



a world apart?

Evaluation of family learning programmes in prison

Summary of key findings

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Overview

Whilst many prisons run parenting courses as a means of enhancing family life once a prisoner is released, only a few have extended the provision to encompass the prisoner and his family during the period of his sentence. The two prisons that form the focus of this evaluation have devised programmes that seek to serve an educational purpose, as well as providing an opportunity for bringing families together. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to undertake a small-scale, in-depth evaluation of two family learning programmes, examining the outcomes arising from them and issues concerned with their implementation. Data was collected through interviews with 39 participants (including prisoners and partners) and 13 prison/education staff.

The evaluation unearthed strong evidence to suggest that the family learning programmes offered considerably more benefits to participants than the family contact experienced during normal visits. On a fundamental level, the programmes maintained father–child interaction during the prisoner’s sentence. The quality of interaction, however, was seen by participants and staff as a valuable aspect of the programmes. During sessions, families were at liberty to engage with their children in a natural manner, to observe their development, learn from other families and to appreciate the educational value in purposeful play. The qualities and skills of the staff overseeing the programme should not be underestimated – their openness, approachability and ability to engage with children were highly commended by participants. Participation in the programme had several effects, including:

- prisoners re-examined their attitudes to parenting
- prisoners showed a greater appreciation of their children
- both mothers and fathers acquired parenting strategies.

Furthermore, there was confirmation from previous participants, now reunited with their families, that the impact of the programmes could be sustained in the long term.

Introducing such a programme into a prison setting is no easy task. Organisers must be prepared to state a case for family learning, win the support and cooperation of other prison staff, secure funding, address any security issues and identify staff with the necessary experience to oversee proceedings. Yet if the positive outcomes of the programmes can be recognised and widely disseminated, then the status of family learning will ultimately profit, which in turn will promote its uptake as an educational and rehabilitative activity.

A description of family learning programmes

A brief outline of the programmes is given below.

- **Participants** Between three and seven families attend the family learning programmes at any one time. Prisoners with children under the age of five are eligible to enrol and the programmes operate on a rolling basis, so families will not necessarily start at the same time.
- **Timing** Each session lasts for two hours and the programmes run for 10 to 15 weeks.
- **Activities** Sessions follow a regular but flexible schedule of activities. Typical activities include play, reading, writing, story time and eating together.
- **Discussion** There are also opportunities for discussing key themes relating to children's development and parenting. Topics covered include building self-esteem, helping children to play, parents' rights and discipline.
- **Written work** Parents are asked to complete learning exercises on the topics discussed. In addition, they also keep a diary of their child's progress over the duration of the programme. Mothers write short accounts of their daily activities, whilst fathers write a full account of the weekly session.
- **Accreditation** Programmes are accredited through the Open College Network (OCN) and on completion parents receive a parent craft certificate.
- **Teaching approach** The teaching approaches were described by staff as 'child-centred, informal, flexible, encouraging'. Parents learn through staff providing subtler pointers and 'by osmosis', as opposed to learning through overt teaching methods.

The benefits of family learning programmes

Ideas for activities

I wouldn't really think about making stuff like this. But now, some of the things what we've made, I'd sit and make with her again, when I got out. Just like crafts, stuff like that, I'd do that again. We made fridge magnets, we've made snakes on strings and all sorts. Some of the mad things they've come out with, I would have never have thought about anything like that. (prisoner)

Family histories were influential in the extent and nature of impact reported by participants. Some parents had more experience of children than others and some families had stronger bonds than others. All, however, were able to derive some benefits from the family learning experience.

The most frequently reported areas of impact in relation to **parenting knowledge and skills** were:

- understanding the importance of spending quality time with children
- positive discipline strategies, e.g. using reasoning and praising good behaviour
- a broader knowledge of activities to share with children, e.g. games, arts and crafts, etc.

Through the weekly sessions, parents were introduced to activities that they had perhaps never engaged in with their children before. Programme staff deliberately

included activities that could be replicated inexpensively in the home and it was felt that the course demonstrated to parents that they could create an effective learning environment with few resources.

In terms of **family relationships** the impact most often mentioned was a chance to maintain a strong family relationship or to rebuild father–child bonds that had been damaged through the father’s imprisonment. Some interviewees reported that families had been brought closer together through family learning. Even though contact time was limited, the nature of interaction during the sessions meant that families were spending better quality time together than they had done previously.

In terms of impacts specifically on **fathers**, by far the most prevalent impact reported was a change in attitude to parenting or to the paternal role. Prisoners made comments relating to a reassessment of their priorities, a realisation of the importance of the father’s role, or a greater awareness and acceptance of parental responsibilities. In the words of one inmate, the course had showed him ‘the whole point of being a parent’. Men spoke about how they had come to value their relationship with their children even more, and realised how much they had taken family life for granted before their imprisonment.

All participants also reported positive impacts **on children** including:

- maintenance or improvement of father–child relationships
- development of social skills, e.g. being with other children improved confidence and helped children learn about sharing and cooperating with others
- early learning through the activities, e.g. developing motor skills through drawing.

Several parents stated that their children simply enjoyed the interaction with others – evidently, a number of children did not attend playgroups or nurseries, and had little contact with children their own age outside of family learning.

For some families, there was a positive impact on **other forms of family contact**, including a more frequent exchange of letters and phone calls and improvements to normal visits. Both mothers and fathers had noticed a change in atmosphere during visiting times, particularly in terms of increased dialogue and interaction between father and child.

Most interviewees felt optimistic that the course could have **long-term impacts** on families. Five of the 21 men interviewed had completed the course between five and 18 months ago and had now been released. These men and their partners were able to speak about the long-term impacts from direct personal experience. There was evidence that fathers spent more time with their children when released, became more involved in their lives, and that parents were better able to work as a team.

However, there was doubt from other interviewees that the impacts could be sustained while the father was still in the prison after the course finished. An issue for further consideration may be how the positive attitudes and benefits arising from these programmes can be built on. Rather than being a one-off, isolated experience, some thought needs to be given to providing opportunities for further learning, both within the prison and after a sentence has been served.

Better quality interaction

We have a one-to-one contact and the benefit is that you improve your skills and the way you talk to children. And they obviously get something out of it because you’re more aware of what their goals are. (prisoner)

Re-examining the father’s role

It’s made me think more about my kids and my responsibilities as a father. You know, that you’re as important as the mother is, to be around. ’Cos they don’t just learn from their mother, they learn from their father as well. I know now that like I’ve got to get my head down and sort my life out and not just for me, but for my family as well. (prisoner)

In terms of wider impact on men, staff observed that prisoners became more relaxed during family learning sessions, with positive impacts on social interactions between participants. Addressing family issues was felt to help men to settle down into prison life, and prisoners' conduct improved overall, as they did not wish to jeopardise their participation in family learning.

Impacts on staff involved in delivering the programmes included:

- improved 'people management' skills
- greater patience and tolerance
- improved attitudes towards prisoners.

Where other prison staff had become more involved, impact included a more positive view of inmates, and of the value of the course.

Views on effectiveness

All participants were happy to recommend the experience to other families. When comparing the family learning programme to other courses they had attended, four men explained that the programme was 'different', due to its broader focus on the family (rather than the individual) and the opportunity to engage with their children. A larger proportion concluded that the programme had been better than their previous experience of courses, explaining that the presence of the family enabled them to put their parenting skills into practice. Two prisoners, reflecting on their attendance at various courses, stated that the family learning programme had been the best they had experienced so far.

The value-added dimensions of family learning appeared to centre on:

- the freedom to interact as a family
- the quality of that interaction (more time is permitted than during normal visits)
- an opportunity to observe children's development
- learning from other families
- observing how tutors interact with children
- the use of purposeful play as an educational activity
- using the programme diary as a communication link between father and the family
- using writing tasks to consolidate new knowledge.

Developing social skills

He [the child] is learning more to play with other kids that are there. To share, 'cos he wasn't usually around other kids. So with there being like a couple of other ones there, he's learning that he has to share and he's getting used to being around them.
(prisoner's partner)

Implementation issues

All staff interviewees, bar one (who had little direct knowledge of the programmes), were confident in recommending the family learning programme to other establishments. They were also invited to comment on the main issues connected with implementing a family learning programme in prison.

In terms of resource issues faced by both prisons, a common theme was the need for staff to be creative and resourceful in order to make the programmes happen, e.g. applying to charities for toys and books. The programmes also relied, to an extent, on the goodwill of the establishment in, for example, using existing security personnel already allocated to visits and using the existing contracted teaching hours to provide staff for the programmes. It was acknowledged by interviewees that there may be some scepticism amongst prison staff towards programmes of this nature. It was therefore recommended that organisers seek the support of a sympathetic governor who is prepared to champion the cause of family learning. More generally, it was stressed that when setting up a family learning programme all those affected within the prison should be fully briefed so that they are aware of the programme aims and so that they understand how it will fit into the existing regime. Most importantly, security implications would have to be discussed in detail.

Finding the appropriate staff to run family learning was considered essential, in particular staff with experience of working with children and basic skills were needed. Participants may struggle with reading and writing, so the programmes need to consider providing support for literacy and may even have to be adapted to cater for different abilities. The appointment of a dedicated coordinator was also felt to be beneficial – someone with the time and enthusiasm to establish the programme within the prison.

On the matter of practicalities, potential organisers would need to find a suitable space for the programme, in terms of size and ease of access for families entering the prison (both programmes involved in the evaluation used rooms within the visits areas). Prisoners' partners may also require assistance with travel costs in order to attend the sessions.

Concluding comments

Whilst parenting programmes are increasingly becoming an established component of the prison education curriculum, family learning takes the educational experience a step further, enabling men to put their learning into practice. One prisoner, who attended a family learning programme held in a room adjacent to the visits area, underlined the value of the sessions. He explained:

They are classed as visits, but they are different environments as far as I'm concerned, total learning. Learning from each other. They are just a room apart, but they are a world apart. (prisoner)

The positive outcomes of such programmes deserve recognition and, in time, more prisons may turn to family learning as an educational and rehabilitative activity.

Contact details

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More involvement with children after release

At one time I would never play toys with him, but I do now. It's pretty bad really, but I didn't realise how much time I wasn't spending with them. At one time I used to go to the pub every Saturday afternoon, guaranteed. But now it's probably once a month. Now I'm not all that bothered anymore. But at one time it used to be like religiously, I've got to go to the pub on Saturday. I never even thought about the kids. Now we probably go swimming on Saturday. (prisoner)

NFER recently evaluated the effectiveness of two family learning programmes for men in prison. These programmes seek to bring together prisoners, their partners and children. The objectives are to encourage parents to help with their children's early learning and development and to provide prisoners with the opportunity to retain and strengthen family bonds, whilst developing good parenting skills.

This report summarises the key points of the evaluation, and will be of interest to those involved in prisoner education and resettlement. As well as documenting the benefits of family learning programmes, the research also considers the practical issues connected with the implementation of such programmes.

Key findings

- Overall, the programmes offered many more benefits to families than the contact they experienced during a normal visit.
- Prisoners valued the freedom to interact in a natural manner with their children.
- Prisoners reported new attitudes to parenting and felt they appreciated their children more.
- Mothers and fathers felt they had acquired parenting strategies.
- Former participants, now reunited with their families, reported that the effects of the programmes lasted.



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