

The Impact of *Fathers Inside*

**An OLSU and Safe Ground Parenting Course
for Male Prisoners at HMP Ashwell**

Executive Summary
of
an evaluation by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Background

The charity 'Safe Ground' has developed in conjunction with the Offenders' Skills and Learning Unit (OLSU) a drama-based parenting programme for male prisoners called **Fathers Inside**. This is an intensive 15-day course which aims to provide them with the skills to continue parenting their children initially from prison and thereafter on release. The programme, which has been extensively trialled, is accredited through the National Open College Network. On successful completion, prisoners gain credits which enable them to progress through education to further qualifications. This evaluation of **Fathers Inside** is an addition to the small but growing portfolio of generally positive outcome research on parenting programmes in adult prisons and Young Offender Institutions (Caddle 1991; Mardon 1996; Boswell and Wedge 2002; Dennison and Lyon 2003)

2 Research aim and method

The **Fathers Inside** programme was studied for a period of 9 months in 2003-4 at HMP Ashwell. It sought primarily to establish whether the learning from this 15-day programme produced changes in parenting attitudes and behaviour within the prison setting and, potentially, beyond it. A wide range of data was elicited from: programme documentation; comparative literature and research; direct observation of the programme; semi-structured interviews with participant prisoners, their partners or main child-carers and their children; and semi-structured interviews with a range of involved staff.

3 The respondent sample

The prisoner sample comprised all 17 participants from the current October 2003 programme, 9 of the 20 participants from the previous June 2003 programme, and 2 life-sentence prisoners who had completed it 4 years earlier – a total of 28. The family sample comprised 5 partners, 2 mothers and a sister, and 3 children (aged 5-7 years) of men who had completed the current programme. The staff sample was taken from 10 professionals in a variety of roles ranging from Prison Officer to Area Manager.

4 Characteristics of the programme participants

This was a group aged 21-40 years, some of black and some of white ethnic origin, most serving terms of 2+ years imprisonment for quite serious (sometimes violent) offences, and most having served previous prison sentences. The majority enjoyed close family relationships and were in touch with current (and, in some cases, past) partners and with their children, whose ages ranged from infancy to early adulthood. Many, however, had experienced difficult upbringings, which included physical and emotional abuse, and

paternal loss, sometimes via imprisonment. Some made links between these experiences and their own later offending.

Although most were in touch with most of their children, there were some exceptions to this and only a minority actually lived with their partners and all of the children they had fathered. The majority of these children had resulted from unplanned pregnancies and none of these men had received formal parenting education. Most were academic non-achievers. In general, and in common with the majority of the prison population, their profile was not one which promised positive engagement with prison education programmes.

5 Recruitment to the ‘Fathers Inside’ programme

Prisoners are recruited to **Fathers Inside** via information provided by the Education Manager on induction to the prison, by posters placed around the prison and, increasingly, by word of mouth. There are no eligibility criteria other than a desire to undertake the programme, which, however, is not deemed suitable for sex offenders. Men are invited to a preliminary meeting to give them a flavour of what their participation will involve, so that they can make an informed decision about enrolling. Most go on to do so. At the end of the programme, the men give a presentation to selected prisoner colleagues and prison staff, based on what they have learnt. Finally there is a Family Day, where their partners/children’s carers and children can come into the prison and share food, entertainment and family time.

6 The programme aims

The programme’s aims are as follows:

- To furnish participants with parenting skills
- To improve their social and life skills, and key skills
- To help with sentence planning, further education and employment

The evaluation found that these aims were substantially met, as subsequent paragraphs demonstrate. The programme ‘Lessons’, all geared towards the above aims, are designed to cover one half-day each. Their content is set out in detail in the Teachers’ Manual, and in single page form in the participants’ portfolio, where men record evidence of their learning in line with 10 assessment criteria. In order to deliver the programme effectively, tutors received training from Safe Ground staff as well as an all-day pre-programme briefing.

7 Learning on the programme

Direct observation showed that participants are encouraged to work in teams so that they build relationships in which they learn to trust each other. ‘Having fun’ is a stated part of the programme ethos, but time is built in for portfolio completion so that the evidence of their learning may be recorded by the men and assessed by the tutors (whose assessment

is then internally and externally verified). Both men and tutors sometimes find this portfolio completion and assessment process very demanding but also acknowledge that it sets men on the path to achievement, often for the first time in their lives. An environment conducive to learning is also crucial to this process; the Ashwell classroom was considered by all to be cramped and lacking in privacy.

During the course of the programme, the men also: keep a journal; analyse 'The Selfish Giant', a short story by Oscar Wilde; watch and study the themes from the film 'Blinda' (written and acted by prisoners from HMP Wandsworth) about an imprisoned father's relationship with his son; and participate in a range of warm-up games, discussions, poems etc., all centring around fatherhood.

8 'Fathers Inside' and adult learning theory

Based on programme observation and documentary analysis, the evaluation found that **Fathers Inside** has a firm basis in modern adult learning theory, which advocates a model of andragogy [the art and science of teaching adults] in place of pedagogy [the art and science of teaching children] (Knowles *et al.* 1998). Tutors are taught to recognise the importance of affording prisoners safety, reassurance, acceptance and self-esteem, much of which is acquired through the group process itself.

This model of learning is humanistic, emphasising the place of the self in the learning process. As paragraph 7 shows, **Fathers Inside** implements this model by making tasks relevant to the fatherhood role, by facilitating men to learn from the fund of their own experience, through flexibility, listening to and acting upon the men's own concerns, and motivating them to achieve educationally. In turn, the aim is that men should reproduce this model in their own relationships with their children.

9 Compliance with and completion of the programme

All 17 men in the substantive study group attended the October 2003 programme, completed the required portfolio work and gained the National Open College Network (NOCN) Life and Social Skills Certificate in Parentcraft, Level 1. All but one man also gained the Group and Teamwork Skills Certificate, Level 2. HMP Ashwell does not offer the Key Skills Communication Certificate. However, about 25% of Ashwell participants normally go on to obtain the Healthy Living Certificate and, thus, a further credit towards the NOCN Intermediate Certificate in Parenting and Lifestyles, a GCSE equivalent.

10 Changes reported by the programme participants

Programme participants' scores on a 1-10 programme effectiveness rating scale were consistently high, mostly in the 7-10 range. They showed continuing positive and frequently enthusiastic responses to programme learning, whether they experienced it 4 years or 3-5 months previously. All 3 groups of prisoners could remember specific pieces of learning from the programme and the majority were able to describe attitudinal shifts

and some behaviour changes which they had already made. These included increased and improved communication with children through visits, letters and telephone calls, and pro-activity in exercising their rights to contact schools, receive school reports and help children with homework.

The self-esteem derived from the group 'bonding' process and from their achievements on the course had made a particular impact on these men. Many also described increased levels of responsibility to their children and, in some cases, to their children's mothers/carers, though there were clearly some complex family situations which appeared to preclude the kind of contact in which responsibility could be expressed.

11 Changes reported by the family respondents

This group of respondents constitutes the nearest to an objective view about the participants' attitude and behaviour towards the family after undertaking **Fathers Inside**. While the adults, at any rate, were dealing with the difficulties caused by the participants' imprisonment, this was clearly not without personal cost. The children, young as they were, were also clearly not untouched by the loss of their father to imprisonment. This corroborates the findings of every study that has ever been conducted about prisoners' families and is a sharp reminder of the rights of children to a continuing relationship with both their parents under the Children Act 1989 and the Human Rights Act 1998.

About half of these respondents provided evidence of notable changes in fathering behaviour, both from prison and after release; the other half provided evidence of minor change. They gave accounts of fathers putting into practice their learning about listening to and talking with their children in visits and telephone calls, playing with them and sharing activities, sending them cards, letters and story tapes. Some also shared their newfound knowledge about child development with their partners (none of whom had ever participated in formal parenting education either). The need to find alternatives to smacking, for example, had impinged on the attitudes of both fathers and some partners. This evidence gives the clear message that **Fathers Inside** promotes learning which has continuous and far-reaching effects on the quality of parent-child relationships even when the father remains in prison.

12 Changes reported by staff

Responses from interviews with staff showed that they viewed **Fathers Inside** as highly effective in improving fathering skills, whilst delivering the 'added value' of increased participant self-esteem, and self-awareness. In their view this often led to improved and more courteous attitudes and behaviour towards staff which, in turn, produced a more supportive staff and prison culture towards the programme. At its best, this produced an elevated atmosphere surrounding participants' wider educational and other self-development within the prison.

13 Implications of this study's findings

- *For prisoner fathers*

Staff, participant, partner/child-carer and, to an extent, children interviews all attested to attitude and behaviour changes in men who had completed this programme. The men themselves highlighted the experiential nature of the programme in bringing about support and increased self-esteem from the group 'bonding' process, and saw it as a building block to wider self-development. This process appears to reflect the good parenting model which is cascaded down from the Safe Ground trainers to the programme tutors. It is clear that **Fathers Inside** meets its aims of enabling men to go on being fathers to their children within the limitations of the prison environment.

- *For prisoners' partners/child-carers*

Interviews with these respondents showed that they all knew that the men were undertaking the programme. In some cases, the men had passed their learning on to their partners/child-carers. This demonstrates the potential of the **Fathers Inside** programme to contribute to wider family problem-solving processes which may, in turn, enhance the prisoners' rehabilitation prospects.

- *For prisoners' children*

This was a very small number of interviews which, nevertheless, reinforced all that other studies have found about the sadness and distress of children at being separated from the father with whom they have a legal right to be in touch. Together with their mothers'/carers' interviews, their responses also showed the efficacy of the programme in improving the quality of contact with their fathers. This bodes well for the quality of attachments and well-being of the next generation, for which other research has shown the prognosis to be poor (Farrington 1995; Howe 1995; Philbrick 1997; Boswell and Wedge 2002).

- *For Safe Ground/OLSU and education staff*

The programme should continue its good record of responding to participant and tutor feedback based on adult learning principles. Issues such as programme intensity, individual learning styles, staffing levels, quality of learning environment, accompanying 'homework' and period over which the programme is delivered should remain firmly on the course designers' agenda. A range of staff associated with the programme in some way sings its praises – but not all prison staff will view it so positively. The programme owners and managers may need to work with prisons to market it not just to prisoners but to prison staff across the board, thus improving the wider climate in which it is delivered. Given other evidence obtained about lack of formal support systems in the lives of prisoners' families, this would fill a gap by providing a stronger locus of support within the prison system itself.

- *For prison staff and the wider prison*

Fathers Inside is an innovative programme, of the kind encouraged by the Social Exclusion Unit's report (2002), working with considerable success to change the fathering behaviour of men with unpromising offending profiles. The educational team at Safe Ground have proved their ability to operate within official educational specifications and institutional boundaries and yet utilise prisoners and their experiences as their primary developmental resource. Improvements have also been demonstrated in participants' attitudes to prison staff which has the potential for an interactive effect within the prison culture itself. The programme's effective teaching and learning strategies should be disseminated to the benefit of all staff who are trying to improve the life chances of prisoners and their families within the sentence planning and resettlement framework

- *For the wider society*

Perhaps unusually, prisons are proving to be pioneers in the delivery of parenting programmes such as **Fathers Inside** and are learning much good practice which could be spread to the outside community. A co-ordinated agency approach to this endeavour could prove a major vehicle for improved stability in child development across the board. It could also help to demonstrate to society that prisoners are able to accept responsibility for their offending and its impact on their children and families. Additionally, it could promote a fuller public understanding of the value, both social and economic, of rehabilitation following punishment and of support to families in that process. Not only is this in the interests of the children and parents concerned but it is also to the long-term benefit of society as a whole.

- *For prison policy and practice*

Fathers Inside has a firm basis in adult learning theory. It appears to be making a valuable and singular contribution to parenting education for prisoners. It also affords them a pathway into wider education and qualifications, potentially improving their employment opportunities. These factors would suggest the programme should be extended. One possibility would be to make it more widely available across one prison per region, such as Ashwell, to see what impact it could make on a whole prison culture. Another possibility would be to spread it more thinly across the adult prison estate. In any event, perhaps sentence planning could reflect the desirability of ensuring that all father-prisoners have an opportunity to undertake a programme such as **Fathers Inside**.

Prisons which run **Fathers Inside** should continue building on the almost universally acclaimed success of the Family Day to develop other opportunities for fathers to apply their learning from the programme. This could include family learning visits, homework clubs and an expansion of tape and video-making facilities. At Ashwell, **Fathers Inside** is already seen to fit well with their 'Relate' initiative (funded by the

charity 'Action for Prisoners' Families') where partners and prisoners meet for a day to discuss issues about release from everyone's perspective. In other prisons, Sure Start and the YMCA are also supporting pre-release projects for fathers. There is plenty of potential for other 'joined up' activity of this kind across prisons and associated agencies and organisations.

14 Conclusion

The findings from this study have demonstrated the knowledge and skills which can be put across and integrated into the lives of prisoners and their families in a relatively unpromising learning environment. The drama-based and experiential nature of this learning also appears to raise the levels of confidence of groups of men, many of whom may previously have had only negative experiences of education and no experience of educational achievement. It spurs some of them to continue achieving and it inculcates in them an ability to reflect, possibly for the first time, on how others are feeling. This has the capacity to change their attitudes towards prison staff and to other people beyond their immediate family. Most importantly, however, if as the evaluation evidence suggests, the changes in their behaviour result in a positive experience of parenting for their children, then the work done by **Fathers Inside** may have spared society from potential candidates for a new generation of future damaged and disaffected prisoners.

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A copy of the full evaluation report can be obtained by contacting either of the above.