

# Parenting and contact from the inside

## *A New Beginnings Project*

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Risdon Prison is a large prison complex on the outskirts of Hobart, housing maximum, medium and minimum rated inmates, with both male and female sections. There is a minimum security prison farm in an outer rural area for males and a remand centre in the city, just opened for use in 1999. There is a youth training centre in the north west of the state and small short stay lockup facilities in the north and north west, used when inmates attend court in those areas. More than 60 per cent of inmates have families living outside the Hobart metropolitan area.

### The program

In 1995, a parenting program was run in Risdon Prison. Response from the inmates was so enthusiastic that an application was made to the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services for help in implementing parenting programs on a regular basis. Consequently a grant was received to employ a project officer and cover program expenses. The program began in April 1998.

Negotiations about the benefits of the program for inmates and their

children were held with Corrective Services management, and also with uniformed staff within the prison complex. Meetings were held with welfare/program staff about the integration of parenting programs with other programs offered, and with inmate representatives to publicise the program and tailor its content to their needs. Guidelines were set up for inmates' children to attend Dads' Day.

Many male inmates had lost contact with their children. The longer the sentence, and the more frequently parents were jailed, the more likely it was that relationships would have become strained between partners. This impacted on the frequency of contact with children. A great deal of family mediation as to the best interests of the child was required to facilitate regular contact with the incarcerated parent.

Issues of safety were always considered. In some situations, the project officer assisted in transport for contact visits especially when one parent (usually the mother) did not want her whereabouts known to the incarcerated parent.

Now a set feature within the prison calendar, Dads' Days allow children to spend three and a half hours with their inmate parents about every three months, and many inmates are initially drawn into participating in the program for this reason. Before the program began, there were only limited facilities in the main prison complex for contact visits. This meant most children had to talk through a screen to their parent without being able to touch or hug them.

Skilled community workers who are familiar with prison work and who are experts in their field run sessions on: Effective relationships; Fathering from prison; Expectations of fathering – ages and stages of development, and play; When the going gets tough – difficult times; Expectations about returning home – coping on the outside; and Dads' Day – time to put learning into practice. Craft sessions have been run to make Christmas gifts for children.

Responsibility and non-violence are reinforced throughout the program. The focus is on building on existing skills, looking for and reinforcing success through shared

experiences rather than a didactic teaching approach. A non-judgemental approach is essential and reframing skills important. Some participants have never attended a group before and would be most unlikely to talk about parenting matters with other men on the outside.

Participation is totally voluntary for inmates, partners of inmates and children. Because of the need to keep children's safety paramount, the program is not available for persons in prison for sex offences. Also with children's safety and wellbeing in mind, where family violence was previously an issue, extra care is taken in preparation for Dads' Days.

have been some who initially have been unable to see the advantages of this program. Some conflict between the demands of prison work and attendance at courses was experienced by inmates even though scheduling of courses had been negotiated with staff and inmates prior to commencement.

Future success of the program could be fostered by inputs into prison officer training on the issues/hardships faced by children and families of prisoners as a means of fostering links between inmates and community service providers, as well as integrating community services into the prison.

- tracing children for re-contact through government agencies;
- access visits for children where mothers did not want contact with inmates;
- support/protection for mothers where violence was an issue in the family;
- assistance with letter writing to children;
- negotiating letters from inmates to be sent to their children via schools;
- arranging counselling for children of inmates;
- negotiating the prison system for family members;



### *Important principles*

A number of important principles have been identified.

- Publicity and handouts within the group need to be appropriate for participants with low literacy skills.
- Guidelines for confidentiality in the group are extremely important given the context where personal information can be used inappropriately against a person who has revealed too much about him/herself.
- Those working within a prison setting need to orient themselves to the environment and be able to work with flexibility and uncertainty. Prison 'incidents' can mean a shutdown of the prison at any time. Safety issues are paramount.

### *Staff attitudes*

Within prisons, family matters can be viewed as relatively unimportant, even though inmates report that family matters are often the underlying reason for attempted prison escapes. While the majority of uniformed staff have been extremely helpful, there

### *Community involvement*

Community service providers have generously donated worker time to run the groups in the prison, and several agencies have donated toys and equipment for Dads' Day. In addition, prison staff have assisted in making these occasions very successful. City Mission and government organisations from Launceston have assisted in transporting children to Hobart from the north of the state, while volunteers from the Risdon Visiting Centre have been available so that parents and children have a safe place to wait at the beginning and end of the Day.

Negotiations and implementing the present program have fostered networking between agencies focusing on the needs of inmates and their families and has aided client care. This is particularly important in Tasmania as there is no one easily identifiable agency that works exclusively with this population.

### *Issues addressed via individual client contact*

Individual client contact facilitates the following issues:

- linking and facilitating communication between family members and prison staff;
- advocacy regarding contact visits in Hobart and Launceston prisons;
- cleaning toys in visitors' waiting area at Risdon;
- renewing toys in visiting areas;
- support for partners of inmates;
- inmate support/counselling on family issues;
- information and resource links;
- family reintegration;
- home visits to post-release prisoners and families to aid adjustment;
- family mediation regarding access visits, letters, presents for children;
- advocacy for drug and alcohol program;
- communication clarification between partners;
- negotiations with family support agencies for visits to prison by state wards to see incarcerated parents.

## Outcomes of the program for participants

A number of positive outcomes have been identified from evaluations by inmates and by observation or reports from prison staff.

Inmates have increased or resumed contact with children, are more relaxed in their interactions with children and partners, and show more readiness for involvement in family mediation. They have improved knowledge of child development and expectations of age appropriate behaviour, and greater desire to be involved in decisions such as children's education. They are more aware of the impact of violence or drug

An unforeseen benefit is increased peer support in the prison yard and readiness to share/discuss family matters. Each group creates a mini-support group within the prison context where the men talk openly about family matters. Usually inmates are reticent about sharing any information of a personal manner, fearing the information would render them vulnerable.

Even in the short time the program has been operating, the benefits of personal empowerment have had positive results. Overall, inmates seem to have greater self-confidence. One inmate from the initial group in the maximum security section is now

will not use services even when needed. By bringing community agency representatives into contact with inmates, barriers are broken down and referrals facilitated.

Likewise it has been easier to provide support for families on the outside. The program fosters trust enabling either direct requests from inmates or referrals for the programs project officer to visit family members in the community for support and referral where appropriate. Trust is a significant issue for this client group. Family members are very suspicious of government, especially welfare agencies and may not seek assistance needed if they feel under scrutiny. It has been important



use of adults on children, and are more motivated to address drug/alcohol problems impacting on family life. They are more aware of the difficulties family members face on the outside, and have greater involvement in prison courses/work activities to earn income to help pay for children's activities (parenting from inside).

peer leader not only for this program but for other groups run in the prison. He has gained sufficient confidence and trust to go out into schools to talk with at-risk youth, and has expressed the desire to develop a career in this area after release.

Prison inmates are generally suspicious of welfare agencies and often

for the project officer to be seen as independent from state government agencies although able to link people into services as needed after trust has been established. The independence provided by federal funding has helped foster acceptance of the program outside of prison to the point where families will now self refer from

## Comments from participants about the program

"I personally have learnt an incredible amount about parenting and being a parent from within the prison walls – there is always more to learn about your children's needs and I'm looking forward to this challenge as I intend to be a good father to my children and make sure they do not take the same path I did."

*Father convicted of drug-related armed robbery.*

"The parenting course is something I wish I had done years ago . . . It's courses like this that have helped me and other inmates – a benefit to the community."

*Father seeking access to his son through family mediation who had previously used violence to gain access.*

"Knowing I will be his Dad when I get out is something to really keep me going. I love all me kids and seeing them – and them getting to know each other – is great."

*Father of three, one of whom was reunited with his father via the program and will go into his father's care after release. Related siblings from different families met through the program and father has regular contact with all three.*

information received through word of mouth.

A unique aspect of the program has been the ability to advocate for children to have access to both parents even in situations where the children's parents are in conflict. Knowing that the absent parent is safe helps children cope with the separation imposed by family disruption and incarceration. Workers and parents report the children are better adjusted and more settled after contact with an incarcerated parent. This has been very helpful for children who had witnessed violence between parents or whose parent had 'disappeared' and were not told where that person had gone.

- statistics on numbers of inmates with parenting/family responsibilities;
- continual expansion of parenting programs in prison;
- an upgrading of prison facilities to meet the needs of visitors, especially children – for example, location of Visitors Centre closer to main gate, cleanliness and safety of toys and waiting area, phase out non-contact visits;
- statistics on drug-related crime – that is, crime associated with maintaining a drug habit;
- the expansion of the drug and alcohol treatment programs in prison;

In addition, as more than half of inmates come from the north or north west of Tasmania, means of assistance is needed for families trying to maintain family cohesion from a distance. First, there is the financial burden for families of travelling to Hobart. Second, the costs to both families and inmates of STD phone charges can be prohibitive – by the time inmates have paid for their daily necessities out of their modest wages there is little money left for long-distance telephone calls.

New pre-release procedures, at present in the development phase by Correctional Services, include family reintegration. There is scope for the



The Dads' Days have proved particularly beneficial as they have enabled fathers and their children to interact in more normal ways than through a screen (non-contact visits) or sitting around a table in an enclosed space (contact visit). Risdon Prison management has agreed to continue this activity on a regular basis for all inmates (maximum security) who attend the parenting course.

Contact between inmates and their children has helped foster greater responsibility towards parenting. Inmates report having a new purpose in their lives and feel more motivated to work towards rehabilitation after being re-united with their children. Several fathers have negotiated with child support agencies to take over full responsibility for their children once the prison sentence is complete. Some of these children had been made state wards and had lost contact with their fathers prior to this program.

## Lessons learned

The program has highlighted the need for:

- specific services for families and children of prisoners;

- improved communication channels between family members and prison staff;
- an information kit for inmates and family members;
- expansion of counselling facilities for inmates with family-related issues, including grief and loss;
- the implementation of pre-release programs to foster family reintegration for inmates serving sentences of more than two years (although for some families this may be needed for even short separations);
- alternatives to imprisonment for motor vehicle offences, as the impact on families in a climate of high unemployment means that the prisoner's family is severely disadvantaged;
- a review of the purpose of incarceration – are prisoners in gaol to act as a labour force to run the prison, or for rehabilitation?
- supported accommodation for inmates who do not have a home/family to return to at the time of release.

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training and support of a team of volunteers to assist in home visits – an activity which could be linked to the present program should funds be available.

Finally, there is a need for increased public awareness about the impact on children of having an incarcerated parent, as well as promoting and fostering parental responsibilities from prison.

## Where to from here?

Now that the program has been successfully established, its long-term viability is essential as the client group is one of high need and extremely limited power. Many find accessing services difficult because of the stigma they feel because of their circumstances and association with prison. The project officer has been actively seeking ongoing funding. Corporate sponsorship is one option.

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