

# Family Literacy and Numeracy in Prisons



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# The background

**D**URING 1998 and 1999, the Basic Skills Agency and the Prison Service funded 3 family learning projects in prisons.

The projects undertook to:

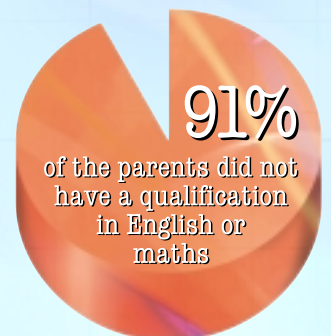
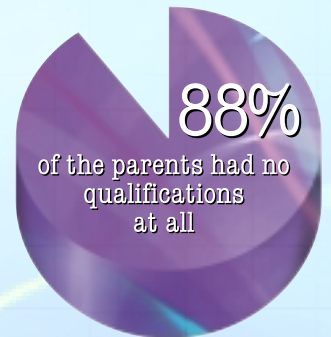
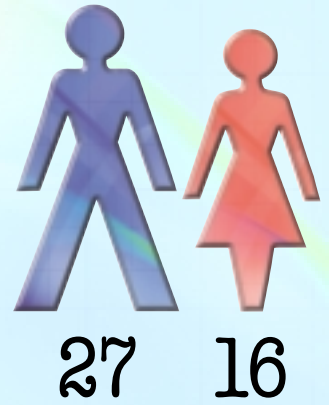
- help young offenders (assessed at below Level 1) to improve their own basic skills, and those of their children;
- provide separate and joint sessions for parents and children;
- give practical ways for parents to support language, literacy and numeracy development of their children at home and during visits;
- provide teachers experienced in teaching children and basic skills to adults;
- enable young offenders who were parents to work towards accreditation.

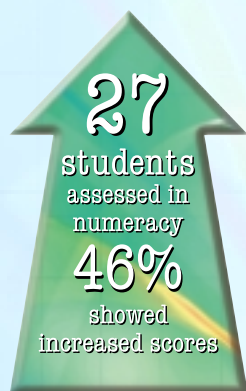
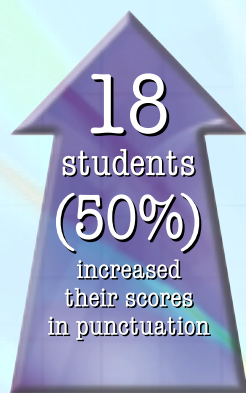
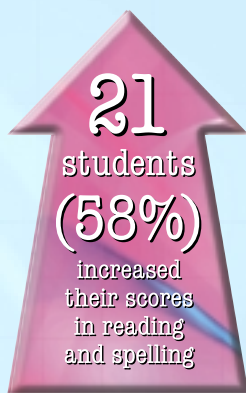
The prisons involved were:

- HMP YOI Stoke Heath (male);
- HMP YOI Norwich (male);
- HMP YOI Bullwood Hall (female).

All of the programmes were short courses which ran over a period of 10 – 12 weeks. 43 offenders took part in the pilot project, of which:

- 27 were male and 16 were female;
- all were between the ages of 15 – 24;
- all were convicted and had served time of between 3 months and 5 years;
- 88% of the parents had no qualifications at all;
- 91% of the parents did not have a qualification in English or maths.





44 children were involved, of which 19 were boys, 25 were girls and 35 were age 3 or under. Development Officers from the Basic Skills Agency and the Prison Education Service monitored the projects.

## What was achieved

**A**LL 43 students were assessed at the beginning of the project and 36 were re-assessed at the end. There were significant gains in the assessment scores of those involved.

- 21 students (58%) increased their scores in reading and spelling.
- 18 students (50%) increased their scores in punctuation.
- Of the 27 students assessed in numeracy, 46% showed increased scores.

A Child Assessment Record was taken at the beginning and end of the project. It showed:

- the number of children showing an interest in books increased from 44% to 56%;
- the number of children who borrowed books from libraries increased from 8% to 24%;
- those children who could write their name with help increased from 40% to 52%;
- those who could do it without help increased from 20% to 36%.

A parent/child questionnaire used at the beginning and end of the project revealed that:

- the 72% of prisoners who reported never reading a story to their child had decreased to 20%;

- the 56% who reported that they never sent their child a card or letter had reduced to 4%.

## The key factors contributing to the success of the projects

### Management and staff

The full co-operation of the prison management and staff was vital to the success of the family visit for the joint session. The venue had to be suitable for the families but also had to meet the security requirements of the prison, particularly because extra visits were made available for those participating. The importance of management planning time was also highlighted.

### Maintaining numbers on the courses

Each establishment had to find a way to overcome the problem of students being transferred before the completion of the course. Some courses were merged or new participants joined to replace those who had been moved from the prison.

### The involvement of other organisations/ agencies

Another factor was the involvement of other key professionals, including a health visitor and authority worker, librarians, a storyteller, a writer in residence and a sound recordist.

### Using the Family Context

When initial assessment had taken place, the basic skills sessions were used as a way of developing the skills of the student in relation to the family learning course and

the number of children showing an interest in books increased from 44% to 56%

the number of children who borrowed books from libraries increased from 8% to 24%

those children who could write their name with help increased from 40% to 52%

those who could do it without help increased from 20% to 36%

to help them gain accreditation. They were encouraged to think of imaginative ways to engage a child in learning, such as:

- story writing and making books, including taped or illustrated books and storybags;
- thinking about games and what skills they developed;
- having fun with maths, such as weighing and measuring cake ingredients.

### **Distance Learning**

If the additional family visits could not happen because of the geographical distance between the prison and the participants' homes, staff put a greater emphasis on the distance learning aspect of the programme. One of the prisons which had taken part in the distance learning courses managed to send out activities each week, such as wordsearch puzzles, clock/time games and book reviews.

# Introduction

THE Basic Skills Agency, working in partnership with the Prison Service, funded three family learning projects in prisons during 1998/1999. The aim of the projects was to develop the basic skills of the participants and to promote the development of literacy, numeracy and communication skills in their children in an innovative way.

The projects built on the lessons of successful work in family literacy and numeracy developed by the Agency. On the evidence from independent research by the NFER, family literacy succeeded in reaching parents with few educational qualifications, improving parents' and children's basic skills and increasing the support parents gave to their children at home. Only a few programmes had been run in prisons. Yet the importance of maintaining strong links with their children is especially high for this group of adults.

The Basic Skills Agency was interested in exploring a variety of innovative approaches to family literacy and numeracy which took account of the particular circumstances of the prison regime, focusing on education, training and work opportunities. Prison education contractors were invited to make applications for funding for an Innovatory Project.

Applications for projects were supported if they demonstrated that they:

- would help young offenders (assessed at below Level 1), who wanted to improve their own basic skills and the literacy and numeracy skills of their children;
- were based around separate and joint sessions for parents and children;

‘maintaining strong links with their children is especially high for this group of adults’

‘parents were enabled to support language, literacy and numeracy development of their children at home and during visits’

- were built on practical ways in which parents could support language, literacy and numeracy development of their children at home and during visits, including the use of audio tapes, games, storybooks and other interactive material;
- were jointly staffed by teachers with experience and relevant qualifications in teaching children and basic skills to adults;
- would enable young offenders who were parents to work towards nationally recognised accreditation in basic skills at Entry Level and Level 1 if appropriate.

The scope, range and likely impact of a proposal and the capacity to establish provision quickly were all taken into account.

Three prison education contractors successfully bid to develop Family Literacy initiatives in prisons. These were:

- Dudley College at HMP YOI Stoke Heath (male);
- City College, Norwich at HMP/YOI Norwich (male);
- Essex County Council at HMP/YOI Bullwood Hall (female).

During the project the contractor for Bullwood Hall changed to City College, Norwich. Most of the students who participated were parents, although some had sibling responsibilities.

Funding was made available for the period 1st May 1998 – 31st March 1999. Development Officers from the Basic Skills Agency and Prison Education Services visited establishments with funded Innovatory Projects to monitor progress. At the end of the funding period, the establishments concerned produced a written report.

## Aims and objectives

**A**LTHOUGH the programmes varied in the individual establishments, there were a number of features they had in common. The most important aim was to improve the basic skills of participants whilst raising their awareness of how they could improve the basic skills of their children. It was hoped that the programme would enhance the parenting skills of participants and that they would involve themselves in the learning and development of their children, in terms of literacy, numeracy and social interaction, thus breaking the cycle of negative experiences and expectations. A further objective was to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of the participants' children or siblings.

The programme was designed to enable the participants to develop an understanding of how children learn through discovery and the contribution that can be made to the process by parents and older siblings. Interactive methods were promoted as a means of helping to develop literacy and numeracy skills and extra visits were made available for those participating. Accreditation was offered to participants as well as opportunities for progression.

‘the most important aim was to improve the basic skills of participants whilst raising their awareness of how they could improve the basic skills of their children’

## Operation

**T**HE programmes varied in context, but all were short courses which ran over a period of ten to twelve weeks. Each course consisted of distinct sessions given over to the development of the student's basic skills, with additional sessions which concentrated on promoting the relevant skills to enhance a child's learning.

The success of the family visit for the joint activity was dependent on the full co-operation of the prison staff.

The venue had to be conducive to the family whilst also meeting the security requirements of the prison. At one prison staff helped to provide a comfortable room in the visits area; in another the visit was held in the education department. Not all participants were able to benefit from family visits.

Aspects of the lifestyle of young offenders meant that family relationships were fragmented and their children were sometimes in care. Some young men no longer had any contact with the mother of their child and some didn't want their child to see them in prison.

Visits were often difficult because of the long distances partners and children needed to travel. However, some families, having been informed of their partner's involvement, welcomed the interest taken in their family and enjoyed the extra visit. At one of the prisons the family learning sessions were extended to include the families of other prisoners and prison staff.

At Bullwood Hall the additional visit did not happen because of the geographical distance between the prison and the participants' homes. To overcome this difficulty a greater emphasis was given to the distance learning aspect of the programme. This proved to be extremely successful in terms of increased contact and involvement in the children's development and in the promotion of the young parent's role within the family set-up.

‘the success of the family visit for the joint activity was dependent on the full co-operation of the prison staff’

## Who took part in the pilot programmes?

**I**NFORMATION was collected on parents' gender, age, ethnic group, languages, status, time served in prison, remaining time to serve, category of offender and qualifications.

43 offenders participated in the pilot project. Of this 43:

- 27 were male and 16 female;
- all were between the ages of 15 to 24;
- all were convicted and had served between 3 months and 5 years of their sentence.

The parents who took part were generally poorly qualified.

- 88% had no qualifications at all.
- 91% did not have a qualification in English or mathematics.

44 children were involved:

- 19 were boys;
- 25 were girls;
- 35 were 3 or under.

## Course content

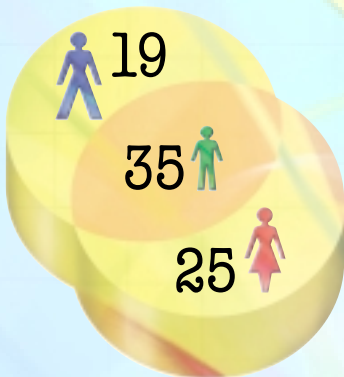
The sessions focusing on children's learning included:

- the importance of play in learning;
- parents as a child's first teacher;
- child centred learning;
- selecting suitable learning materials;
- evaluation of games;
- learning to read;
- learning to write;
- numeracy skills;
- language development – story telling/writing;
- negative/positive use of language;
- body language and communicating with your child.



27 16





As low self-esteem is a major problem with young offenders, teaching approaches in one of the prisons centred around improvement of self-esteem by giving exercises, showing how difficult it can be to learn to read and write, to reduce students' feelings of failure.

Sessions also included discussion of issues concerning parents or carers of small children such as nutrition and discipline. One prison invited a guest speaker in to talk about promoting self-esteem in children.

Practical sessions supporting the course content included:

- 'Go and play' – students were given the order to "go and play" to show how difficult it can be just to play;
- puppet making;
- making books;
- tape recording narratives;
- letter writing;
- making storybags;
- alphabet frieze;
- wall displays and mural;
- communication games;
- game making – colour, shape, number and words;
- fun with maths – baking a cake;
- designing a mobile for a baby.

Following initial assessment, the contents of basic skills sessions were used to develop the skills of the student in support of the Family Learning course and to help them gain accreditation. Practical activities were used to develop students' basic skills while building up imaginative and interesting ways to engage a child in the processes involved in learning.

Story writing for children was encouraged and many students made their own books. This encouraged

students' awareness of the importance of reading, writing and communication, particularly listening skills. It also enabled cultural differences to be celebrated as many students used their own background to write their stories.

Some stories were taped or illustrated and some were included in storybags that were also produced. The storybag initiative was found to be useful because it provided a way of promoting skills beyond reading. The contents of the bag included the storybook plus finger puppets and stuffed toys to be used as props in the story. In addition, the students were encouraged to devise number games based on their storybook to develop their child's numeracy skills.

Games were another useful source for developing and accrediting communication skills. Students interviewed staff about games they had played as children as well as games they had taught their children and what skills were developed as a result. The selection of games according to different criteria provided learning about skills development such as spatial awareness or number development, as well as providing opportunities for accrediting elements of Wordpower or Numberpower.

Having fun with maths enabled students to learn to measure accurately whilst encouraging them to realise the value of simple activities as learning opportunities for their children. Weighing and measuring cake ingredients or counting chocolate buttons for decoration made maths accessible and fun for the children. These activities could also be accredited as elements of Numberpower. The fun element was important for students to overcome their negative attitudes towards maths.

### *Home activities*

As additional visits from the participants' children were problematic, distance learning activities became more

‘games were a useful source for developing and accrediting communication skills’

significant. One of the prisons managed to send out activities each week. The activities were designed to suit the individual ages of the children to whom they were sent. It was also important to pay attention to cultural difference as some children were Muslim and with carers who spoke very little English.

Activities included:

- pencil control exercises – tracing, colouring, dot to dot;
- jigsaw puzzles;
- word search puzzles;
- gap-filling exercises;
- colouring by number;
- book reviews;
- clock/time game;
- hand prints sent out by the student and the children's prints sent back in return;
- cress heads – handed out on visits for children to watch them grow;
- nursery rhymes sent out and videos of children singing them sent back in;
- videos showing children playing, which were valuable in showing interaction between children and their carers. Some students hadn't seen their children for almost a year.

‘the fun element was important for students to overcome their negative attitudes towards maths’

## The role of other key partners

**P**ROJECT workers involved in the delivery of the programmes drew from experience gained in basic skills delivery, as well as from their knowledge of child development and community family projects. All three establishments involved other prison staff, organisations and agencies. The success of the projects was dependent on the support of prison management and

staff, particularly where permission was needed for activities that would not normally take place, such as extra visits.

The effectiveness of the projects was enhanced by the other key professionals involved, including a health visitor, librarians, a health authority worker promoting self-esteem in children in the primary sector, a storyteller, a writer in residence and a sound recordist.

In one prison the involvement of the health visitor, whose background was very similar to the students, helped to change the negative view that some students have of health visitors as 'middle class busy bodies'. Students were encouraged by the health authority worker to see how the effects of their actions, both positive and negative, affected the emotional well-being and self-esteem of their children.

Librarians encouraged imagination, story telling and reading skills, promoted the importance of books and the shared experience of reading, and helped with the selection of suitable books for early years.

The storyteller, writer in residence and sound recordist all helped students to discover what makes a good bedtime story, how stories can be created and how they should be told or read. The production of story tapes were an important link which enabled students to maintain links with their children and for the child to hear the parent's voice on a regular basis. This was particularly useful in one prison where a baby became distraught on a family visit whenever it was talked to or held by the father. On the visit following the use of the tape the baby was quite happy.

‘librarians encouraged imagination, story telling and reading skills’

## Outcomes



**E**ACH establishment set themselves different targets and therefore achievements varied accordingly.

The total number of participants in the project was 43 - 27 males and 16 females.

However this was well below the targets that had been set.

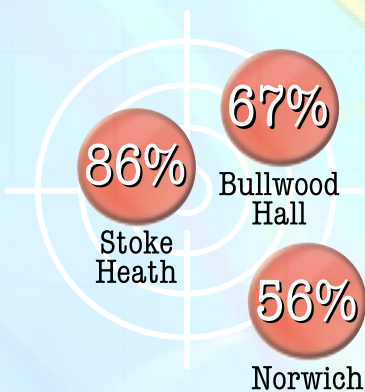
- Bullwood Hall recruited 67% of their target
- Stoke Heath recruited 86% of their target
- Norwich recruited 56% of their target

Reasons given for this shortfall were the transient nature of the prison and changes in the prison population. One of the prisons suddenly found themselves coping with an influx of short term young offenders whereas another of the prisons is a local prison and had to cope with continuous court appearances and transfers.

Initially, recruiting for Family Learning in a male establishment was found to be more difficult because information was not collected about whether or not a prisoner had children, whereas this information is automatically recorded in the women's estate. Subsequently this has been changed so that it is automatically recorded for men as well.

Some concerns expressed by the students prior to the Family Learning course were that:

- they were not in contact with their children;
- they were unsure of their own skills;
- they were not sure if the course was 'macho' enough;
- they had split up from their partners;
- they did not want their children to see them in prison;



- their families did not live near the prison;
- their families had difficulties with transport.

Student retention was difficult to measure because of the transient nature of the prison but records were kept of why students left. Only one of the prisons seemed to have difficulty with students dropping out and this was generally at the beginning of the course when they realised what was involved. However one student left at a later stage because he split up with his partner and did not feel motivated to continue.

Students were often transferred before the completion of the course. Each establishment approached the project flexibly to find ways of maximising the learning opportunities. Sometimes courses were merged or new participants joined to replace those who had been moved from the prison.

Of the 43 students who participated only 5 had any qualifications. Students were assessed at the beginning, and where possible at the end of the project.

36 students were reassessed. There were significant gains in the assessment scores of those involved.

- 21 students (58%) showed increased scores in reading.
- 21 students (58%) showed increased scores in spelling.
- 18 students (50%) showed increased scores in punctuation.

27 students were assessed on numeracy and 46% of them showed increased scores.

The group of students whose scores did not change included two EAL students and one non-reader. They were unable to complete the assessment forms. In those cases gains in terms of word and number recognition,

• 58% of the students showed increased scores in reading and spelling and 50% showed increased scores in punctuation



**ACHIEVED 25%**



**ACHIEVED 50%**



**ACHIEVED 50%**

confidence, English speaking skills and motivation were noted.

As many of the students targeted were students of lower levels of ability, importance was placed upon the increase of both self-esteem and confidence.

There were other more tangible achievements which added to the success of the project and students' self esteem. Students were able to produce something, such as a puppet, storysack, book or tape, that could be given to a child and used together. This was an important factor in the motivation of students. At Bullwood Hall all students completed their storysacks, which were either taken with them on release or handed out on a visit.

Norwich Prison set targets regarding reading activities.

- Target: 50% increase in newspaper reading
- Achieved: 25%
  
- Target: 50% increase in using reading for information
- Achieved: 50%
  
- Target: 50% increase in using literacy for leisure
- Achieved: 50%

Although this prison set other targets to measure the increase in the use of the library, the prison library was closed for most of the project. An increase in interest was noted when the library reopened but it was not possible to measure this increase accurately.

Although each of the prisons had hoped to achieve gains in accreditation, only Bullwood Hall managed to do so.

Out of a target of 24 Wordpower or Numberpower units, 21 were achieved (87.5% of aim).

Qualitative evaluation was carried out by:

- a Child Assessment Record at the beginning and end of the project;
- a parent/child questionnaire at the beginning and end of the project;
- a student questionnaire;
- a staff questionnaire.

Contrary to initial expectation, it was difficult to collect data for the Child Assessment Record because many of the young men had very little or no contact with their children. For this reason Stoke Heath was unable to collect any data. No-one had predicted how little contact parents had with their children once they went into prison. For this reason the project has been valuable in showing how important it is to find ways to support parents in maintaining relationships with their children.

Although extra family visits proved difficult and opportunities to work with children separately was not possible, the assessments of children and parents taken at the end of the project at Bullwood Hall and Norwich show increased scores. Bullwood Hall devised distance-learning activities for the children, so some of these gains are feasible. However, on the whole it would be unwise to make generalisations about progress.

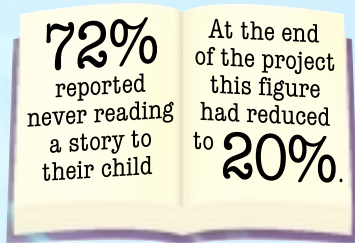
The Child Assessment Record showed that:

- the number of children who showed an interest in books increased from 44% to 56%;
- the number of children who borrowed books from libraries increased from 8% to 24%.

In terms of writing:

- children who could write their name with help increased from 40% to 52%;
- those who could do it without help increased from 20% to 36%.





Assessment of talking skills showed the number of children who could listen to instructions, stories, rhymes and poems increased from 52% to 60%. Children able to take a message (as reported by parents) increased from 28% to 40%.

The questions for the parent/child questionnaire were taken from the national family learning projects but had to be modified for use in prisons because of the separation of parents from their children and, therefore, a narrower range of possible activities.

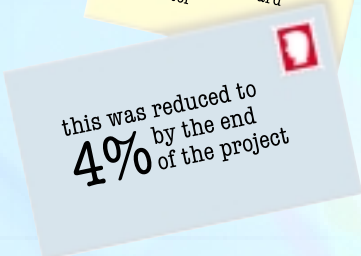
The results of the parent/child questionnaire revealed changes in parental involvement with their children on visits. The number of prisoners who shared books or comics with their children increased. At the start of the project 72% reported never reading a story to their child, whereas at the end of the project this figure had reduced to 20%. Similarly, the questionnaire showed that parents had a greater involvement in playing with their children.

At the start of the project 56% reported they never sent their child a card or letter. This was reduced to 4% by the end of the project and 36% reported they were now sending something more than once a week.

Similar improvements were shown in the number of participants who contacted their children by phone. The 44% who never spoke to their child by phone had reduced to 28% by the end of the project.

The number of prisoners who received communications such as a card, picture or letter from their child also increased. At the start of the project, 60% reported never receiving anything. This had decreased to 48% by the end of the project.

The student questionnaire completed by 30 students at the end of the course revealed some of the 'softer' gains.



Although it was initially difficult to recruit people for the course, at the end of the project 83% of participants said they wanted to continue learning and all participants felt more confident about helping their children to learn.

60% said they were better at reading and 67% said they enjoyed reading more than they did previously. 53% reported they used the library more.

67% felt they could concentrate for longer and felt more confident about working in a group. They also said they were better at listening to instructions.

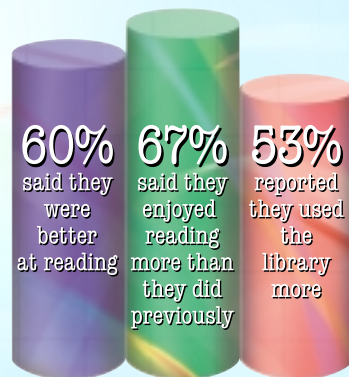
70% said they found it easier to write letters and 57% found it easier to fill in prison forms. 53% said they enjoyed writing more and 57% noticed an improvement in their spelling.

These improvements were supported by the results of the questionnaire completed by prison officers, trainers or supervisors who worked closely with the prisoners.

Staff responded regarding 26 of the participants.

89% of students showed a greater understanding of how children learn.

Improvements in co-operation and group work skills were reported for 80% of participants.



## Evaluation

‘students’  
social and life  
skills were  
developed  
during the  
course through  
the group work’

THE Family Learning programmes in prisons have not been able to function in the same way as Family Learning programmes in the community because of the difficulty of negotiating the prison and visits system. Nevertheless they have shown there are enormous gains to be made by running such programmes.

We can see that it is possible to gain accreditation in basic skills, particularly if courses are integrated or supported by other education programmes. Increased self-esteem, confidence and motivation have led students to consider other courses and to succeed in other areas of the curriculum.

Students’ social and life skills were developed during the course through the group work. They were encouraged to participate in group discussions and to acknowledge that other individuals can hold differing opinions. Students were encouraged to try to show tolerance to opposing viewpoints and recognise the right of others to hold such opinions. They learnt to see that a situation can be defused by using communication and therefore need not result in physical violence.

One student who had been positively encouraged by his father and brothers to be physically violent and ‘always win a fight’ or face a beating from them, disagreed with others who promoted fighting to solve an issue. He could recognise the futility of such actions, seeing the value of talking rather than punching. He also recognised that if the students, as parents, failed to teach this to their children, history could repeat itself, and those children might find themselves in prison. Although behaviour cannot be changed overnight it is possible to begin to raise awareness of some issues.

In one of the projects young men, who had not previously encountered many positive or sensitive male

Improvements in  
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role models, were able to appreciate and reflect on their activities with men who did not reinforce the macho culture of the establishment.

Students who participated became more self-assured both within the education department and in their dealings with staff in other areas of the establishment. Many also became more positive in their approach to life.

Participants improved their parenting skills, knowledge of the way children learn and how they, as parents or carers, had an important role to play in supporting their children's learning. Students were also able to reflect on their own childhood and in some cases re-evaluate their experiences. Discussions often led on to how the students as children had been treated, corrected or abused.

The importance of play and how their children's literacy and numeracy skills could be developed through fun was new to most participants, who subsequently developed the confidence to select suitable materials and games to enhance a child's ability to develop skills.

Family relationships improved and in some cases students made contact with their child for the first time. The use of story tapes and videos were found to be particularly useful in maintaining contact with children. In Norwich Prison students started and maintained the practice of writing letters to their family rather than relying solely on telephone calls. In another, the distance learning activities helped the motivation of students who regained their sense of parenting when they received work back from their child.

Stoke Heath Prison highlighted the importance of planning time, which they had considerably underestimated. The practicalities in setting up the course were significant in terms of management time and security issues were paramount.

‘family relationships improved and in some cases students made contact with their child for the first time’

‘prisoners are less likely to re-offend if they maintain strong family ties while in prison’

Security clearance for prisoners attending the course, particularly in terms of previous offences against children, outstanding custody cases etc. took considerable time. This involved the prison, the probation service and negotiations with the carer of the child. The commitment and professionalism of the tutors involved was felt to bring about the success of the project.

At Bullwood Hall Prison, it was felt that the programme was good value for money in terms of accreditable achievement and the development of social skills with regard to many of the young women involved. Consequently, the Comprehensive Spending Review provided money to fund further family learning projects. The prison intends to build on the foundations that have been laid by the Basic Skills Agency funded project. Future plans include developing the distance learning programme across the age range and to provide support for SATS revision for Years 2 and 6. The numeracy hour and its implications will also be part of their future development.

Despite the difficulties encountered in Norwich Prison, in terms of changes in management and prisoner profile, and overcrowding drafts, which reduced the ability of the project to meet the targets set, the Governor recognises the success of the project and wishes it to continue. The continuation of the concept of Family Learning has been achieved by delivering a reduced programme of 6 week courses focusing on reading, story tapes and family visits.

Working with prisoners' families is an important part of crime reduction. Prisoners are less likely to re-offend if they maintain strong family ties while in prison. The impact for children of having a parent in prison is considerable – behaviour and self-esteem often deteriorates. If we are to reduce the inter-generational effects, we must ensure that parents are able to boost

their own education, have better access to their children and are fully involved with their children's learning. Family learning provides a means of doing this.

## Lessons from the projects

- Family visits are difficult because of distances, lack of transport and limited finances. Distance-learning initiatives are essential.
- Children can become overtired in extended visits.
- Only a small percentage of male prisoners remain in a stable relationship with the mother of their child. Allowance should be made for other family members to bring the student's child into prison, if all parties agree to this.
- Security checks are important to ensure that parents could have access to their children.
- Cross-curricular links are essential to enable students to achieve their learning goals.
- The support of prison staff is essential in accommodating the additional family visit and the smooth running of family learning initiatives.
- Male prisons need to spend more time considering how to target suitable candidates.
- It is important to record parental status in male establishments.

For further information contact:  
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