

Readconnect in HMP Downview: Year 1 report

Introduction

Readconnect is a storytelling project which is being delivered at HMP Downview, a prison and Young Offender Institution for women aged 18 and over.

The programme supports participants to bond with their children and wider family members while they are in prison, through storytelling and wider literacy activities. Participants attend sessions to build their confidence and learn new skills such as: creative writing for children, telling stories over the phone and reading aloud. Following the workshops, participants use their new skills on visits, family day sessions and over the phone, with their children and young family members.

In addition to workshops, Readconnect provides resource packs for the wider prison estate. These consist of different activities to help support people in prison with storytelling and literacy, including how to write a poem to your child, top tips on reading bedtime stories and creative writing session plans. The resource packs are based around the age of the child or family member and can be accessed through the Learning and Skills Manager, Library and PACT.

During the first year of the programme we distributed 830 'Chat, Play and Read' cards from the National Literacy Trust Early Years Team, to support people in prison to connect with their children and the young people in their families and support their learning. We also distributed 546 books to workshop participants (a copy for the participant and a copy for the child/family member), with any extra copies or book donations gifted to the library or visits hall. Authors and workshop leaders included: Wendy Shearer, Ilona Bannister, Kate Wakeling and Laura Dockrill (to name a few).

We used a short survey to gather feedback about the programme and explore its benefits for participants and staff. Overall, we received responses from 74 participants and 2 members of staff at Downview.

Feedback from the programme

The programme was positively received. All participants rated the workshops they attended as 'excellent' or 'good'. When asked how the workshops could be improved, many said they would have liked more sessions, or to be able to spend more time in the workshops.

When asked what they liked most about the sessions, many participants told us in their comments that the sessions were enjoyable, inspiring and made them feel positive:

"It made me feel happy I actually forgot I was in prison it made me explore my inner deepest imagination which was magical."

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“It made me feel warm and inspired thank you.”

“Interacting and feeling safe to be silly, I feel it connected our group and broke some walls”

“Fantastic energy! Such an inspirational session – really positive and engaging”

“It made me feel very happy & positive”

“Made me feel confident & was so much fun.”

“It made me feel inspired!!”

“I'm glad I came and appreciate this day as it has made me feel happier and brighter”

In a similar vein, both staff members also rated the programme as excellent. They agreed that the programme enabled them to better support participants to engage with their child(ren)'s learning and to encourage participants to maintain contact with their family/child(ren).

Changes for participants

We also saw positive changes for participants, as part of the programme. For example, 9 in 10 participants were inspired to support their child(ren)'s learning (89.5%) and wanted to be more involved in their child(ren)'s learning going forward (94.2%). 9 in 10 participants also felt more confident to read stories with their child(ren) (89.7%) and in supporting their child(ren)'s learning through storytelling and reading (91.3%; see Figure 1).

More than 4 in 5 participants agreed that the sessions gave them ideas for storytelling and reading activities, to use with their child(ren) (85.1%); and 7 in 10 agreed that the sessions provided them with ideas on how to support their child(ren)'s learning (70.2%).

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Figure 1: Changes for participants following the workshops



A common theme amongst participants, when asked about the impact of the programme, was that it inspired them to find ways to connect with their children or the young people in their family, giving them more confidence to communicate with them.

“It helped me to express myself in a child like way and writing poem and being able to share with my child”

“I can write stories to send out or read over phone and get my niece to partake in that”

“Was really fun, easy to understand and made me feel like I could write my children books. Gained confidence in writing”

“it was very energetic, loads of shared skills and it gave me confidence in communicating with my child and it gave me a good boost”

We also asked staff what changes they had witnessed in participants. Both agreed that participants seemed more confident in supporting their child(ren)'s learning through storytelling and reading; in sharing stories with their child(ren); and felt more empowered to support their child(ren)'s learning during visits, video calls, and phone calls.

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“Residents who went into the workshops unsure that they would be able to participate due to low self-esteem or anxiety, gained confidence. It was also nice to see them connect with each other over motherhood and joint experience of being a family member to children while in prison.”

“There are a lot of residents who haven’t previously thought of books and storytelling as a way to connect with their children. For these people, the workshops have provided new things to talk about with their children, as well as techniques for engaging with them especially on the phone.”

“The projects have allowed residents the opportunity to explore connections with loved ones in non-traditional and unique ways.”

Staff also highlighted benefits for specific participants, for example, a resident who began the programme with little contact with her daughter, but built a connection and bonded with her through the books that were sent. The programme also enabled participants to talk more freely about their children, grandchildren and other young family members, improving relationships within the prison.

“The residents have been given the opportunity to open up more about their families to myself and their peers and it has provided them with a support network and a joyful distraction from the daily stresses and heartache of prison life. There has always been laughter coming from the room when the workshops have been taking place and that has been lovely to hear!”

Participants highlighted, specifically, the positive impact that the authors facilitating the session had on them, in particular how engaging and inspirational they were.

“Excellent! Wow! I am spellbound! Sita (Brahmachari) was fantastic! Engaging - magical - enthusiastic - heart warming! I am truly blessed to have been graced with her beautiful spirit! More inspirational than you will EVER KNOW XXX”

“Kate (Wakeling) was very enthusiastic! the group was uplifting - had a smile all the way through”

“I liked Kate the author of the book, also her poems and the way she read them, I liked being creative and loved getting poems, riddles and ideas I can share with my daughter”

“Wendy's (Shearer) inspirational stories getting our creative juices flowing”

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**“I loved Sitas passion, she makes you feel warm + welcome her stories are very good,
I would love to come again”**

For many the workshops were a place to learn about the creative process, inspiring them to access their own creativity and build confidence in their reading and writing skills.

“It made me feel confident that I could get my ideas down and that there are many stories I have to share, that my disabilitys are not a block but something that can be climbed and turned into something positive”

“We can create sections of writing to do a story & it was really fun & interesting”

“Small blocks of information, interactive and inspiring made me believe I have a story to tell + the ways to do it - fabulous thank you”

“We got to write down ideas for stories and learning new techniques on how to develop a story”

“Making writing more spontaneous and taking the fear of the formal away - removing blockages”

“The creative writing bits, I was pleasantly surprised at how creative my mind actually is”

“I'm more creative than I think”

Conclusion

Overall, the value of the workshops to the participants was evident, both through the feedback received and participants' desire for the sessions to continue. This report demonstrates that Readconnect is very popular amongst participants and effective in creating change for those who attend workshops. It was particularly effective in giving participants ideas around how to be creative with their child(ren); equipping them with the confidence to read to their child(ren), assist their learning and inspiring them to become more involved in their child(ren)'s education.

Moving forward, owing to the success of this pilot project, the criminal justice team are hopeful and optimistic that they will be successful in future funding applications, to continue the delivery of Readconnect at HMP Downview.