Storytime Foundation lockdown care packs project

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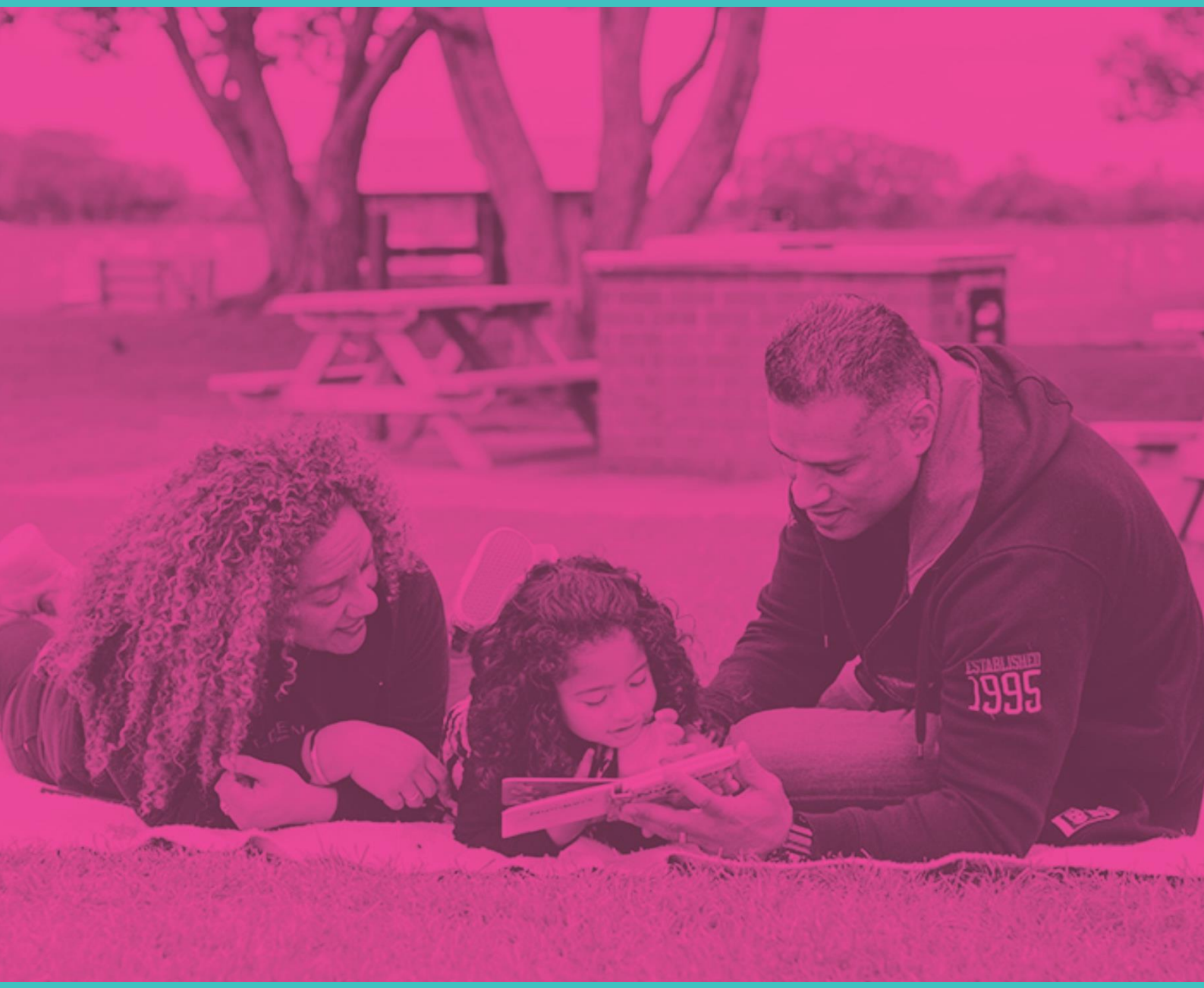

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The Lockdown Care Packs Project was implemented by the Storytime Foundation through a collaborative inter-agency initiative in 2020. The project was made possible under COVID-19 Lockdown through the work of Ara Poutama Aotearoa, Department of Corrections and Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, Ministry of Education.

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The project and its evaluation were funded by the Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) Programme Hei Kete Raukura, in the Ministry of Education's Evidence, Data and Knowledge Group, and the Parent Information and Community Intelligence Group, to enable and inform reach and support to children and their whānau in times of stress.

Please note that to preserve confidentiality, the photos used in the report are not of paihere or their whānau.

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Executive summary

Taonga mō ngā Tamariki could not be delivered to paihere during lockdown levels 3 and 4 as prison visits were suspended. The resources were redirected to support the whānau of paihere or those experiencing family violence, with children under twelve years.

Lockdown care packs were made individually to cater to the age, stage, and culture of the children of paihere. The resources in each pack typically included books for each child in the family, where possible in their home language, games, dice and counters, scrapbook pack and coloured pencils, and a handout about how reading can reduce stress.

Findings

A total of 685 packs were delivered to whānau. Most of those interviewed (95%) said the process of receiving the packs went smoothly. The main issue appeared to be delivery delays.

Both Probation Officers, and whānau themselves reported whānau faced increased stress, including material hardship and loss of emotional supports, during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Many whānau had very few resources and appreciated these at such a stressful time. Several said that the lockdown care packs helped to calm the household down and helped to alleviate boredom and stress.

The way the packs were framed was helpful. Parents struggled to home educate their children. Although the packs contained educational resources, the intention was for whānau to have fun together.

Few whānau remembered seeing a handout about reducing stress in the pack. Nonetheless they were able to describe the intention of the packs, which was to help reduce stress at a stressful time by having fun and reading together.

While some whānau said they had reasonably good relationships with their Probation Officers, others were very touched that their Probation Officer had thought of them and their tamariki at this stressful time. Many of the whānau and Probation Officers felt that it had helped to strengthen their relationship.

It would appear that the resources, books and games developed for Taonga mō ngā Tamariki, successfully used in prison settings to strengthen the relationship between paihere and tamariki, could also be used in a community setting to mitigate toxic levels of stress, provide an important protective factor and support whānau resilience during stressful times.

Evaluation Notes

Purpose

The evaluation describes the Storytime Foundation Lockdown Care Packs project, and seeks to understand the outcomes, what was learned and how it might be improved should a similar project be undertaken.

Data

A total of 215 respondents provided feedback on the packs.

The evaluator contacted 88 whānau by phone who offered brief feedback.

Twenty-eight respondents agreed to more in-depth phone interviews.

Tamariki were asked to provide a word to describe the packs. While 32 responded, some were too young to answer.

Twenty-nine Probation Officers answered an online survey about the project and the differences it had made.

Purpose

The purpose of this evaluative report is to describe the Storytime Foundation Lockdown care packs project, understand the outputs and outcomes, what was learned and how it might be improved should a similar project be undertaken.

Background

In 2017 the Storytime Foundation Project Manager contacted Northland Regional Correctional Facility (NRCF) to discuss how children's visits operated in the prison setting, and how The Storytime Foundation might support these. The Corrections visiting team had just started breakfast and afternoon tea visits for fathers and their children. It was agreed that the Storytime Foundation could support this initiative by providing a literacy and numeracy programme in which learning games and resources were given to the prisoners and their families.

The Storytime Foundation drew upon mounting evidence (see Appendix One) that the appropriate support provided to children whose parents are in prison or are affected by family violence can achieve better outcomes for those children and their families. This includes better mental health, positive future prospects and the ability to thrive at home, learn well in schools and take part in community activities without a sense of alienation. Targeted support also reduces the negative intergenerational effects of family separation, criminality and violence.

In response, the Storytime Foundation developed Taonga mō ngā Tamariki (the introduction to Early Reading Together® Te Pānui Ngātahi and Reading Together® Te Pānui Ngātahi) to parents/caregivers in Corrections care through adaptive workshops.

Evaluations of the Reading Together® programme (Alton-Lee, Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009) had found that a strengths-based intervention giving parents the knowledge and skills to support their children's reading had helped them develop basic understandings of the reading process and how children learn to read; learn strategies to constructively support their children's reading at home; reflect on and discuss their experiences with their children's reading; access and select reading material at an appropriate level from school and local libraries. The intervention supported positive whānau-child interactions and children's enjoyment of reading. The children of families on the Reading Together® programme not only made greater gains than those in control groups, but these gains were sustained over time. Similarly, the Storytime Books for Babies evaluation (Woodley, 2020a) had found that outcomes, such as how often children were read to and library usage, were greatly amplified when books were combined with key messages to parents on the importance of reading with, talking to and playing with children, and how to use the books.

Based on these findings, Taonga mō ngā Tamariki combined the use of books and resources with workshops based on the Reading Together® and Early Reading Together®[1] programmes, adapted for the prison setting. The programme is designed to support oral language, literacy, numeracy and attachment between parents, caregivers and their children, and to maximise positive outcomes in these areas.

The participants choose the books that they think their children will enjoy. They are taught how to introduce the book to their child, and taught literacy and numeracy games, that they can play when their child comes to visit. They can make a placemat for each of their children with positive messages for each child. The resources are provided to the child/ren in a book bag made in the prison sewing room. The book bag is kept at the prison for when the children visit.

Before Covid-19 caused New Zealand schools and institutions to lockdown in late March 2020, the project had delivered a range of positive outcomes to paihere (prisoners and those in the care of Corrections).

By July 2020 186 participants had completed the programme and evaluation forms. The evaluation (Woodley, 2020) found the outcomes were positive. There was a shift in the percentage of parents who said they knew about the benefits of reading to children, before (25%) and after (94%) the programme. Similarly, there was a shift in the percentage of parents who said they knew about the benefits of storytelling and singing to children, before (27%) and after (97%) the programme. There was also a marked shift in the percentage of parents who said they knew about the benefits of playing counting and word games with their children, before (23%) and after (97%) the programme. Parents and grandparents reported feeling more confident about reading, telling stories, singing, and playing games with their children, after the programme (98%, compared with 38% prior to participating in the initiative). All the reported differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

[1] The Early Reading Together® programme is the companion programme to the Reading Together® programme and is focused on adults reading to 'babies to 5 and 6 year-olds' to support their children's language and literacy development.

There was widespread agreement that Taonga mō ngā Tamariki worked best when combined with child-centred visits. This combination provides the participants with an opportunity to strengthen relationships with their children, have fun and spend `normal' family time with them. This was strongly valued by the participants.

Both staff and paihere interviewed for the evaluation have said that Taonga mō ngā Tamariki is one of the most successful programmes the facilities offer, because it uses a hands-on learning format where the participants choose books, and make games and activities; it is not related to their offending and it focuses on their children. The combination of books targeted at the age of the children, and the activities, have not just supported literacy and numeracy activities, they appear to have supported and strengthened the relationships between the men and their children and given the children some `normal' family time. It is too early to assess whether it has had an impact on recidivism.

Covid-19 pandemic

On 11 March 2020 the World Health organisation declared the outbreak of Covid -19 a pandemic. In response, New Zealand introduced a four-level alert system on 21 March to manage the outbreak. While the Alert Level was initially set at Level Two, it was raised to Level Three on 23 March. By 25 March, the Alert Level was moved to Level Four, putting the country into a nationwide lockdown. The Alert Level was moved back down to Level 3 on 27 April, partially lifting some lockdown restrictions, and down to Level 2 on 13 May.

As the virus is both highly contagious and can be fatal, prison visits were suspended under Alert Levels Three and Four, and there were restrictions placed on prison visiting under Alert Level Two. This meant that children were missing out on prison visits to whānau and were no longer receiving books, literacy and numeracy activities that they enjoyed.

This raised important questions, namely, how could tamariki and paihere best be supported in this new environment and what could be developed to support paihere, tamariki and whānau.

Evidence

Taonga mō ngā Tamariki is based on compelling evidence from a range of international studies conducted over many years that reading or literacy schemes involving prisoner-child contact can foster supportive family relationships and motivate prisoners towards a productive future (see Appendix One).

Similarly, studies have found that using play in the prisons is important to keeping family relations close. Woodall & Kinsella (2017), for example, found that: “Prison visits are an integral part of institutional structures and are a key way by which families stay in contact and mitigate against the negative effects of family separation”. They noted that the children were more excited to see their fathers because of play. It created a more exciting environment and a space in which the family could strengthen their attachments with each other. Many fathers commented on how, when playing with their children, it became less like a prison and helped them feel more positive about going home once released.

With the rapid changes in contact and travel allowed under lockdown alert levels 4 and 3 from late March to May, project staff had to think quickly and rework the project. While the Northern Region Corrections Facility encouraged letter-writing and put audio-visual contact in place, both the Storytime Foundation and Corrections staff were concerned that many home-based paihere, and whānau of paihere in Corrections facilities, were already facing high levels of stress, and Levels 3 and 4 lockdown, with the loss of employment, income, security, along with the anxiety of facing a pandemic, homeschooling and confinement, potentially further increased levels of stress on whānau. They wanted to continue to provide positive support for affected children and their whānau, drawing on evidence of what works, how to avoid unintended negative effects, and prioritising keeping everyone involved safe.

Storytime Foundation staff were aware that while stress, even severe stress, which is shortlived and experienced in the context of warm supportive relationships, is normal and important to healthy development, a toxic stress response occurs when a child is exposed to strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity or extremely stressful conditions. Stressors can include poverty, financial stress, family violence, mental health issues, living in areas characterised by deprivation, along with a range of other stressful conditions. Exposure to toxic levels of stress can rob both parents and their tamariki of executive function or the ability to plan, strategise, organise and learn. Chronic fear and anxiety commonly experienced by children who live in threatening, chaotic or stressful situations can make it very hard for them to access their executive abilities, even when they are not actually present in those environments, such as when at school (Center on the Developing Child, 2010). And it appears that toxic levels of stress can have a strong impact on child outcomes. The Growing Up in New Zealand study, for example, found that children exposed to multiple risk factors have an increased likelihood of experiencing poor health, educational and behavioural outcomes during their preschool years (Woodley, 2017).

However, as the Center on the Developing Child (2010) points out, some people beat the odds despite severe levels of stress, hardship and adversity. The Centre found that children with at least one supportive, stable, committed adult in their life, who could provide personalised responsiveness and protection helped to buffer children from risks and trauma. These adults helped to build the key capacities in children, such as the ability to plan, monitor and regulate their behaviour and were critically important to child wellbeing. Responsive relationships are based on give and take, or serve and return interactions, where the adult responds to the child, and the interactions are individualised to the child's personality, interests and capabilities. These are generally the responses used when singing to children, reading to children, telling them stories, or responding to their questions (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). The Centre on the Developing Child also found that play can foster young children's resilience to hardship (Centre on the Developing Child, 2020).

New Zealand studies too, were highlighting the importance of reading to children. An analysis of Growing Up in New Zealand data, found for example, that when the cumulative weight of stress is high, reading to children is one of the few protective factors that can positively impact child outcomes in whānau experiencing persistently high levels of stress (Woodley, 2017).

But reading to children appears to work best when it is fun. An OECD report (2002) found that reading for pleasure is the single most important indicator of a child's future success. It's an even more powerful factor in life achievement than socio-economic background. But if it is not fun, it can become a vicious circle in which children who struggle to read, become less motivated to read, affecting their feelings about reading and creating a vicious circle where poor readers remain poor readers.

It appeared that the resources, books and games developed for Taonga mō ngā Tamariki being successfully used in prison settings to strengthen the relationship between paihere and tamariki, could also be used to protect the whānau of paihere in the community against toxic levels of stress, providing an important protective factor and supporting whānau resilience during this particularly stressful time.

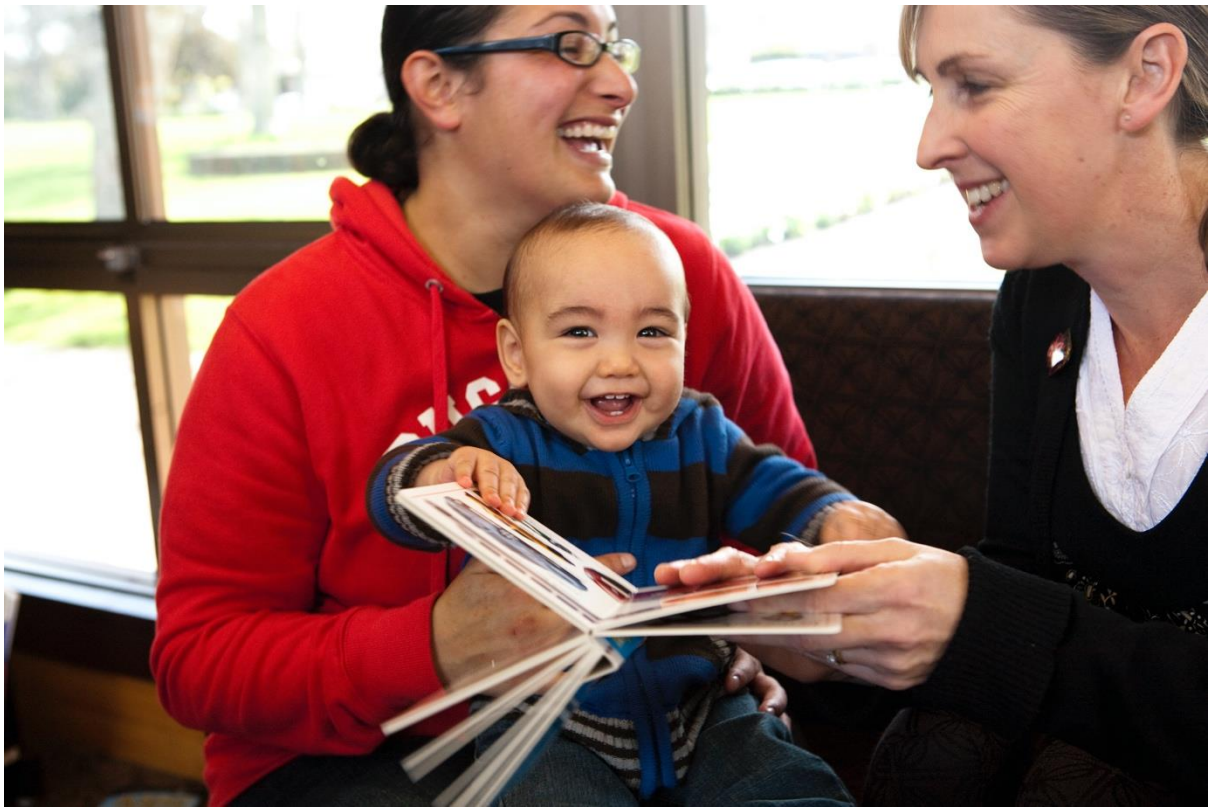
However, evidence suggests that the impact of these resources could be further leveraged by staff working in a different way. Lambie (2018) has found that providing plentiful, trauma-informed, culturally appropriate support, could help stop intergenerational cycles of disadvantage, including family violence. As Lambie (2018) points out, although the wellbeing of babies may seem a long way from arguments about the prison muster, there is evidence which suggests that is where the interruption of family violence needs to begin. Emerging evidence also suggests that a more compassionate and relational response to addressing stressors such as family violence can make a difference. There are examples of how this can work. In 2015, Woodley, for example, evaluated a project where police, Corrections and other agencies, in an effort to reduce family violence at Christmas time, delivered food hampers to fifty families with the highest and most severe family violence offending rates in the previous 12 months in Manukau. In addition to delivering hampers and organising fun days for whānau, police talked to the adults about their plans over Christmas, how they were going to resolve conflict at such a stressful time of the year, and asked them to contact them early if things were starting to escalate. While the family violence rates at Christmas peaked in Counties Manukau and New Zealand, there was a marked decrease in family violence incidents amongst the fifty whānau cohort over that period ($p<0.05$).

Interestingly, there had been concern from police that providing Christmas hampers to offending whānau might reward 'bad behaviour' by linking a positive (food hamper) with a negative (family violence incident). This was a view shared by some Corrections staff in the early days of Taonga mō ngā Tamariki. The police officers and Corrections staff interviewed were surprised at the outcomes, and even those who had initially expressed concerns changed their views in response to the differences they saw the projects were making.

Importantly, it appears that the strength of the project lay not just in the food parcels, fun days, or in the case of Taonga mō ngā Tamariki, the books, although the value of these to families with little cannot be underestimated. The value appears to lie in the attempts by the police and Corrections staff to develop supportive and caring relationships with paihere and their families. The hampers, fun days and books are a means of opening the door to having key conversations about the importance of reading, or in the case of the Christmas project, safety. It also appears to change the nature of the relationship between paihere, whānau and staff. Changing the dynamic from punitive to care-based responses was considered highly symbolic by the families, particularly for those who did not receive a lot of empathy or compassion in their lives. Staff, paihere and their whānau found it deeply humanising.

"Police, families, and community organisations identified the same key benefits of the project. It built trust and strengthened relationships between and within families, organisations, and the police. The project also supported families by providing practical support at a stressful time of year." (Woodley, 2015)

It would appear the efficacy of projects could be further leveraged by ensuring that staff supporting paihere and their whānau, not only share the resources being provided, but tell paihere why they can make a difference, and that staff take time to develop the relational aspects of projects; in particular by showing authentic care for paihere *and* their whānau.



Response of the Storytime Foundation and Corrections

In response to Covid-19 the Storytime Foundation and Northern Region Contracts Manager moved quickly to devise a new approach that would be effective in the new, unprecedented lockdown times. The Northern Region Contracts allowed the funding that would have been used for programme delivery in Corrections Facilities to be redirected into a new programme that could be delivered under Covid-19 level four lockdown.

The Ministry of Education then funded the Storytime Foundation to provide reading material and games to children under 12 under the direction of Corrections in Te Tai Tokerau and Manukau. The programme was extended to provide support during lockdown Levels three and two in May and June 2020.

The Covid-adapted initiative draws upon knowledge and expertise developed in the delivery of Taonga mō ngā Tamariki, and the lessons learned through delivery of packs up until then, to optimise the match of resources to the age of the children, prioritising child wellbeing, safety, fun, enjoyment, positive whānau bonding and positive messages for child identity.

The lockdown packs

Corrections staff were asked to refer whānau with children 12 years or under to the Storytime Community Engagement Facilitator. They were asked to provide:

- The name of person receiving the packs
- Their address
- The names, gender and ages of children

- Any other languages spoken at home (we have some books in Te Reo, Tongan, Fijian and Samoan languages)
- Whether they would be happy for the Storytime Foundation to contact them either before or after the packs were sent.

The packs for each whānau were made individually to cater for the ages and home languages of their children. A local courier agreed to collect them from the facilitator, despite it being out of his way.

Based on research which showed the importance of reading to children to reduce stress and top up the executive functions of both children and parents, the resources in each pack typically included:

- books - for each child in the family, where possible in their home language
- one or two games suitable for the ages of the children
- dice and counters (with a safety warning)
- Scrapbook packs, felts or coloured pencils, etc.

Each pack also contained a one-page handout developed specifically for families at this time summarising how reading and interacting with your children can be beneficial to all. (See Appendix Two.) Ten packs also contained a letter from the father in a Corrections facility to their children.

Evaluation

A total of 154 tailored resource packs were distributed to 371 children with parents or whānau caregivers in the care of Corrections, while 346 packs were distributed to children affected by family violence incidents in Manukau (through the Manukau Multi-Disciplinary Community-Based Action Team [MDCAT]) between the first week of May and late June 2020. In addition, the project was able to distribute an extra 125 whānau packs to 302 children plus 60 additional packs to children at risk of family violence. Hence, a total 685 packs – well above the target number – were delivered during Covid lockdown.

The Storytime Foundation undertook follow-up phone calls with 205 families to check the packs had been delivered, get initial feedback from families and to establish whether the families were comfortable with follow-up contact from the evaluators. Considerable care was taken to ensure that the privacy of children and families was protected, both in the project design and evaluation.

Of the 205 respondents, three quarters (153) were male and one quarter (52) female, with a total of 514 children.

Type of sentence

Supervision	25%	n=52
Intensive supervision	21%	n=43
Home detention	17%	n=35
Post detention	11%	n=22
Released on conditions	7%	n=14
Community work	5%	n=11
Other	14%	n=28

In addition, a total of 88 whānau were contacted by the evaluator. Most of these commented only briefly or texted a reply in response. Twenty-eight whānau provided more in-depth feedback.

Whānau interviewed were asked about:

- The process of receiving the packs
- What was in the packs
- What their children thought of the packs – and if they could ask them for one word to describe the packs
- What they thought of the packs e.g. the quality, age appropriateness, cultural fit, whether they thought the packs were fun, educational etc.
- If the packs made a difference to them and their children over this time, and if so what difference it made

- If they had seen a pamphlet in the pack about reading to children – and if they remembered what it said

- Whether the packs made any other difference – e.g. to their relationship with their probation officer or police officer, and if so , what difference it made

- If there was anything they would change about the content of the packs, the process etc.

- If they would recommend the packs to others.

Findings

Most of those interviewed (95%) said the process of receiving the packs went smoothly. The main issue appeared to be with the delivery of the packs, with some experiencing delays. In a number of cases, it took more than 10 days for a courier pack from Whangarei to reach Auckland (160kms). Every pack was tracked, so if concerns were raised about the speed of the delivery, Storytime staff were able to track the individual parcels and advise whānau of the expected delivery date. Three families did not receive their packs, so replacement packs were sent. The Storytime community engagement facilitator checked the addresses were correct and subsequently attached a note to the courier asking them to take special care.

Almost all the whānau contacted said they appreciated the books, colouring pencils and activities. Some commented that the packs arrived at the right time, as they were running out of things to do and ideas. Most said they loved the activities and they were well used.

"The children enjoyed it. The scrap books are filled up, used chalk on pavement outside and reading books, snakes and ladders with the counters. Used every bit of it."

"He opened the box - a buzz in its own. He started to learn about crayons and pens, drawing on himself. Good books he liked. Haven't got through the whole pack - drip feeding him so it lasts."

Many of the parents commented that the packs helped to keep their children off devices. They also commented on the quality of the packs and were surprised at how much they contained.

"I was quite shocked actually. Didn't expect there to be so much in the pack."

"Such a lovely surprise and very, very excited. Opened and read the books and played the games. The maths one was exceptionally good."

The parents were requested to ask their children for a word that described how they felt about the packs. Two of the 88 parents felt that the children lost interest in the packs quite quickly and may have enjoyed toys more. The remainder described the excitement of their children when they received the packs. While some of the children were too young to respond, the most commonly used words were "awesome" "sweet" "loved it" "tu meke"

(too much) “fun” “wonderful” “cool” “great” “solid” “surprised” “dope” “sick” along with comments relating to how boring lockdown was and how the packs were “not boring”.

The parents were asked about the appropriateness of the packs, in particular whether they were good quality, age appropriate, a good cultural fit, fun, and educational. Parents commented that they appreciated them being in home languages, they were a good fit, they contained high quality resources and more resources than they had anticipated.

“I liked that it is culturally appropriate. My grandchild is Tongan and Māori.”

Some parents commented that the value of the Storytime lockdown care packs was that they were fun and not overtly educational.

“The Storytime packs were learning also but more in a creative and fun way.”

“School was all copied crosswords and things like that -very basic and worksheets – Storytime was something different for them.”

Parents also noted that while the schools provided worksheets, books and crosswords, the intention of the Storytime packs appeared to be different. Although the packs had a learning flavour, the activities were not about teaching children or learning, they were designed for families to interact and play together.

“Younger into snakes/ladders. Read lego books - played lego together - haven't done that for a while. Good time to connect and learn.”

The parents said they enjoyed playing together with their children and they had fun. Most felt that teaching children at home had been stressful and largely unenjoyable.

When asked if the packs made a difference to them and their children, most felt that they had. Several parents commented that the children had little to do other than watch TV and movies. The packs gave them a chance to read, play games, and colour in.

“Before the packet came they were just watching movies and youtube. Then they can colour.”

“Yes, when we turned the tv off they would get them on the dining table - good to turn internet off and let them vibe as children.”

The packs also gave families ideas about what they could do with their children which did not take money to organise.

“Thank you very much. Using scrapbook with activity, very helpful. He (son) was on my case all the time, now he has something to do. Enjoying it and really helped me. Given me ideas we can do for no money.”

Handout

Only 10% of whānau remembered seeing any handouts or pamphlets in the pack. Nonetheless, when asked about why they thought they had been sent it, they said they thought the pack was about reducing stress, reading to and playing with their children.

"The pack was about having fun together as a family. To chill out together."

"I think it was about reading to your kids, being a good thing to do. It was good because we spent time together not just watching TV."

Difference to their relationships with Probation Officers

While some said they had a postive relationship already, others said it made a difference to their relationship with their Probation Officers. They expressed surprise and were touched that their Probation Officers had thought of them and cared about them. They also appreciated that the Probation Officers were thinking not just about them but about their whānau, in particular their tamariki.

"It was good, it was something nice, that she is there to help not just a PO. It was like she cared."

"I've had a few Probation Officers and there's never been anything like this. It was all about you you you - this is about your kids*. Before the focus was on the client and now it's a bit more family oriented."*

When asked if there was anything they would change about the packs, most said they were perfect as they were. A few interviewees felt that more activities, or ideas for activities might have been a welcome addition. Others suggested more coloured pencils as these eventually snapped, or something to play with, such as blocks or toys. A few people felt that the contents had missed the age of their children, with the books or activities being slightly too young or too old for the children. Most however, were positive about both the packs and the process.

Almost all the parents (94%) would recommend the packs to other parents. The concerns related to Covid-19, the worry of having whānau in prison and the implications of Covid-19 getting into prisons, financial stress, job loss, food insecurity, the confinement, being cooped up inside and having to teach children were all mentioned as having added to their stress. They felt that the packs were a positive at a bleak time during which there weren't many positives. The activities had helped to calm the household down and gave the children something to do at a very stressful time of their lives.

"Because being at home with nothing to do is a bit crazy. For the little one, when she got nothing to do she's a little brat. The pack helped a lot as it kept her busy like being at kindy."

"Most definitely - keeps kids occupied and can learn, good not seeing them fighting over the playstation controller or tv."

Taonga Mō Ngā Tamariki [TMNT] more broadly

Several of the parents commented on TMNT more broadly, as they had undertaken TMNT in prison or in the community and commented how it had helped them understand how to better support their children by reading to them, playing with them and interacting with them.

"Writing books for my daughter in jail opened my eyes to how little I did with my kids. It made me go into deep-thinking and realisation of what I needed to do."

"Been on TMNT in community. It's a blessing."

Corrections staff

Twenty-nine Department of Corrections staff who had participated in the project also answered a survey about the project. Just over half of these Corrections staff (16) were from Manukau, six from Waitematā, four from Northland and three from Auckland Metro. All but one had referred whānau they worked with to Storytime to receive a care pack. Those receiving care packs had whānau in the care of Corrections or had been involved in reports of family violence incidents.

Impact of Covid-19

Corrections staff were asked about the impact Covid-19 had on the whānau they work with, particularly those with children under 12 years. Almost all Corrections staff described the increased stress families experienced during lockdown. Stressors they saw whānau experiencing included financial stress through job loss or reduced incomes, and family stress from being confined together. This was seen as increasing tension within families.

"Financial difficulties not being able to work and relying on Work and Income for assistance. They had to sign up with Spark (an internet provider) to have access to internet to submit applications to Work and Income for assistance if they were not able to reach Work and Income over the phone."

"Financial stress, tension at home with partner."

Corrections staff noted that for some whānau, food security was also a concern, adding to the cumulative weight of other stressors.

"These whānau are on the benefit so food security is a critical concern. Although they wanted to support their tamariki with their education some lack the ability and skill to do so."

Staff noted that some parents found it difficult to entertain the kids with such limited resources and found the books and activities helpful. They felt that the books and activities helped to address both boredom and the stress of confinement. It helped to calm both the adults and the children down.

"They have found it hard to keep the children entertained, as they couldn't see friends, go to school or kindy, especially on wet days when they were inside."

"The whanau are doing it tough. They have had a really difficult time. The children don't have a lot so it is not like they have had a lot of activities. It is hard for our families. They are already under stress."

The increase in parental responsibilities and roles to meet the expectation of "becoming teachers and learning how to cope with being around whānau all the time and learning how to develop communication" was also mentioned as a stressor.

Three Corrections staff noted that there were some positive aspects of lockdown. For some whānau it was an opportunity to pause, reflect on routines and household activities. For others it gave them time to bond and reconnect together as a family.

"More close proximity time, as kids couldn't go to school. Fathers (on HD) seeing their kids more often."

"It was good because it has the whanau push a 'reset' button with routines, what goes on in the household, what is most important. Then not so good, as it has children home all day every day. Not always having enough food in the fridge daily."

However, the majority of Probation Officers believe that for most the stress of having children at home for long periods of time eroded many families' ability to enjoy more family time together. An increase in family stress due to stresses such as overcrowded, small homes led to greater potential for conflict between family members. Corrections staff felt that this affected children particularly keenly.

Discussions with families

The Probation Officers were asked if they had undertaken discussions with whānau about the packs. Of those who responded three-quarters (12) had discussed having fun with their whānau, half (9) talked about the value of reading and playing games and discussed who they could contact if they needed support along with safety messages. Just over one-third (6) talked about how to reduce stress over this time.

Difference the lockdown care packs made to whānau

The Probation Officers were asked to provide feedback about the care packs and whether they thought the pack had made a difference to whānau.

- 24 (89%) said they provided books and activities that were fun for whānau
- 21 (78%) said they provided books and activities that were age appropriate
- 19 (70%) said they provided books and activities that were culturally appropriate
- 17 (63%) said it helped reduce whānau stress
- 18 (67%) said it helped support attachment and healthy relationships between children and parents
- 15 (56%) helped to support whānau safety.

Twenty (71%) of the Probation Officers believe the care packs made a difference to their relationships with whānau. Mostly they felt it helped them to engage with them, gave them something positive to discuss and showed they care about them. As a result, they felt that whānau were appreciative and opened up to them more.

"I think it showed them that we care about them and their children. I think it showed they matter to us. It has been really helpful."

"Helping to build on the foundations that we are here to support whanau not to look for ways to take them back to prison or breach them. For some they saw us in a different light and saw Probation as a support system who cares about not only the person in our system but their kids also."

They also felt that it gave them the opportunity to show that they cared about the whole family, including the children.

"It let them know someone cared about their tamariki, a small gesture went a long way."

Some staff commented that the books and activities helped reduce the stress in families and support positive relationships and interactions between parents and their children. The books and activities were also seen as providing constructive opportunities to play, read, and be creative.

"It has helped families who are in financial difficulty to help keep their kids occupied."

"It gave the children constructive things to do within the home and it kept their brains active."

"It provided an opportunity for my paihere to engage their children in a different learning i.e. getting mail, excitement of what was enclosed, reading/doing activities with their children."

Some Probation Officers hope that the project will be extended, with one officer suggesting they repeat the initiative at Christmas.

"Story Time packs are fantastic! I hope the Department of Corrections continues to support the initiative as it really helps relationships with offender whanau!"

"I think it would be great if an initiative like this can continue or something could come back around during Christmas as we all know it is a very stressful time for our Whanau and these packs can take some of the pressure away from parents needing to buy presents."

Conclusion

Both Probation Officers, and whānau themselves report that the paihere whānau faced increased stress, including material hardship and loss of emotional supports during Covid-19 lockdowns. Many had already been experiencing high levels of stress. The additional stressors as a result of Covid-19, in particular when families are stressed about meeting basic needs, is likely to have increased their child's emotional distress.

It would appear that the Covid-19 lockdown care packs provided whānau, many who had very few resources, with books and activities that they found fun and they and their children used during this stressful period.

There are several factors which appear to stand out in this evaluation.

The first is that the Storytime Foundation staff, the Corrections Contracts Manager and Ministry of Education showed flexibility and responsiveness at a time when these qualities were urgently needed. This enabled funding to be redirected into a new programme that could be delivered under Covid-19 level four lockdown almost immediately. The Ministry of Education, too, responded quickly with funding, enabling the programme to be extended. All three organisations had staff who shared the vision of supporting the whānau of paihere, were able to make decisions quickly, and were reflective and responsive, hence open to iterating the programme.

The second is the books and resources were targeted to the age, stage, culture and where possible, home language of the children. This meant that the resources were accessible and the whānau found the activities fun as they were targeted to their interests and abilities.

Thirdly, the framing of activities appears to be important. Although the packs contained educational material and resources, the intention of the packs was for parents and their children to have fun together. Many of the parents interviewed found home educating their children very stressful and difficult. When the intention is reading for pleasure, and playing games for fun, the whānau enjoyed the activities and found it reduced stress levels. Several mentioned that the lockdown care packs helped to calm the household down.

Fourthly, although few whānau remembered seeing a handout in the pack, most were clear about the intention of the pack, which was to help reduce stress at a stressful time, and that the activities were designed for whānau to do together. This message was reinforced by some Probation Officers. At least some of the parents and caregivers said that as a result they had done the activities with their children, and really enjoyed it. Some had not interacted with their children in this way for some time.

Lastly, while some whānau said they had reasonably good relationships with their Probation Officers, at least some whānau were very touched that their Probation Officer had thought of them and their tamariki at this stressful time. Many of the whānau and Probation Officers felt that it had helped to strengthen their relationship.

It would appear that the resources, books and games developed for Taonga mō ngā Tamariki, successfully used in prison settings to strengthen the relationship between paihere and tamariki, could also be used to protect the whānau of paihere in the community

against toxic levels of stress, providing an important protective factor and supporting whānau resilience during this particularly stressful time.

Next steps

It is recommended:

- that the programme is repeated in subsequent lockdowns, and consideration is given to extending the programme nationally
- that consideration is given to extending the programme after Christmas, as this is a time which whānau find stressful, family violence increases, and tamariki lose reading gains made in the previous year
- that consideration is given to the findings that the intention of the packs can affect their use; in particular the finding that while parents struggled educating their children over this time, they enjoyed reading to their children and playing with them when it was linked to fun.

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Appendix One

The impact of family contact on prisoners' recidivism: Literature overview

There is compelling evidence from a range of international studies conducted over many years that encouraging prisoners to have contact with their families during incarceration is linked to reduced recidivism after release.

Mitchell et al's (2016) analysis of 16 studies into the effect of prison visiting on recidivism showed a 26% decrease in recidivism among those who received visits from family or friends. Similarly, Hairston (1991) cites six studies that show that maintenance of family ties during incarceration is linked to lower rates of recidivism and fewer parole violations. A 1972 study by Holt and Miller found that only 2 percent of men who had visits from three or more individuals during the year prior to their parole were returned to prison the following year. This compared with 12 percent of those who had no contact with family or friends ending up back in prison after only a year (Holt and Miller, 1972).

One of the most recent meta-analysis of studies (De Claire and Dixon, 2017), which examined in fine detail 10 relevant studies into family visits and their impact on prisoner reoffending, described researchers' findings that when prisoners do not have access to their families, they lose hope about the future, and their social skills and emotional resilience diminish. This is echoed by Hairston (1988) who says these factors can lead isolated former prisoners to reoffend at higher rates than those with family ties.

In the UK, the Ministry of Justice's research (May, Sharma and Stewart, 2008) shows a clear, substantial positive effect on reducing recidivism when family ties are maintained. Prisoners who received visits from a family member had a reoffending rate 39% lower than those who did not. As UK prison reform advocate Lord Farmer (2017) argues:

"We cannot ignore the reality that a supportive relationship with at least one person is indispensable to a prisoner's ability to get through their sentence well and achieve rehabilitation... Supportive relationships with family members and significant others give meaning and all important motivation to other strands of rehabilitation and resettlement activity."

Research from a recent study (Folk, Stuewig, Mashek, Tangney, & Grossmann, 2019) found those who had regular visits from family were not only less likely to be reincarcerated but are also less likely to develop mental illnesses and to abuse substances. The study stated: "The odds of recidivism were 30.7% lower for those visited at least once during the year before release compared with those not visited, and increased frequency of visitation reduced the odds of recidivism." This indicates that one visit alone has an impact on the prisoner. When the families visited more often, the prisoners became more unlikely to end up back in prison.

In the UK, Clancy and Maguire (2017) describe a qualitative evaluation of the Invisible Walls Wales (IWW) project, which aimed to improve the quality of family life and community involvement and to reduce recidivism and intergenerational offending. The key innovation of the IWW is its emphasis on the "whole family", rather than focusing on the incarcerated

individual. The project provided support to 83 imprisoned men and their partners and children, two-thirds of whom were under 8 years for 6–12 months during the father's imprisonment and up to 6 months post-release. Visits took place in facilities designed to have a "family-friendly" feel, which included the use of colour and art, plants, and informally dressed staff. A children's charity was in charge of administering the visitor's booking-in process and waiting room to create a more positive atmosphere. Families reported coming closer, that their children were happier, and that they had become better parents as a result of the programme. Parents showed a significant improvement in parenting skills and family functioning over time. IWW has been adopted by many other prisons in the UK as well as other countries.

Visher (2013) analysed data from a multistate, longitudinal study in Texas and Ohio designed to explore the challenges that returning imprisoned individuals and their families face, and the pathways to successful reintegration. Participants included 324 imprisoned fathers who had at least one child under the age of 18. Fathers were more likely to show commitment to their children if they received in-person visits or mail from their children during the final three months of their prison term or they had served shorter sentences or expressed stronger levels of spirituality and control over their lives or had an existing perception that it would be easy to renew their relationships with their children after release, or felt their families were supportive before they went to prison. Fathers who spent more time with their children shortly before being released experienced several successful outcomes. In particular, when fathers spent time with their children engaging in positive parenting activities such as playing, helping with homework and discipline, they also spent more hours per week working upon release. In addition, engaging in activities with their children was associated with a lower likelihood of depression and of engaging in criminal activities, including supervision violations.

Visits from children can complicate prisoners' outcomes

The link between contact with family and friends and reduced recidivism, however, is not straightforward when it comes to contact with children. De Claire and Dixon's (2017) review of 10 papers reports one "high-quality study" (Bales and Mears, 2008) which followed 7,000 prisoners in Florida and found that although visits from family and friends reduced recidivism significantly, for imprisoned fathers "the higher frequency of child visits was associated with higher recidivism, a result the researchers did not anticipate" (p. 197). Bales and Mears speculate that "it may be that such visitation imposes greater strain on inmates by leading them to become more viscerally aware of their inability to parent their children, leading to increased offending" (p. 314), and argue that more research needs to be done on the nature of children's visits, with it being "possible, for example, that child visitation in which overt conflict is evident (e.g. a parent yelling at his or her child or vice versa) may be associated with increased recidivism" (p. 314).

Poehlmann-Tynan and Pritzl (2019) describe the paradoxical quality of family visits: on the one hand visits are an opportunity for positive family connections, but on the other hand, they may be stressful or even recreate traumatic separation or "secondary prisonization" for visitors where parents feel another level of incarceration where they have little control over their ability to parent or even be present as a parent (Arditti, 2003; Tasca, 2016).

As Halsey and Harris (2011) frame it, the present prison system provides such a lack of support to family relationships that "having children can... give rise to degenerative dispositions amongst imprisoned fathers since their capacity to 'do' fatherhood is fundamentally restricted to the devices of letter writing, brief phone calls, and occasional visits. It is of little surprise, therefore, that many prisoners feel deeply disconnected from the very children who may have initially inspired a generative outlook."

However, the picture is not the same for women prisoners. As De Claire and Dixon (2017) note in their meta-analysis of 10 high-quality studies, while visits by either family or friends were associated with reduced recidivism among male prisoners, this reduction was not recorded for women prisoners. Other studies that have examined the effects of women's access to their children while in prison have reached similar conclusions. Carlson (1998) found lower recidivism rates among women who had access to their children in prison through a nursery scheme, and in a meta-analysis of three studies, Shlonsky et al (n.d.) found that nursery programme participants were less likely to return to prison than mothers who were not involved. One additional quality study has indicated that visits from male partners may increase women's reoffending. The implication of this seems to be that there may be notably different effects on recidivism based on the gender of the prisoners receiving visits.

How contact with children is promoted is key

Dennison et al. (2017) found that the prison environment negatively influenced families visited during visits. Incarcerated fathers felt that they were not able to engage with their children for sufficient duration, frequency, or intensity or do so without interruptions. In addition, many fathers wished that they had better communication skills to engage with their children, and described barriers resulting from lack of cooperation with the child's caregiver out of prison.

Giovanna, (2013) notes there are continuous obstacles in the way of families staying connected in the criminal justice system that can prevent family members from wanting to visit prisoners – for example, wait times and invasive physical searchers. These factors then create issues, with children no longer wanting to visit their parents as it became too hard, long and boring.

There is evidence suggesting the *kinds of contexts* for children's prison visiting that are likely to provide clear positive effects on reducing recidivism rates. These interventions may mitigate the potential for children's visits to trigger incarcerated fathers' perceptions of themselves as poor parents by providing a means for these fathers to engage with their children in constructive ways and, through doing this, retain awareness of the fact that they do have something to offer their children.

Poehlmann-Tynan and Pritzl (2019) looked at conditions for positive visits by children of prisoners. Factors under the control of the correctional facility such as type of visits offered, privacy, length of visits and availability of toys and books were key. In addition family factors such as children's interactions with caregivers before, during, and after visits, the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent, and what children are told about the parent's incarceration were also important. Other key factors included the parents' ability to maintain contact through other means, such as letters and phone calls.

Cramer et al. (2017) reviewed the existing literature and interviewed eight experts in the field to examine parent-child visits during adult incarceration. They concluded that face-to-face visits appeared the most beneficial for children, especially when they offer developmentally appropriate activities and are part of family support programmes.

In their 2010 review, Poehlmann et al. concluded that there are both benefits and challenges to in-person visits, whereas other forms of parent–child contact during parental incarceration, such as letter writing, appear to be uniformly helpful. However, when care is taken to ensure conditions for prison visits are child-friendly, children clearly benefit. Child-friendly measures include: providing a positive, safe, friendly environment for visits; training corrections staff how to interact with children and families; fostering open communication among caregivers, children, incarcerated parents and supportive professionals; preparing children for visits; and supporting incarcerated parents in the visit process.

Poehlmann et al. argue that in-home video visits, where the child can be comfortable in the home during a visit, are good alternatives when child-friendly visits are not possible or as supplements to in-person visits. They also point out that is also critical that parents and children have contact with each other between visits, such as through: letter writing; mailing drawings, cards, or videos; email contact; or telephone calls. For visits to be positive for children, there needs to be adequate preparation, including talking to children simply and honestly about the parent being in jail or prison.

Poehlmann-Tynan et al. (2015) have developed guidance for making non-contact visits more child-friendly. These suggestions include: increasing privacy, decreasing wait time, giving a warning before visits end, including more information about visits online and adding links to resources for families with children, providing staff with additional training, recognising the key role that children's caregivers play, and preparing children and adults.

In practice, interventions to foster family contact during imprisonment have often taken the form of prison parenting programmes where male prisoners are taught parenting skills and facilitated to take part in enhanced family visits. Examples include three parenting programmes run by the UK organisation Safe Ground – 'Fathers Inside', 'Family Man', and 'Parenting Matters' – which are designed to help incarcerated fathers "develop a better understanding of their role as a father, while challenging attitudes, developing skills essential to successful resettlement, and contributing to desistance from crime" (Safe Ground, n.d.). These programmes centre around education and reflection on the role of parenting, and use creative methods such as drama, fiction, games, and written portfolio work by prisoners. A 2011 quantitative and qualitative evaluation study commissioned by Safe Ground (Boswell, Poland and Moseley, 2011) provides considerable evidence of the benefits of such programmes, and focuses in particular on 'Family Man' (FM), which aims to prevent reoffending by developing social and life skills that help prisoners understand the importance of maintaining family relationships from prison. The authors attribute a large part of the success of the Family Man programme to the link between education and desistance from re-offending, given that such a large percentage of prisoners have a history of being alienated by the education system, and "for many of the men, FM was the first time they had achieved educationally in any way".

A number of studies have also demonstrated that reading or literacy schemes involving prisoner-child contact can foster supportive family relationships and motivate prisoners towards a productive future. One example of this is a project known as FLiP (Family Literacy in Prisons), which – as documented by Nutbrown et al (2017) – brought prisoners together in small groups of 10–15 to learn about child literacy and discuss ways to engage children in activities involving words, rhymes, book sharing and early writing, while giving careful consideration to the vulnerability or distress the prisoners might feel when discussing their own literacy experiences or returning to their cells after spending time with their children. The workshops were followed by six literacy-related family visits. The authors report that many prisoners found the opportunity to see their children in a different situation from usual family visits motivating, and some fathers acknowledged that the workshops were an effective tool to help them relate better to their children. The authors conclude that the project successfully stimulated the prisoners' relationships with their children and "produced a more positive attitude towards avoiding crime" (p. 7).

Similarly, studies have found that using play in the prisons is important to keeping family relations close. Woodall & Kinsella (2017), for example, found that: "Prison visits are an integral part of institutional structures and are a key way by which families stay in contact and mitigate against the negative effects of family separation". They noted that the children were more excited to see their fathers because of play. It created a more exciting environment and a space in which the family could strengthen their attachments with each other. Many fathers commented on how, when playing with their children, it became less like a prison and helped them feel more positive about going home once released.

As Farmer (2017) noted in his review of the UK prison system, being expected to help children with their homework can be a powerful motivator for prisoners' own learning, since it can "provide a significant fillip to men inside, some of whom feel they have never achieved anything in their lives that would make their children proud of them" (p.68). Furthermore, Blumberg and Griffin (2013) suggest that making children's schoolwork, and reading in particular, the focus of a parent-child prison visit, rather than the parent's incarceration, can help mitigate awkwardness, discomfort, and unhelpful emotional intensity – as well as provide the parent with "an opportunity to feel a sense of mastery and pride they may not experience in prison... Participation in academic-related activities may enable inmates to feel as though they are not just inmates, but are parents again who are making a valuable contribution in the life of their child" (p. 258-9).

Further research needed

The weight of evidence strongly supports the principle that better family links reduce reoffending, and suggest that strategies to promote and facilitate positive family contact as part of prison reform efforts – such as those that have already been introduced in the UK – are much needed.

Further research may be needed to fully unpack the differing effects of contact with children, partners, and other friends and family members on incarcerated men and women. At the moment the lack of a substantial base of studies showing positive results, limits the extent to which such findings can be generalised. More research could also lead the way to 'smarter', evidence-based approaches to ensure that families are facilitated to maintain positive contact during incarceration and after and that children, in particular, are

supported to break the vicious cycle of intergenerational imprisonment and dysfunctional families.

The Storytime project has provided some valuable and very encouraging insights. Further quality research could ensure its applicability and make the case for funding initiatives based on this model throughout the rest of Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Appendix Two

Reading to your children can reduce their stress and yours

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Children need to feel safe and cared for. When children are stressed they can feel unsafe, overwhelmed, and scared. If the stress is too great or goes on for too long it can become 'toxic'. It will begin to affect their wellbeing, learning and brain development.

So, how can we help children experiencing stress?

The most important thing we can do is to calm them down and help them feel safe. We can do this by:

- spending time with them
- reading to them
- telling them stories
- singing to them and,
- playing with them.

Even very young babies love to be read to. Reading to your children helps them to feel better and develop important life skills. When you read to your children with them on your lap, cuddling them, or sitting close to them, you feel close to each other. It calms them down and it can calm you down too.

Research also shows that the more often children are read to, the more likely they are to do better at school. This is not just in reading but in language, literacy, numeracy and comprehension. Reading to them every day can give them up to a year's head start at school.

Make storytime part of your kids' bedtime routine. When you are being driven crazy or your children are bored, tired, or acting up, pick up a book and read to them. In times of stress, spending time with your family reading to them, telling them stories and playing games is time well spent. The research shows the more the better. Every moment counts. So make time. The results will be lifelong. And the best part – it's not just good for you and your family, it's fun.

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