

Reparation through reading: a collaborative approach to adult and family literacy in Western Australian prisons

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Abstract:

An estimated 70% of adult prisoners in Western Australia have literacy issues to some extent. Poor literacy is generational – parents with low literacy skills struggle to support their children in attaining the experiences they need to develop good reading habits and school readiness skills. Therefore supporting the literacy needs of prisoners gives them a better chance of finding a job or continuing their education on release and can contribute to breaking the cycle of generational illiteracy. Adults with family responsibilities are often more motivated to improve their literacy skills in order to help their children be better prepared for school. Successful family literacy programs recognise that as well as encouraging sound literacy practices for children, they must offer parent support and education as well as linking families with the resources necessary to develop these skills and activities. A cross-sector approach between Better Beginnings, WA Corrective Services and prison based family support services has enabled the development and delivery of accredited foundation adult literacy units integrating family literacy principles. Incarcerated parents are learning age appropriate activities to share with their children while at the same time developing their own literacy skills. Participants then go on to apply these skills during family visits and establish pathways to further education.

Keywords: adult literacy, reading, prisons, Western Australia

1. Introduction

Poor literacy is often generational and parents with low literacy skills struggle to support their children in attaining the experiences they need to develop good reading habits and school readiness skills. An estimated 70% of adult prisoners in Western Australia are at or below the reading level for an 11 year old compared to the Australian average of 44% (Parliament of Western Australia, 2010). Supporting the literacy needs of prisoners gives them a better chance of breaking the cycle of generational illiteracy. The Education and Vocational Training Unit of the Western

Australian Department of Corrective Services (DCS) have entered into a unique collaboration with the *Better Beginnings* Family Literacy program, an initiative of the State Library of Western Australia (SLWA). The goal is to teach incarcerated parents how to effectively read and share books with their young children and improve their own foundation skills using a range of age appropriate books and play based activities that encourage early literacy and language development.

2. Background: Better Beginnings Family Literacy Program

Better Beginnings is an early intervention family literacy program for children from birth to five years. Recognising the positive impact of intergenerational learning and parental involvement on a child's literacy and education, the program uses an established network of public libraries, community health services, education, and government agencies to deliver literacy resources to families across Western Australia (SLWA, 2010).

There is a wealth of evidence from national and international studies that shows a significant connection between family literacy practices and adult literacy (Hopkins, Green & Brooks, 2013). The research also indicates that parental involvement is vital to a child's success at school and one of the most effective ways of achieving this is through targeted strategies and resources that are designed to support shared reading between parents and children. In the wider community *Better Beginnings* provides a free gift of a reading pack to new and first time parents and to four and five year old children starting school. Each pack contains a high quality Australian children's picture book and information about reading and literacy activities. Public libraries receive early literacy resources to lend to families and schools, provide in-house support and outreach rhyme and parenting information sessions. Collection development focusses on identifying age appropriate books to support parents when choosing books with their children and most libraries have a reference collection of parenting books. Library staff regularly receive training in providing effective rhyme and story time sessions.

Engagement and collaboration

Better Beginnings is built on connections. The program makes connections between theory and practice, parents and children, and families and communities. Although the program is universal, it allows for targeted strategies, is flexible and responsive, and is based on effective partnerships and collaborations across government and non-government sectors. One of the key partnerships is between State and local government and the provision of public library services. Western Australia has a network of over 230 public libraries that deliver their services through this partnership.

Accessibility to services is a challenge in WA with its geographical constraints, so by basing the program delivery on existing infrastructure, the program can provide free year round access to resources and services that support reading and literacy. Since its launch in 2005, *Better Beginnings* has reached over 250,000 families with newborns throughout the state and has provided more than 78,000 reading packs and books to children four and five year of age; currently there are 116 libraries and 347 schools participating in the Kindergarten/Pre-Primary program.

3. Breaking the cycle

Better Beginnings aims to help parents create a rich literacy environment in the home where books are shared and enjoyed, with rhymes, songs and conversations helping early language development and fostering the development of healthy imaginations. Children with a parent in prison are vulnerable to missing out on the benefits of such shared experiences, adding to the many other social, emotional and economic challenges they encounter as they grow up (Toohey, 2012). For incarcerated parents, *Better Beginnings* is helping to foster healthy relationships between parents and children by working with prison staff and support agencies to ensure inmates have access to the same reading packs and services available to families outside prison.

Basic adult education courses are provided in all 15 prisons in Western Australia by the Department of Corrective Services Education and Vocational Training Unit (EVTU). For many prisoners this is the starting point on their pathway to further secondary, tertiary or vocational training and education. For some it is an opportunity to return to education and put aside previous bad experiences at school. The Unit aims to provide student-centred programs that are both engaging, intrinsically motivating and lead to employment opportunities upon release. The EVTU is a Registered Training Organisation and as such meets Australian Quality Training Framework standards.

Family Literacy

Adults with family responsibilities are often more motivated to improve their own literacy skills to help their children to be better prepared for school success. As an early literacy and parenting program *Better Beginnings* is also a family literacy program in the truest sense. The program is an holistic, integrated approach to learning for adults to improve their own literacy skills alongside their children which they can then put into practice at home.

Capitalising on the notion that prisoners might want to begin to make reparations by learning how to better read and share books with their children, *Better Beginnings Resource Kits* have been distributed to all Western Australian prison education centres for use as classroom teaching resources. The kits contain multiple copies of picture books, printed materials and program resources and a number of the newborn and four/five year old reading packs. To facilitate the distribution of reading packs to families, collaboration has been extended to include prison-based family support services. This cross-sector approach has strengthened partnerships and enhanced the support of early literacy development for families that need it most.

4. Libraries, reading and prisons

Libraries are a rich source of reading materials and expertise for recommending appropriate books for sharing with children of all ages. While most prisons have a library, developing community links with a public library may assist with prisoner re-integration on release. The *Reparation through reading* program encourages participants to re-visit the concept of library afresh and explore all that their modern public library has to offer. It encourages the partners of incarcerated participants to

access their local library and the inmates themselves to access their library upon release.

Successful storybook reading programs, in partnership with libraries, have been implemented in many prisons around the world. Incarcerated parents make audio (and if allowed video) recordings of themselves reading a story to their child. Where criminogenic histories allow, these recordings are sent home to the child along with a copy of the book. Parents who are not confident readers are given the opportunity to get some book sharing tips and improve their reading skills before they make the final recording. *Better Beginnings* books and resources are being used by prisoners in some of these programs and the board book *Baby Ways* (Allen & Kett, 2006) is a popular choice for its pictures of babies and ease of reading. Research shows that this practice often leads to further learning experiences and assists strengthening family connections in difficult circumstances (Duncan, 2011). It should be noted that these programs are not limited to fathers, as uncles and grandfathers often choose to participate and similar programs have been extended to women's prisons.

In WA, Acacia Prison has been part of the UK *Storybook Dads* program for several years. Through the program prisoners enhance their reading, literacy and digital technology skills as they maintain positive relationships with their children. It has been particularly valuable for Aboriginal prisoners with very low literacy levels as editing software enables stumbles and mistakes to be removed. Concerns by prisoners about their poor reading skills are often a deterrent to participation. Technology has made this reading model easier and more accessible for participants, prison staff and support services. Anecdotal feedback from Acacia suggests that the program has had a significant effect on the fathers who have participated in building self-confidence and reading skills. The State Library of WA and *Better Beginnings* are investigating how libraries could provide additional support to support the extension of this service throughout WA prisons.

From little things...

In 2011 and 2012 the *Better Beginnings* team was approached by a family support service based in three Perth metropolitan prisons, with an invitation to be involved in an event they were organising for prisoners and their families as part of their '*Dads and Kids Connect*' program. *Better Beginnings* staff were able to attend the prison visitors' centres to read stories, and share rhymes and songs with the families. Reading packs were distributed to the children with many parents commented that they had not received them before.

In 2013 another family incentive visit was arranged. However on this occasion the Hakea Prison Education Centre Manager saw this as an opportunity to transform the lives of the prisoners in his care and encouraged them to take on a greater parenting role and actually spend some of this visit time reading with their children. As some of the men were not confident readers, he invited them to attend sessions in the education centre before the event to practise reading the books they would like to read to their children on visit days. The enthusiastic response from the men and access to *Better Beginnings* resources inspired the creation of a teaching program with an assessment tool mapped to accredited curricula.

Helping your child – the course

It can be difficult finding reading materials at a level suitable for adults with very low literacy. Children's books can be an excellent learning resource for adults, particularly those with children. Typically, children's books are colourful; commonly use rhyme, rhythm and repetitive language; introduce new words and sounds; words and pictures tell the story together; and they help to discover the world and encourage imagination. While some adults may feel they are not appropriate for their learning needs, in the case of prison inmates they have proved to be a powerful incentive.

The six week basic adult education course, *Helping Your Child* is targeted at prisoners with low literacy and who have children less than five years of age. With the additional support from an early childhood specialist, corrective services teaching staff have been trained to deliver the course. They can also draw on support from prison peer mentors.

Using a draft course outline the Education Centre Manager undertook a 'needs analysis' to ascertain interest in a *Helping Your Child* program. As the proposed course was presented with much heart felt warmth and conviction, it was inevitably going to be popular. The participants soon realised that what they would learn through the course would not only help them but also their children get off to a better start at school.

Helping Your Child course units concentrate on the important functions of early vocabulary development while incorporating an integrated approach to the curriculum. Students are guided through topics such as creating nurturing reading environments; making time to read together every day; reading for pleasure; using rhymes; selecting suitable books; building vocabulary; questioning and comprehension; print awareness and activities to develop reading and numeracy skills. Key messages and information are reinforced through parenting sessions provided by the *Good Beginnings 'Dads and Kids Connect'* program.

Throughout the course, students have plenty of hands-on experience of learning through play with activities they can share with their children including craft and maths games. Each participant is given the time they need to achieve outcomes and the small group environment allows for one-on-one tuition if required, as the course can be tailored to individual student needs and learning levels. As they work through the course, any books used (including the *Better Beginnings* reading packs), craft supplies, games and items made through creative play activities are put into the participant's 'property box' which is passed onto their families upon completion. This enables students to share what they have learnt and take literacy practices into their homes.

Following the successful initial delivery of the course, the *Helping Your Child* Teachers Guide, Student Workbook and Parent's Guide have been made available to all Corrective Services EVTU centres and to the two SERCO run prisons in Western Australia. As word spreads about the success of the program, more centres are exploring how they will implement the course. State Library and *Better Beginnings* staff have an ongoing commitment to supporting the prisons with resources, professional development and liaison with prison-based family support services.

The Education Centre at Hakea Prison that developed the course is also investigating how it can be adapted for Aboriginal students using resources and culturally appropriate books from the *Better Beginnings* Aboriginal program that was specifically developed for remote communities in Western Australia. Any teaching resources developed as a result of these discussions will also be made available state-wide.

5. Reading changes lives

Feedback from participants has been very positive with one student going on to help mentor the next group. Attendance at each session has been consistent and students have indicated they are finding it rewarding. Some have commented that they did not realise they were actually gaining accredited education units. As well as the literacy, numeracy and communication skills, knowledge and attitudes towards positive parenting are being put into practice. Learning about brain development and language in the early years is reinforced through another parenting program the students attend.

One participant said:

The course not only makes a huge difference in our lives, it also makes a big, big difference in the lives of our children. For the first time I'm not feeling as though my children are being punished by the system while they're punishing me.

In an unprecedented turn of events, other participants have requested that their transfers or release dates be postponed so they can complete the course. Participants have also skipped morning and afternoon tea breaks to stay in class. Another participant also expressed for the first time that he would never be coming back to prison. He credited the course with enabling him to feel better about himself in his role as father, and not just a 'useless fifth wheel', changing his marriage for the better and for giving him the skills he needs to ensure his daughter does not suffer the way he has suffered. Participants who were, at first, somewhat shy have been eager to share their achievements with their peers and have offered assistance to their classmates

6. Libraries are a vital link

The role of libraries as an invaluable community resource is also a key message integrated into the *Helping Your Child* program. An outcome of the course is to engage prisoners' families in creating a reading culture in the home that will extend to life beyond release. Introducing prisoners and their families to the services and facilities freely available at their local public library can help develop positive community learning experiences to support rehabilitation. Prisoners' families are encouraged to join their local library.

Towards the end of the course staff from *Better Beginnings* visit the participants in class to provide a general introduction to public library services and collections available to them and their families. Where possible the nearest public library is also invited to participate. The session also includes a bit of fun through sharing rhymes and reading a story. This in-house visit has been extremely rewarding for both library

staff, as they gain some insight into prison security and life on the inside, and for the participants whose experience with libraries has often been minimal or non-existent. Library staff hope these visits will start breaking down stereotypes and perceptions of libraries and promote them as valuable community links for prisoners and their families.

Other new opportunities have also opened for the State Library of WA, *Better Beginnings*, public libraries and prison-based family support services, as these groups have partnered in the adult literacy program. These opportunities include the following.

- A regular program of monthly library visits for young fathers in a low-security prison has been established in partnership with a nearby public library. Special family rhyme-time sessions are held at the library when it is closed to the general public. The fathers are escorted to the library to meet their families and spend time reading, playing with their children and having a real library experience. Anecdotal feedback from the Dads indicates that they will continue to visit libraries on release.
- The Branch Librarian has also been able to set up escorted library visits for other prisoners who become members and borrow directly from the library, returning every few weeks to exchange their items.
- Attendance at family incentive visits and special events to provide reading and book sharing activities usually only available in the wider community.
- Linking local libraries with the *Storybook Dads* program by providing books and resources for prisoners to read and send home to their children.
- Library staff have been invited to participate in other prison-based adult education programs as guest speakers enabling the promotion of libraries as valuable places in the community that offer a range of freely available services to support prisoners post-release.
- Linking the State Library with other agencies supporting vulnerable families and enabling *Better Beginnings* to extend its reach to support their reading and literacy needs.
- Libraries taking on a key role in the delivery of community-based literacy services in WA.

7. Conclusion

Collaboration in the *Helping Your Child* program across sectors has benefited and contributed to achieving good outcomes for prisoners and their families. Representatives from each organisation provide valuable expertise which has been shared in the spirit of improving literacy for all. The collaboration has contributed to reducing duplication of services through sharing resources, resulting in a better return on investment for each government agency and family support services. This partnership has improved the reach of programs of each participating agency and ensured the likelihood of ongoing sustainability.

Another key to success has been a shared vision and common goals. Everyone involved in the programs shares a passion and desire to reach families who have 'slipped through the cracks'. Parents are inspired to do something good for themselves, to build their self-confidence so they want to engage with their children's learning, literacy and language development to provide a good start to school.

Staff are also learning to overcome barriers and understand each other's issues. This has meant being realistic about expectations and keeping processes simple in order to make the program 'doable'. Each organisation had its own requirements, such as timelines and reporting, however good communication ensures these are met while working within the range of limitations of a prison environment.

By taking a risk and giving something new 'a go', education staff in WA Corrective Services and the State Library of WA are helping prisoners maintain their family relationships, strengthen the bond between parents and children, influence literacy practices in the home and link family support services to education. While there are many factors affecting rates of imprisonment, *Better Beginnings* and the *Helping Your Child* program is changing lives. Working together we are delivering a replicable model that achieves positive long term educational, cultural, social and economic outcomes by raising literacy levels throughout Western Australia.

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Jane Jones coordinates the development of adult literacy initiatives to support the *Better Beginnings Family Literacy* program. Her extensive experience at the State Library of WA includes supporting the literacy, information and learning needs of library staff and the wider community.