

# Readconnect in HMP Swaleside: Year 1 report

“In 25 years of working within the prison service this is one of the few times I have been overwhelmed by the impact and change that can be achieved by engaging men in the right activities, for the right reasons and with the right professionals. Outstanding!! And I speak on behalf of all the men that attended. Thank you!”

## Introduction

Readconnect is a storytelling project which is being delivered at HMP Swaleside, a category B prison where half of the population are serving a sentence in excess of 10 years.

Readconnect supports participants to use storytelling to bond with their children and young family members while they are in prison. 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, the men use their new skills on visits, family day sessions and over the phone with their children and young family members.

Alongside providing workshop, Readconnect has created resource packs for the wider prison. These resource packs consist of different activities to help support the men 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 created based on the age of the child, and are accessed by writing an application to the Family Services Lead.

As part of the programme, we invited all participants to share their feedback after the workshops and after receiving the resource packs. In the first year of delivery, 30 participants provided feedback after the workshops and 14 after receiving the resource packs. In addition, we received feedback from the two staff members who facilitated the programme in their setting.

## Workshop feedback

More than 9 in 10 fathers in prison (96.6%) rated the workshop that they attended as ‘excellent’, while the remaining 3.4% rated it as ‘good’. Many told us in their comments that the sessions were enjoyable and made them feel positive:

“It made me smile and laugh”

“Felt quite calming/therapeutic”

“Every time it makes me remember what’s really important to me, and who I am as a person”

“Made me feel really good and emotional”

“It felt great to engage in”

When asked what they liked the most about the session, many mentioned the atmosphere that had been created:

“The overall feel of the session was exciting and I enjoyed the way everyone was engaging in the class. Also the tutors were really friendly and easy to get along with”

“I liked the energy in the room and learning about storytelling”

“Good energy also good topics to discuss”

The participants also told us that they enjoyed the opportunity to talk about important and difficult things:

“Opening up. Thinking of memories and times that I haven't thought of for years”

“The sharing of each other’s stories/life experiences”

“We were really challenged to think about difficult subjects”

Participants also particularly enjoyed learning about the creative process and producing their own writing:

“Using our creativity”

“Creating a story of my own”

“Learning to draw and also book plan”

“It was very fun and I gained a lot of knowledge for creating a story for my son”

“It was really interesting to get their insight into the writing and illustration process, and they gave great tips for getting started”

Indeed, much of the feedback from the fathers in prison showed their appreciation and asked for more:

“I really like the sessions. I know that we are all going to get a lot out of it. Thank you all so much”

“I would like more of the sessions”

“Thank you for putting this on but it should have been all day”

“Great session thank you all for putting this group together”

“I would like more sessions about storytelling to be provided”

“It was a great opportunity to do something we don't get a chance to here, so thank you to everyone for organising it!”

“Just want to say a massive thank you to all those involved in these courses it's a great asset to all those that attend”

“Thank you so much for continuing to put these sessions on, this is my second Readconnect workshop and they've both been such fantastic opportunities for us”

Some participants also wished for the sessions to be longer:

“The time is too short it needs to be an all day course so we can learn a lot more, it was a bit too rushed”

“Yes - not long enough”

“Need more time but that can't change”

The feedback from staff was also positive:

“The workshops have provided a safe and open environment. They have been an opportunity for the men to really focus on their thoughts and put their anxieties aside. The men produce fantastic work, which they have carried on with in their cells, that they have been proud of and that they have been able to share with their children. I have seen the men in the hall reading the books to their children and they have been reading the books over the phone. The men and myself only wish the workshops were longer.”

“Such an amazing provision offering outstanding workshops, resources, activities and future opportunities.”

Similarly to the participants, both staff members requested more workshops and longer sessions:

“I think the workshops should be longer for the men. I know time is essence, but a whole day for one group would be ideal due to the amount of engagement we have had.”

“Provision and Becky really has been an amazing addition to Swaleside and it would be great to offer this to more of our community as well as have access

to the other areas that the National Literacy Trust offer in other establishments. The resources are unbelievable quality and enabling the men and their families to share the same books gives an invisible connection that cannot be measured. Thank you and more of everything the National Literacy Trust are able to offer in all areas.”

### Feedback on the resources

As part of the Readconnect programme, the fathers in prison received an activity pack with resources to aid their ability to support their children’s literacy. All participants who provided feedback on this (100%; n= 14) thought this pack was excellent or good. Indeed, such resource packs are evidently a welcome addition to the programme, as more than 9 in 10 fathers in prison (92.9%) indicated they would like to receive more ideas on how to use this pack and more useful tips on how to support their child(ren)’s learning.

When the fathers were asked what they liked the most about resources, some of them highlighted the tips on supporting their child(ren)’s literacy:

“The different things and tips about baby book time”

“I like all the tips on how to write and read with my child and the advice on engaging my child to learn”

Others told us that the thing they liked the most was the reading resources:

“The books were interesting and the kids enjoy them”

“The book”

“The reading items”

“The books”

Many fathers specifically described the ways that the resources have benefitted their relationships with their child(ren):

“It was the first time I'd ever read my daughter a story so it was really nice”

“It helped me to get closer to my god kids”

“Kid liked it”

“Bonding”

“We had fun reading the books”

“More and better contact with my children”

We asked the fathers if there was anything else they would want to be included in the pack, we received a variety of suggestions as well as requests for more packs:

“Colouring packs”

“More diverse subjects”

“Questionnaire for my daughter”

“Bookmark”

“Two books, one for me and one for my loved one”

“I would like this to be shared with our other halves on the outside. Mothers/  
carers of our children”

“Just that there could be a little more, that's all, otherwise good’

“I would like for there to be more of these packs to be given to fathers in jail”

## Changes for participants following the programme

In addition to the positive perception of the programme, it has also been successful in creating changes for the participants in its first year of delivery. All fathers in prison who responded to the survey (100%) said that the workshops provided them with ideas and reading activities to use with their child(ren). Nearly all (96.7%) told us that they were more confident to read stories with their child(ren) and in supporting their child(ren)'s learning through storytelling and reading following the workshop. Nearly all (96.7%) also felt more inspired to support their child(ren)'s learning and wanted to be more involved in their child(ren)'s learning going forward (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Changes for participants following the workshops**



Many fathers also told us about a variety of other things they learned in the workshops:

“How to read better”

“Being able to get the kids to engage in the story better”

“Inspiration to try and write poetry myself, Yomi really broke down the process for us”

“To think in a different manner and drop your pride”

“How to start an idea and get that thought onto paper”

“Better outlook with my time behind the door”

Some of the fathers referenced specifically the value of the programme in connecting them to their families:

“Try to keep this going as it's very positive for the kids”

“I always enjoy being able to get things to send to my kids”

“This really helped me connect and strengthen family ties”

Staff also provided insight into the changes they had observed in the participants:

“The biggest change has been their ability to put aside the buzz of prison life, gain confidence in themselves and read to their children during visits.”

“Understanding the importance to engage with their children through reading and having the confidence to read with their children with an understanding of how to bring the story to life and discussions with their children. Quality time and conversations enables the men to feel part of their children's lives.”

We asked staff to provide a case study of an individual who had benefited from the programme. It is evident from both of these that increasing confidence and engagement of the participants was a clear benefit of the programme in these settings:

“Prisoner A showed interest in attending the workshop, he said that it sounded like a great opportunity. He showed clear anxieties surrounding his own literacy levels. I explained that his level of involvement or literacy would not be judged. He agreed to attend. Initially, he remained quiet, however, as time went on his confidence developed and his engagement was sound. His work was incredible. He was keen to attend the next workshop. Again, on the day, his anxiety was getting the better of him. With encouragement from myself and the rest of the group he came along. During the workshop he let down his barriers, he shared some personal stories and was able to write

about them. He has surprised himself during the workshops, his family and children will be very proud of him.”

“We have a complex and difficult population and offered this workshop to men who although were [keen] to take part were initially slightly resistant to engaging with activities. Quickly the attendees were put at ease and began to engage; eventually creating an environment of real enthusiasm, confidence and willingness. The feedback at the end from all that attended was gratitude towards the facilitators and requests for another workshop to be planned as soon as possible. Many stated that it is the first time that they have felt like they were not in prison and felt totally at ease, and demonstrates the importance and need for more of this in all establishments.”

## Conclusion

This report shows that in its first year of delivery, Readconnect has been positively perceived by both participants and staff members, and created changes for those who attended the workshops. In particular, we have seen that it was successful in providing participants ideas and reading activities to use with their children, supported them to gain confidence to read with their children and support their learning, and inspired them to be more involved in their children’s learning.

In the second year of Readconnect we plan for the project to do the following:

- Bring in more workshop facilitators who can deliver on a variety of topics (sport and music, for example)
- Work collaboratively with PACT on family days
- Reach more men within the prison
- Develop a dad’s and daughters element in the project
- Start planning a way to showcase and celebrate the work within the prison

**If you have any questions regarding Readconnect in HMP Swaleside, please email Rebecca James: [Rebecca.james@literacytrust.org.uk](mailto:Rebecca.james@literacytrust.org.uk)**