An independent evaluation of Jigsaw Visitors’ Centre’s Play Visits Service delivered to prisoners and their families at HMP Leeds

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Executive Summary

Context

The Jigsaw Visitors’ Centre at HMP Leeds commissioned the Institute for Health and Wellbeing at Leeds Metropolitan University to undertake an independent evaluation of the play visits Service delivered to prisoners and their families.

Children can find the process of visiting a prison traumatic and daunting (Dixey and Woodall, 2012) and, as a result of parental incarceration, children can experience a range of emotions, including anger, shame, guilt and fear (Hart and Clutterbrook, 2008). Longer term, children of imprisoned parents can face a myriad of problems, including: an increase in the child experiencing stigmatisation and bullying; a decrease in school attendance and attainment; increased mental health problems and an increase in the risk of offending (Morgan et al., 2013). To alleviate the difficulties that children may face when visiting a parent in prison, an innovative play visits scheme has been delivered at HMP Leeds for the past 3 years and funded through Children in Need.

Aims and objectives

This evaluation aimed to explore whether and how deeper bonds are created and the ways in which family ties are maintained (or not) through the play visits service at HMP Leeds. More specifically, the evaluation intends to:

- Analyse and monitor the utilisation of the service;
- Explore whether the quality of family time spent during prison visits is enhanced by attending a play visit;
- Examine what, if any, benefits occur as a result of the service for children visiting HMP Leeds;
- Make recommendations to influence the sustainability of the play visits service.

Methods and approach

It was essential to gather a wide range of stakeholder views on the play visits service. In summary, data collection comprised of:

- Semi-structured interviews with nine prison visitors that regularly used the play service.
- One focus group with four current serving prisoners at HMP Leeds who had experienced a play visit.
- A questionnaire administered to visitors and children participating in a play visit (14 adult and five children questionnaires were returned).
- One semi-structured interview with the current play work specialist.
- Finally, monitoring data and information from ‘in-house’ evaluations were analysed.

Ethical approval for these strands of activity were approved by the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences at Leeds Metropolitan University.

Key findings

- The data from the independent evaluation was overwhelmingly positive and showed the benefits the play service had provided to prisoners and their family.

- The service is in high demand as between September 2010 and March 2013, the play visits service attracted 1154 applications and in total 449 different families experienced the play visits service with 1126 children having participated.
• Children enjoyed the play visits service in comparison to standard visits and were more likely to want to maintain regular visiting patterns as a result.

• In some cases, prison visitors suggested that their children had, for the first time, felt comfortable playing with their father and enjoying his company. This, it was felt, had been stimulated through the organised and carefully co-ordinated play activities delivered by the play worker.

• Half of the questionnaire responses from prison visitors suggested that as a result of the play visits service stronger family bonds had been developed.

• It was suggested that play visits allowed the prisoner and his child/children to have greater physical contact than standard visits, whereby fixed tables and chairs made this more difficult. This physical connection was deemed important for bonding and for children to feel closer to their fathers.

• The quality of visiting between the child/children and the prisoner was greatly improved through the play visits service, allowing the prisoner to learn more about his children through facilitated play activities.

• An overarching themes was that the play visits service genuinely allowed prisoners to re-establish their role as a father. This was reported to have mutual benefits both for the prisoner to reconnect as a ‘dad’ and for the child/children to continue to have a father figure in their life.

• The play visit allowed an opportunity for the visitor, usually the mother, to have a break for a short time and hand the parental reins to the father.

• The play work team were consistently praised for their dedication, professionalism and sensitivity.

Conclusions and recommendations

The evidence gathered as part of this independent evaluation strongly suggests that the play visits service at HMP Leeds is making a positive impact on the well-being of children and in maintaining and strengthening family ties. The data indicates that the play visits service made the process of visiting HMP Leeds less daunting for children, encouraged continued visitation and allowed the child to relax and play with their father in a safe and highly-professional environment. Through play, children felt increasingly in control of their visit – this included feeling better able to bond with their father. In some instances, it was suggested that the play service minimised the psychological harm that may be caused through visiting the prison environment. In conclusion, the play visits service produces positive health and social outcomes for children and are effective in maintaining and strengthening family ties.

There are a number of recommendations for improving the current service. These include:

• Considering expanding the number of play visits offered to ensure that more families benefit.

• The toys provided in the play area should be reviewed so that those that are broken are replaced.

• The variety of toys provided should cater for all age ranges.
1. Context

The precise number of children with a parent in prison in England and Wales is unknown, although a recent survey suggests that it is approximately 200,000 (Williams et al., 2012). At HMP Leeds (see Box 1), around 55% of men have a child under the age of 18 years (HM Chief Inspectorate of Prisons, 2013).

**Box 1. HMP Leeds: a snapshot**

- Leeds is a local prison holding prisoners remanded or sentenced by the courts in West Yorkshire.
- Approximate population – 1120
- Around 63% of the population at HMP Leeds are sentenced prisoners.
- 17% are serving 2 years to less than 4 years in the prison. Almost 2% are serving life sentences.
- 42% of prisoners are aged between 21-29 years.
- 70% of prisoners are classified as ‘White British’

(HM Chief Inspectorate of Prisons, 2013)

Prison visits are an important way to maintain family connections. Codd (2008, p152-153) has described prison visits as the “lynchpin of contact between prisoners and their families”; however, how families, especially children, maintain ties when a member enters prison has not been well researched (Hart and Clutterbrook, 2008). Evidence suggests that children can find the process of visiting a prison traumatic and daunting (Dixey and Woodall, 2012) and, as a result of parental incarceration, children can experience a range of emotions, including anger, shame, guilt and fear (Hart and Clutterbrook, 2008). Longer term, children of imprisoned parents can face a myriad of problems, including: an increase in the child experiencing stigmatisation and bullying; a decrease in school attendance and attainment; increased mental health problems and an increase in the risk of offending (Morgan et al., 2013).

The Prison Service in England and Wales recognises the importance of maintaining family ties (Light and Campbell, 2006). This is clearly emphasised in the prison rules which state: "Special attention shall be paid to the maintenance of such relationships between a prisoner and his family as are desirable in the best interests of both." (Rule 4 of the Prison Rules, 1999)

The importance placed on visits by the Prison Service is supported by the wider literature, as it has long been held that enabling prisoners to maintain family ties whilst incarcerated offers a series of benefits both during and after confinement (Bales and Mears, 2008). Box 2 summarises these issues.
Box 2. Why maintaining family ties is important: the evidence base

- Children who have parents in prison are a particularly vulnerable and marginalised who often experience a myriad of health and social problems (Morgan et al., 2013).

- Where children remain in contact with their imprisoned father, studies show that the well-being of these children is often higher than those children who do not visit. This may be because, amongst other things, visiting allows children to comprehend the context of their father’s imprisonment (Johnston, 1995).

- Research indicates that family contact reduces the likelihood of prisoners reoffending. This is particularly important, given that 47% of adult prisoners are reconvicted within one year of being released and, for those serving sentences of less than 12 months, this increases to 60% (Prison Reform Trust, 2009). Ditchfield (1994), for example, demonstrated that prisoners without active family support are between two and six times more likely to re-offend within the first year of release than those with family support. Bales and Mears (2008), in their U.S. based study, also reported that visitation reduces and delays recidivism, with visits from spouses producing a more pronounced reduction.

- Family contact is associated with successful resettlement. Home Office research revealed that 37% of prisoners who had at least one prison visit from a member of their family had either employment, training or education arranged on release from prison, compared with 16% of those not receiving visits (Niven and Stewart, 2005).

- A prisoner’s mental health is often contingent on his contact with the outside world (Woodall et al., 2009). The presence of visitors can ‘normalise’ the prison environment and function as a reminder of the outside world and its associated responsibilities (Hairston, 1991, Mills, 2005). Therefore, regular visits improve the transition back into the community, lowering levels of ‘institutionalisation’ as prisoners are not completely immersed in the prison sub-culture (Gordon, 1999, Codd, 2008).

The recent Green Paper – ‘Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders’ (Ministry of Justice, 2010, p.1) states that prisons are expensive to run and that a greater focus on reducing the likelihood of prisoners reoffending is urgently needed. Policy frameworks for reducing reoffending have consistently advocated supporting family ties and have emphasised the important role of prison visits for improving the chances of successful resettlement. Indeed, policy frequently acknowledges that family links are at the heart of offender management (Ministry of Justice and Department for Children Schools and Families, 2008).

In summary, working with the children and families of prisoners could represent significant savings for society through potentially reducing the costs associated with reoffending and contributing to other outcomes, including improved health, reduced family breakdown and lessening the likelihood of poor child outcomes and inter-generational offending (Williams et al., 2012).

Children’s play visits at HMP Leeds

To alleviate the difficulties that children may face when visiting a parent in prison, many prisons have basic facilities (usually a selection of toys and books) (Codd, 2008, Pugh, 2004). At HMP Leeds, however, an innovative play visits scheme has been delivered for the
past 3 years by the Jigsaw Visitors’ Centre and funded through Children in Need. Previous evaluations have consistently shown how innovative and responsive Jigsaw are to the needs of families and children visiting HMP Leeds (Woodall et al., 2009, Dixey and Woodall, 2009).

The rationale for the play scheme, which is available during school term-time between Monday and Friday, is to provide supervised play work provision for children visiting relations in HMP Leeds. Indeed, research shows that play is essential to childhood development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children. Moreover, play provides an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children (Ginsburg, 2007). Prior to the play visits scheme at HMP Leeds, children had little to occupy their time during a prison visit.

The scheme employs a qualified play worker in a designated play area facilitating supervised play. This, it is envisaged, will ease tension on visits between visitors and their partner as children will be kept occupied in structured play opportunities.
2. Aims and objectives of the evaluation

This evaluation aims to explore whether and how deeper bonds are created and the ways in which family ties are maintained (or not) through the play visits service at HMP Leeds. More specifically, the evaluation intends to:

- Analyse and monitor the utilisation of the service;
- Explore whether the quality of family time spent during prison visits is enhanced by attending a play visit;
- Examine what, if any, benefits occur as a result of the service for children visiting HMP Leeds;
- Make recommendations to influence the sustainability of the play visits service.
3. Methodology

The use of triangulation has been proposed as a means of achieving validity in evaluation (Green and Tones, 1999) and is particularly relevant to this evaluation. Data triangulation involves “using diverse sources of data, so that one seeks out instances of a phenomena in several different settings, at different points in time or space” (Seale, 2004, p.77). Triangulation was achieved by comparing the findings derived from the use of different methods (focus groups, interviews, questionnaires, monitoring data) and from different stakeholder groups (i.e., prison visitors, children, prisoners, play work specialist). Ethical approval for these strands of activity were approved by the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences at Leeds Metropolitan University. Table 1 provides an overview of data collected during the evaluation.

Analysing documentary/monitoring data
By gathering existing documentary data on the service (monitoring data and ‘in-house’ evaluation results) the evaluation team will be better placed to understand trends and patterns over the 3-year period of the programme.

Interviews with prisoners’ families
Understanding the visitors' perspective of the play visits service was a central strand of the evaluation. Qualitative interviewing was used as a method to elicit visitor experiences and is recognised as being a valuable approach to understanding the process of prison visits (Mears et al., 2011). During the data collection period of the evaluation (May, 2013), prison visitors that had experienced a play visit were approached by a member of the Jigsaw team and were invited to participate in a short semi-structured interview with a member of the evaluation team (KK). A total of nine female prison visitors were interviewed – in most cases, these individuals were the wives/partners of the men in prison.

Survey of families (including children)
A questionnaire was administered to those involved in play visits over a two-week period and was overseen by a member of staff from Jigsaw. Completing the questionnaire was optional and individuals had the right to withdraw from the evaluation at any point. The aim of the questionnaire was to determine any changes in perceived family connections as a result of the play visit. In addition to this, the children involved in the project were also invited to complete a short questionnaire after the project had finished. This questionnaire drew on recognised principles of ‘draw and write’ which has been used extensively to explore the perceptions of younger children for whom more traditional research methods may not be appropriate (Pridmore, 1996). In total, 14 adult visitors completed the questionnaire and five children.

Prisoner focus group
There is little consideration of prisoners’ own views in regards to family ties and the visits process (Mills, 2005; Dixey and Woodall, 2012), therefore this element of the evaluation was deemed essential in order to make decisions about the play visits service. Four prisoners that had experience of the play visits service participated in a focus group.

Play work specialist
Finally, opportunity was taken to understand the service from a professional’s perspective and an interview was conducted with the current play work specialist.

Data analysis
The analysis was conducted over a number of stages. After all data (interview and workshop recordings) had been transcribed verbatim, members of the evaluation team read and familiarised themselves with the content of the transcripts. Based on this, a coding
framework was developed. This framework was derived from thematic areas of interest within the data itself. The coding framework was refined and agreed amongst the evaluation team and applied to the original transcripts to extract major themes. Descriptive statistics were conducted on Jigsaw’s monitoring data and this was facilitated through Excel.

Table 1. **An overview of data collection activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Data collection activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Gathering monitoring data and data from ‘in-house’ evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoners’ families</td>
<td>Nine semi-structured interviews and 14 questionnaire responses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prisoners</td>
<td>One focus group with four current serving prisoners at HMP Leeds who had experienced a play visit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Play work specialist</td>
<td>One semi-structured interview with the current play work specialist.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prisoners’ children</td>
<td>Five survey responses.</td>
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4. Findings

The data from the independent evaluation was overwhelmingly positive and showed the benefits the play service had provided to prisoners and their family. One prisoner even described it as the “best thing” the Prison Service has implemented. The following themes presented are those that emerged both through the qualitative and quantitative evidence. Where quotations have been used to illustrate issues, these have been anonymised to protect the participants.

**Utilisation of the service**

Between September 2010 and March 2013, the play visits service attracted 1154 applications from prisoners and prisoners’ families and this equated to 725 completed play visits. This data suggests that demand outweighs supply and because of this prisoners within the focus group suggested that the process of applying for a play visit could be slow:

“It’s a slow process getting a play visit when you put an application in at the PID [Prisoner Information Desk].” (Prisoner 1)

This issue, however, may need to be viewed in the context of managing a play visits service in a prison, where prisoners requesting the service need to security checked and approved before a visit can be authorised. This can be a time-consuming process and not all of those prisoners requesting a play visit will be eligible due to their prior offence or background.

Figure 1 disaggregates the data and shows that demand for the service is high and not all applications result in a play visit being granted. This was reflected in qualitative data where many respondents wanted play visits to run more frequently and for longer:

“It should be open more, you put your name down and it could be 3 months before you get a [play] visit.” (Prison visitor 7)

**Figure 1. Applications received and play visits completed: demand outweighing supply?**

A total of 449 different families experienced the play visits service with 1126 children having participated. Particular peaks in the number of children utilising the service is evident during the lead up to the Christmas period and lower numbers are apparent during school holidays. This is due to the service currently operating during school term-time only (see Figure 2).
Both prison visitors and prisoners noted how standard visits could be difficult for children, as there was often little to occupy their time. Children could also become restless, bored and uninterested and this could detract from the overall visits experience for all concerned. However for those families experiencing the play visits service, this situation was largely eradicated as children were engaged in purposeful play and activity. Children that responded to the questionnaire, for example, highlighted how they enjoyed playing games, colouring pictures and playing with the toys while visiting their father.

Although only a small sample, those children that completed the questionnaire unanimously enjoyed the play visit. Nonetheless, children offered recommendations for improving the service, which included replacing the toys in the play area that were broken and damaged. The adults that completed the questionnaire also noted that the range of toys should be expanded to cater for all age ranges.

According to prison visitors, their children relished and looked forward to the time with their father in the play visit and this encouraged regular and consistent visiting patterns:

“The children enjoy it because they ask about it and children don’t ask about something if it’s not a fun time and they are enjoying it.” (Prison visitor 9)

In some cases, prison visitors suggested that their children had, for the first time, felt comfortable playing with their father and enjoying his company. This, it was felt, had been stimulated through the organised and carefully co-ordinated play activities delivered by the play worker. Participants reported tangible differences in the levels of bonding between the prisoner and child as a result of the service. Half of the questionnaire responses also indicated that as a result of the play visits service stronger family bonds had been developed:

“Yes I’ve seen a much stronger bond between [name of son] and his dad since being on play visits. He never used to sit and play but now he loves spending time playing with his dad and his dad loves spending time playing with [name of son]. It has brought them a lot closer than what they were.” (Prison visitor 2)

As a consequence of children enjoying the visits experience, several prisoners felt that they were more likely to want to stay in touch with their children during their sentence. This was
set in contrast to standard visits, whereby their children being bored and uninterested was a disincentive to continue regular contact.

It was suggested that the play facilities could minimise the effect of parental incarceration on children. Prisoners recited previous (standard) visits where their children had felt daunted and anxious of visiting the prison. However, as the experience of the play visit was considered enjoyable and exciting, prisoners and visitors suggested that this would potentially result in children not having any mental ‘scars’ as a result of visiting their father in prison:

“For me she’s at an age where I don’t think she will remember her dad was in prison. He’s just been at work! But if she does remember hopefully all she will remember is having fun in the play area with her dad. She won’t remember gates and keys and officers. Prison is not a nice place but hopefully that is what she will remember, having fun with her dad.” (Prison visitor 3)

“The play visit takes their [the children’s] mind off where they are…it goes a long way to help them cope with me being in here.” (Prisoner 1)

**Improved prisoner-child bonding**

An overwhelming theme emerging throughout the data was that play visits, in comparison to standard visits, enabled improved family connections and increased prisoner-child bonding. Data collected via the questionnaire showed that play visits had helped to improve family relationships. Figure 3, for instance, shows that all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: ‘the play visits have helped improve family relationships’.

**Figure 3.** The play visits have helped improve family relationships

It was suggested that play visits allowed the prisoner and his chid/children to have greater physical contact than standard visits, whereby fixed tables and chairs made this more difficult. This physical connection was deemed important for bonding and for children to feel closer to their fathers:

“My children could just cuddle him” (Prison visitor 4)

“The family get to do things together and spend that closer time together on a [play] visit instead of having a table in-between. The children feel closer and they can do things with their dad playing with toys or games. My children have benefitted from it.” (Prison visitor 9)
“The environment is just so much nicer. They can play board games, sit next to each other have a cuddle, it is just a lot more relaxed” (Play worker)

Being able to have increased physical contact between the prisoner and child was reported by one visitor to be particularly important:

“My little boy would really look forward to it; he knew he was going in there with his dad. If he wasn’t going in he’d be so upset, because his dad can lie down on the floor with him and stuff and play proper games.” (Prison visitor 6)

Prisoners also appreciated the relaxed atmosphere within the play visit; that was in contrast to the feeling of being constantly monitored by prison staff on a standard visit. This level of informality allowed prisoners to express their feelings and emotions with their children:

“The atmosphere is relaxed and less formal; you forget you’re on surveillance. It feels like it’s just you and your kids, you don’t have an officer breathing down your neck.” (Prisoner 3)

**Being a family again**

The play visit allowed, albeit temporarily, for the family to be reconnected properly. This was summed up by two visitors:

“It just feels like you are part of a family again. It’s not you and the kids versus a partner in prison, you are a family, a mum and dad and your kids.” (Prison visitor 7)

“It was just like we were a family again, like with him being at home.” (Prison visitor 6)

Respondents suggested that the play visit felt ‘normal’, similar in many ways to the home environment, where family members could feel relaxed and more at ease. The family visit felt more ‘natural’ as a result of the relaxed atmosphere generated by the play worker:

“It’s just the opportunity to interact, we’re not sat at a table and it feels more natural. It’s a better environment for my daughter being able to play with her dad.” (Prison visitor 4)

Despite this theme, some respondents (via the questionnaire and qualitative interviews) suggested that the play visits area should be situated away from the visits hall so that the ‘home-environment’ was optimised.

It was suggested that the quality of visiting between the child/children and the prisoner was greatly improved through the play visits service, allowing the prisoner to learn more about his children through facilitated play activities. This was noted by one visitor:

“They have made a big difference, it’s like on a normal visit [name of prisoner] doesn’t get that bond with his son, not on a normal visit but when you are having a play visit it just gives them that bit of freedom to bond more and play more and he can watch his son do new things.” (Prison visitor 2)

The questionnaire also data showed that the play visits allowed better quality family time during visits, as all respondents (100%) indicated this as an outcome from the play visit experience.

**Not missing out on being a dad and not missing out on having a dad**

The family separation that occurs as a consequence of imprisonment is, in many ways, inevitable. Nevertheless, one of the overarching themes was that the play visits service genuinely allowed prisoners to re-establish their role as a father. This was reported to have mutual benefits both for the prisoner to reconnect as a ‘dad’ and for the child/children to continue to have a father figure in their life. The benefits of this were summed up by two visitors:
“He bonded with his little boy. I had the baby while he was in HMP Leeds, he was a baby and now he’s nearly one….He now knows who is dad is even though he’s not at home.” (Prison visitor 6)

“My children know who he is now and they know he is coming home. My little boy who is nearly one he knows who is dad is now and that’s through those visits. They are so beneficial.” (Prison visitor 3)

One prisoner described how it was easy to become a ‘stranger’ to his children through being in prison. The play visits, however, alleviated this social distance between father and child:

“I'm not a stranger anymore, she knows who I am. It used to break my heart when she looked at me and didn’t know who I was.” (Prisoner 3)

Prisoners suggested that the play visit allowed them to connect more closely as a parent and ensured that they were able to experience significant events in their children’s life. This was described by one prisoner:

“I've got to experience milestones. Like in here I've missed the first time that she crawled and the steps she made, but I've seen her do that in the play visit and I've got to experience that in a nice environment. I wouldn't have been able to see that on a normal visit and that all makes you closer as a family. Before she would tell me on the phone, you know, she's took her first steps and things but it just makes you more upset.” (Prisoner 1)

A break for mum

Prison visitors discussed the challenges of looking after children while their partner was in prison. These challenges could be both financially, emotionally and physically draining. The play visit allowed an opportunity for the visitor, usually the mother, to have a break for a short time and hand the parental reins to the father:

“I can have that moment and my partner can be the parent of the children and be there and I can relax and take my focus off for a minute and leave them to it.” (Prison visitor 9)

Professional and sensitive play workers

A theme running throughout much of the data gathered was the professionalism and sensitivity of the play workers. Frequently, prisoners and visitors suggested how well-organised the sessions were and how the play workers understood when to intervene in order to facilitate interaction and when not to:

“She [play worker] is a good catalyst, she’s got lots of good ideas and she gets you involved.” (Prisoner 2)

“Well they give you your space but at the same time they will make a fuss of my daughter and suggest things to do while we are in there like making cards and stuff like that.” (Prison visitor 4)

This was reflected in the questionnaire data, where all respondents either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the play visits were run well.

The play workers were consistently described as being friendly and helpful and always willing to go ‘the extra mile’. Furthermore, the families seemed to appreciate the consistency of seeing the same play workers during their visits. This provided a more personal and bespoke service:

“It's the personal manner; it’s really nice because they build up a relationship with your kids. It’s very nice, they smile.” (Prison visitor 7)

“If we want her to she does if not she just sits at the side. I got on really well with her so she got activities ready for us that she knew we liked, what the children liked. She
got the toys out and ready. They just couldn't do enough for you it were brilliant. To
go to a prison and know that your children can go in that room, that little area and
they are so welcoming as well. You don't have that in any other jail.” (Prison visitor 6)
5. Discussion

The evidence gathered as part of this independent evaluation strongly suggests that the play visits service at HMP Leeds is making a positive impact on the well-being of children and in maintaining and strengthening family ties. Although further investigation is needed, the data suggests that the impact of play visits may be greater than standard (non-play) visits.

The theory that play contributes to the social and emotional well-being of children and allows an opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children (Ginsburg, 2007) has been demonstrated by this evaluation. The data presented here indicates that the play visits service made the process of visiting the prison environment less daunting for children, encouraged continued visitation and allowed the child to relax and play with their father in a safe and highly-professional environment. This finding is particularly important, as research shows that visiting numbers to prison are on the decline and this may be because children find prison visiting frightening (Pugh, 2004). The data from the evaluation suggests that play visits for children visiting prison may have the potential to reverse this trend.

The evaluation demonstrates that through professionally facilitated play experiences, children were able to rearrange their worlds to make them either ‘less intimidating’ or ‘less boring’ (Sutton-Smith, 1999). Through play, children felt increasingly in control of their visit – this included feeling better able to bond with their father. In some instances, it was suggested that the play service minimised the psychological harm that may be caused through visiting the prison environment. This latter finding will, however, require further validation through longitudinal measures.

The literature shows that prisoners’ children can face particular difficulties as a consequence of parental incarceration. Evidence from the wider literature suggests that their likelihood of offending in the future is increased, as are other behavioural difficulties. Moreover, health and other social outcomes for prisoners’ children are generally poorer than for those children without a parent in prison (Johnston, 1995, Mills and Codd, 2007, Codd, 2008). Perhaps increasing these problems, is that it is common for prisoners not to allow their children to visit them in prison (Dixey and Woodall, 2012). From a prisoners’ perspective, the family visit is a situation where his identity as an inmate and as a father are in sharp focus (Tripp, 2009), and some prisoners actively chose not to receive visits because this focus can be too painful. The play visits service at HMP Leeds, however, encouraged prisoners and their children to remain in contact – children enjoy the experience of playing with their father and highly skilled play work staff facilitate interaction, where necessary, to ensure a ‘smooth’ visit where all parties are engaged. Through visiting HMP Leeds, family ties are maintained and this can be beneficial for children, as when they remain in contact with their imprisoned father, studies show that the well-being of these children is higher than those children who do not (Johnston, 1995).

Positive outcomes as a result of the play visit service, were also reported in relation to strengthening bonds between the prisoner and his child/children. The process by which the play visits service strengthened ties were multi-factorial, but can be summarised under these key mechanisms:

- Allowing increased physical contact;
- Engaging children through organised play created ‘less-stress’ during visits and provided a ‘better quality’ family experience;
- Providing prisoners with a genuine opportunity to re-establish their family role allowed them to feel more connected not disengaged, from family life.

One issue that needs to be considered, however, is managing the supply and demand of the play visits service. The monitoring data suggests that the play visits service is extremely
popular and not all applications received resulted in a play visit – this is due to a number of factors, mainly the need to prioritise security. This reiterates the challenges of implementing an intervention of this type in a secure environment, where balancing the respect and dignity agendas against security imperatives can be difficult. However, unless application processes are explained clearly to prisoners and their families, delays to receiving play visits may have the potential to cause frustration and Jigsaw may wish to consider expanding the service so that more families benefit.

While this small-scale evaluation was unable to measure long-term outcomes as a result of the play visits service, research has consistently showed that prisoners’ families can represent a rich source of social capital for offenders and play a critical role in individuals desisting from crime and reintegrating successfully back into the community (Holt and Miller, 1972, Ditchfield, 1994, Niven and Stewart, 2005, Mills and Codd, 2008). Future research should attempt to measure these outcomes and to provide further quantitative evidence of the impact of play visits.
6. Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of this independent evaluation was to explore the ways in which family ties are maintained (or not) through the play visits service at HMP Leeds and what, if any, positive outcomes are experienced by children. Data derived from a range of sources suggest that play visits do produce positive health and social outcomes for children and are effective in maintaining and strengthening family ties. These effects may be stronger when compared to standard prison visits.

There has been a recognition that evaluating prison visitor centre services is challenging and that attributing their work with improvements in child and family outcomes and reductions in re-offending rates is methodologically complex (de Las Casas et al., 2011, Mears et al., 2011). This is because it is difficult to disentangle the impact that specific services have toward re-offending and improving child outcomes. Nevertheless, the evidence strongly suggests that the play visits, facilitated by enthusiastic and committed workers, were enjoyed by all members of the family particularly children, and this meant that visiting during the sentence was more likely to take place. Research shows that regular visitation does lead to a series of positive outcomes, including: reductions in inter-generational offending; improved child well-being and reduced reoffending. The evaluation would strongly encourage the continuation of play visits at HMP Leeds as they do make a difference to child outcomes and family connections.

There are a number of recommendations for improving the current service. These include:

- Considering expanding the number of play visits offered to ensure that more families benefit.
- The toys provided in the play area should be reviewed so that those that are broken are replaced.
- The variety of toys provided should cater for all age ranges.
References


Justice, 5, 26-56.
backgrounds: results from the surveying prisoner crime reduction (SPCR)