

The under-threat project helping dads in prison connect with their children

The 'Mellow Dads' programme has improved the parenting skills of inmates at HMP Oakwood but its future hangs in the balance

by [Rachel Carter](#) on June 1, 2016 in [Adults](#), [Children](#), [Youth justice](#)



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Liam's decision took just seconds to make but would impact lives forever.

Stepping outside the pub for a cigarette he saw his dad getting beaten up. He leapt to his father's defence and jumped into the fight. His opponent ended up in a coma, and later died.

Liam is now serving eight years for attempted murder at HMP Oakwood in Walsall. He has a young son. He also remembers how little he saw of his own father during his childhood. His memories are of waves across the street. Or being given his first line of cocaine.

“I always swore blind I wouldn’t end up like him,” Liam says. “But when my son was born, I wasn’t interested. I was going down the same route as my dad, I was taking drugs.”

Liam says he joined the fight that night because, despite the fractious relationship with his father, “he was still my dad – I thought that’s what you’ve got to do, isn’t it?”

The two were initially placed in the same prison, until Liam’s dad requested a transfer.

“Even in jail he still left me,” Liam says. “He could have stayed here with me, we could have built a relationship, but he just left.”

Liam wants better for his own son. He’s one of seven Oakwood inmates to have recently completed [the ‘Mellow Dads’ parenting programme](#) run by the prison and Walsall council.

The 14 week programme is designed to improve parent-child relationships by increasing participants’ understanding of themselves and the fathering role. It was developed by a charity in Scotland where it has been rolled out in six prisons.

HMP Oakwood decided to trial the project in June 2015 after the prison’s then lead for reducing reoffending wanted to build stronger links with local authority child and family services. At the same time, Walsall council wanted to explore new ways of supporting prisoners with children.

‘Think bigger’

“There has traditionally been very little done around dads in custody,” says Bina Sandhu, former team manager of Walsall’s family intervention team, who was involved in the project.

“As an authority we do not take them seriously and we don’t involve them as much as we should. Mellow provided a good platform to do that – it’s different to other programmes because it allows the dads time alone with their children.”

The sessions took place once a week and were split into three parts. Firstly, the inmates were supported by two course leaders from the council and a prison officer to consider

their past experiences and understand how these had impacted on them and their children.

At lunchtime, the children would arrive and for the next 90 minutes, the dads would take sole responsibility for their care, while the mums took part in arts and crafts activities in another room. The time the dads spent bonding and playing with their children was videotaped.

In the afternoon, the group would watch the recordings and reflect on their parent-child interactions. These sessions covered a variety of topics, which were aimed at assisting the dads to consider child development, discipline and their own self-esteem.

“It’s all about developing the attachment to your child,” Sandhu says. “It’s about bigger thinking for the dads and helping them to recognise the important role they play in their child’s life. They start to think: ‘do I want to be in this situation – missing out on my child’s life?’”

‘Quality time’

When Liam started the programme, he described himself as someone “who had nothing to offer”. Now he’s applied to take part in a violence reduction course to help other prisoners.

“If I get onto that I will be helping other prisoners in the same situation as me,” he says. “I used to be lost and overwhelmed but the support from Mellow has helped me to think positively.

“I know that I need to be in a good place to be able to be a good father to my son.”

The programme has helped Liam reconnect with his son, who is now six years old.

“When I first came to jail I would write to my son but because he couldn’t write back, I just stopped,” he says. “Even when I called home, I would just say ‘is your mum there?’”

“Now I don’t do that. I ask him about his day because I need to do that. I’ve been writing him letters again, it doesn’t matter that he can’t reply yet – he’ll just know that I’m there.”

The video recording element of the programme also helped to boost Liam’s self-esteem.

“It’s good because you can see what you’re doing right and what you’re doing wrong, you can learn from other people and help other people,” he says. “You can see the

excitement in your son's face when you're doing it right – that was good for my confidence.”

“I feel like a different person now to when I came in,” he adds. “I've learned to walk away from situations on the wing where normally I would think with my fists. I react differently now.”

Tom*, another dad on the family wing, has had a similar experience. He has two daughters and is currently halfway through an eight year sentence for possession and intent to supply.

“The project was brilliant,” he says. “During a normal visit here I would have to share time with my wife as well but the project meant you just had your kids – so it was real quality time.

“It's made me see things in a different light and made me realise that there are ways around things – often we keep ourselves to ourselves, but actually we should take help when it's there.

“I know that money isn't important now. This sentence is killing me. I don't want to be taken away from my kids again. It's not nice for them – they can pick up on these things.”

‘Visiting rights’

After recognising the need for an independent evaluation of the programme, Walsall council commissioned the University of Birmingham to undertake a piece of research. This was carried out by Jess Langston, honorary research fellow, PhD student and former children and families social worker.

Langston used participatory research methods and enlisted the help of five peer researchers – men who had been involved with Walsall social services and had previously completed the Mellow Dads programme in the community – to undertake the study.

The researchers used interviews and questionnaires to capture the experiences and interactions of dads participating in the programme, in order to determine how their perceptions of themselves, the parenting role and the relationship with their children had changed.

“I think the starkest finding was the legitimising of the fathering role – we could never have imagined that,” says Langston. “All of the inmates were in receipt of the maximum

visits allowed, yet they still reported significantly stronger relationships with their children.

“This really does question the government’s approach to men who offend in prison and strengthening family ties – we just chuck more visits at them, but actually it turns out it’s not about the quantity of visits, it’s about giving these men the space to be an actual dad.”

‘Significant damage’

Given the positive findings from Langston’s report, it’s surprising to learn that family visits have since been cut at Oakwood – prison staff have raised concerns about taking children out to visit their dads during school hours – and have been moved back into a different hall, where the children cannot interact with their fathers in the same way.

Walsall Council is keen for ‘Mellow Dads’ to continue, but HMP Oakwood is yet to agree and a question mark hangs over the programme’s future.

Sandhu says: “Following the completion of the Mellow programme, there have been significant change to management of the family wing, which have been counterproductive to its ethos.

“The attachments made between dad and child have been significantly damaged and these concerns have been raised by dads and mums involved in the programme.

“I hope that listening to families and the learning from the research will inform future practice at HMP Oakwood. There is an opportunity here to develop Mellow as an integral intervention.”

Langston raises concerns that the prison is simply falling back on the endemic practice of using visitation rights as an incentive to make inmates comply with the rules.

“We know families are the key agency to reducing reoffending – so using family visits as an incentive is just disgraceful,” she says. “You might be incentivising the dads but the damage that’s being done to the children in the process of this is just wrong.”

The dads on the family wing are struggling to come to terms with the change. “The problem with the programme ending and now visits being cut is we can’t interact with our kids in the same way, we can’t do anything with them,” says Tom.

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s our fault we’re in prison and I know we don’t have a say in this, but we have opted to try our best to keep that bond there, and to interact with our children.

“Now the bond is just being broken again, and of course the kids will be impacted by that.”

‘Dad today, not tomorrow’

This of course feeds into the wider debate on ‘punishment v. rehabilitation’, but it’s also about how we as a society value men and the contribution they can make, Langston adds.

“I know when I was a practising social worker we were often reluctant to facilitate contact with a dad in prison because we assumed he must be a risk, she says.

“We don’t actually take a pragmatic approach to risk and instead draw off our own experiences, which can often be negative or judgemental.”

“Don’t get me wrong – of course people should be punished,” she adds. “But the children in this are very clear. It affects every aspect of their lives. We need to be supporting them.

“It doesn’t make sense to say the key to helping children through this period is contact with their parents, but then we’re refusing to do that because we want to punish the dads.”

The children who took part in this programme have been very clear in their feedback.

At a recent dissemination event for Langston’s research, Molly, who is nine-years-old, gave a presentation to prison officers, social services staff and representatives from the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office.

“This programme has helped me and my sister have a normal relationship with our dad,” she says. “Thank you to everyone for the opportunity and for helping us to continue to bond with our dad because the years he is away we can never get back.”

****Some names and details have been changed***