

Invisible Fathers



A study exploring the pilot of
Mellow Dads Parenting
Programme in Her Majesty's
Prison Oakwood.

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Executive Summary

1

Set against the backdrop of an 'austerity' agenda affecting the most vulnerable in society, an innovative partnership between a local authority and a neighbouring prison provides a unique opportunity not only to deliver an effective evidence based parenting programme in a prison, but to reconsider paternal incarceration as an opportunity to identify and address the adversity affecting families of which parental imprisonment is just one.

The Mellow Dads Parenting Programme is a 14 week evidenced based course, designed to enhance parent-child relationships through an increasing participants' understanding of themselves and their fathering role. The programme was facilitated by trained staff from Walsall Council Family Interventions Team and an officer from HMP Oakwood.

The children and their mothers were transported to the prison whilst their fathers undertook morning sessions, but over lunch the fathers had sole responsibility for their children. After lunch the children returned home with their mothers whilst the fathers reflected upon their own and each others parent-child interactions.

The overall Invisible Fathers study uses mixed methods and is designed as two self contained individual studies. Study A prioritised the perspective of five trained peer researchers who had completed the programme within the community. Study B draws on existing measures to capture measurable changes in participants' perceptions of their behaviour across the course of the programme.

Study A found that through the provision of a space in which fathers could take sole responsibility for their children participants reported engaging in their parenting role in a way that had been unavailable to them since their incarceration. hence legitimising their fathering role. Participants also noted the importance of course facilitators in encouraging a nurturing and reflective environment from which they could consider how to enact changes to their lives.

Study B identified changes to participants' parenting styles with progressively lower reported hostile, passive, and rejecting parenting behaviours whilst repeatedly recording increases in participants' understanding of play, empathy, and boundaries for their children. Of interest were the changes to participants' self identified support network; initially each network contained generic family and friends,

however upon completion of the programme all participants had identified specific individuals along with the inclusion of professionals.

Together the Invisible Fathers study has found that the Mellow Dads Parenting Programme is effective in assisting participants to reconsider their parenting styles and acquire more positive parenting behaviours which contributed to changes to the parent-child relationship.

Most significant was the legitimising of the fathering role, the participants in the study were all in receipt of the maximum visits allowed yet still reported substantially strengthened relationships with their children. This finding challenges the current practice of providing extra family visits to incarcerated parents as a way to strengthen relationships.

Of concern is the contrast reported between the reflective and nurturing culture promoted within the programme and the negative and critical environment on the prison wing and how the changes reported within the study will be maintained upon completion of the programme. With lowering self-acceptance rates reported within Study B the wellbeing of prisoners whilst they are reflecting on sometimes difficult experiences is paramount but it is unclear how this will be enacted.

The potential in the partnership between a local authority and a neighbouring prison is an exciting opportunity for professionals to work together in identifying and supporting families who are most at risk of poor outcomes. The Invisible Fathers study recommends that the incredible work performed within the pilot is built upon and extended to consider changes within the prison to continue the reflective nurturing environment of Mellow Dads beyond the programme and within the family wing of the prison.

Parental incarceration is not the cause of childhood adversity, many families are experiencing high levels of disadvantage prior to the imprisonment of a parent, but the Invisible Fathers study proposes that the Mellow Dads Parenting Programme has a potential to affect substantial change. The programme can not only offer services and support to alleviate the difficulties associated with parental incarceration but offers the possibility of identifying families for whom parental incarceration is just one of the many disadvantages they face.



Comments from Walsall Council

1.1

The Walsall Council Early Help Team will be sharing the findings of this research with commissioners and partners. We will also ensure that the research is shared with our neighbouring local authorities where some of the dads will return to reside when released into the community. This research will contribute to our ongoing work in children's services to improve quality, and ensuring the voice of the child and parents are ascertained and utilised to shape services in all aspects of our work. Moving forward this research will shape how we deliver targeted programmes to parents with complex and vulnerable families and our work with 'invisible fathers' with an aim to offer these evidence based interventions as early on as possible.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Jess our researcher and The University of Birmingham in working so closely with us in the new venture. Many thanks also goes to the families that have taken part and shared and contributed so much to this programme, including the peer researcher 'dads' that that were integral to the pilot.

Andrea Potts

Assistant Director



Comments from HMP Oakwood

1.2

This research is an extremely valuable contribution to the on-going debate about how we can best engage prisoners to turn away from crime and reduce future victims of crime. We know that the family is the best re-settlement agency and that those prisoners who are encouraged to nurture links with their family stand the best chance of breaking the cycle of reoffending. I am delighted that HMP Oakwood has been able to support this research and pilot the Parenting Programme, Mellow Dads.

It's our role to ensure that our prison culture supports and allows the men we look after to take responsibility for their family lives. This requires prisoners and staff to champion people in our prison community who put their families first and challenge those who adopt a disrespectful attitude or ridicule their peers who are trying to make a change. We are introducing the Solihull Approach, a model which helps our team to better understand and support prisoners more fully with family engagement programmes.

While historically, there may have been a focus on protecting and maintaining the bond between an imprisoned mother and her children, we are only just beginning to look at the same approach and foster the same ethos between fathers inside and their children. The family can play a powerful role in prisoner reform and by bringing families together we are also much more likely to support the children of prisoners who are left on the outside without their father. Of the 1582 prisoners at Oakwood, 989 of them have one or more children in the community and a powerful motivation for our team is preventing those young people from following in their father's footsteps.

The Mellow Dads pilot has really informed our new approach to prisoner engagement with their families. At Oakwood there has been a renewed focus on interactive visits supported by playworkers and programmes not just for fathers and grandfathers but also to include mothers as well.

I was struck by something a prisoner said during this programme which sums up why this work is so important - "Prison is a punishment for a father, not their child" and we have a duty to work constructively with prisoners to protect their family ties.

John McLaughlin

HMP Oakwood Director

Families are widely acknowledged as the source of strength for prisoners seeking to resettle in the community, and are seen as central in the government's approach to reducing reoffending rates (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2014). Yet prison policies appear to do little to support such a position. The use of children as a tool with which to entice prisoners to comply with prison rules (Sharratt, 2014) creates additional barriers to maintaining family ties, and does nothing to reduce them. With no framework from which to provide support to parents or their children (Ministry of Justice, 2007) families are subject to the differing practices of each professional, who draw upon their own personal experiences of parenting and gender roles (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004. Scourfield, 2012. Zanoni et al, 2014. Gilligan et al, 2012). At the time of this study former Circuit Judge and current Recorder of Cardiff, Her Honour Judge Eleri Rees, was interviewed on Radio Four and spoke of parental incarceration;

“The ramifications on the children are something that you have at the back of your mind... I think the courts and judges, both male and female, are both conscious that if you send a woman to prison it's often... not just her serving that sentence...” (Rees, 2015).

Her Honour Judge Rees clearly acknowledges the impact of parental incarceration, but isolates the impact to being associated with the loss of a mother, not of a father. The distinction between maternal and paternal incarceration is evident within the body of research that seeks to explore the adverse effect of parental incarceration upon children. Maternal incarceration appears to be considered with a sympathetic concern for the mental health of those children separated from their mothers (Corston Report cited in Sharratt, 2014), whereas paternal incarceration is shrouded in blame, with links to children's antisocial behaviour and criminal activity (Ministry of Justice, 2007, Wildeman, 2010).

45% of fathers lose touch with their families whilst incarcerated.

Such a distinction strengthens an already present narrative that men are the source of risk within vulnerable families². The differentiation between maternal and paternal incarceration is evident beyond sentencing and established within the prison system. The practice of linking prisoners' behaviours to family visits was terminated within women's prisons in 2009 recognising that it was not in the best interests of mothers or their children, nor was it compatible with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Sharrat, 2014, Children of Prisoners Europe, 2014). However, the children of male prisoners are still penalised for their fathers' conduct within the prison, with family visits being linked to the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme (Sharrat, 2014).

It has been suggested that a reduction in reoffending rates will also lower the levels of adversity experienced by children whose parents are incarcerated (Clarke et al, 2005). Is it a misguided attempt to protect children from men whom the research tells us are to blame for the adversity faced by so many of their

Prisoners who remain linked
with families are up to 39%
less likely to reoffend.

children? The links between paternal incarceration and the wide ranging disadvantages faced by children are problematic, whilst it is clear that a large number of children whose fathers are incarcerated are experiencing adversity, it is not evident that this is the cause (Murray and Farrington, 2008). Many prisoners and their families experience high levels of social disadvantage prior to imprisonment (Ministry of Justice, 2007. Murray and Farrington, 2008). The government's 'Children of Offenders Review' sought to reframe parental incarceration as; "an opportunity to identify children at risk of poor outcomes and to offer support to mitigate the effects of both parental imprisonment and family circumstance" (Ministry of Justice, 2007;6).

Can parenting programmes unite these agendas and address the adversity of children whose fathers are incarcerated whilst strengthening family ties to reduce reoffending?

² This study recognises that for some children it may not be in their best interests to have contact with a parent but that this should be identified through the purposeful assessment of individual risk and not built upon gender assumptions.

A variety of searches were undertaken in order fully to consider relevant literature, ranging from legislation and policy, evaluations of parenting programmes undertaken in a prison setting, to reports upon the experiences of those affected by parental incarceration. Key authors were identified and their bibliographies explored.

Key terms were operationalised and searches were conducted using The University of Birmingham's electronic database, Google Scholar, government websites, and third party organisations such as The Fatherhood Institute, Father's Network, and Barnardo's iKHOP service³.

Given the small size of this study, results were narrowed by excluding those studies outside of the United Kingdom, those targeting specific demographics such as 'fathers under 21' and studies predating 2005. Results were explored and separated into primary research, secondary research, and policy documents. Primary research was then further categorised in order to identify evaluations of paternal parenting programmes undertaken within UK prisons. Secondary research and policy documents were explored and drawn upon when seeking to explore the context within which the study operates.

Whilst not a comparative study, the project did seek to understand other parenting programmes operating within male prisons throughout the United Kingdom. Six evaluations of four such dedicated programmes were identified; each programme was considered for the course content and the findings of their evaluations were detailed.



³ A number of press releases and leaflets were identified referring to the parenting programmes that Barnardo's run in prisons across Northern Ireland and Wales, however only one evaluation could be located. The lack of published evaluations was problematic and therefore their contribution within the literature review was not necessarily representative of the work Barnardo's undertake within prisons.

Programme	Length	Course Content
Being a Dad	1 day a week over 7 weeks	Focusing on family life and relationships, the course aims to provide a reflective space in which fathers can consider their relationships, identify areas of parenting for which they need further assistance, and attend monthly 'family events' aimed at strengthening family ties.
You and Your Child	4 weeks	The programme aims to assist fathers to build skills across parenting and self-development. This is done through sessions that seek to build fathers' self-confidence and understand child development further.
Family Man	42 lessons over 8 weeks	An arts-based approach, using drama and group activities, aimed at strengthening family links to prevent reoffending. 'Supporters' - members of prisoner's family or friends - are nominated to work alongside men, and also attend the course. As part of the course, links are made to community resources such as drug and alcohol practitioners, Job Centre staff and education agencies.
Fathers Inside	15 days	A drama-based approach, aiming to activate change in participant's attitudes and behaviours towards parenting, to enable men to continue their parenting role from within prison.

Existing Programmes in Prison

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The *You and Your Child* evaluation recorded that the most useful element to the programme was a self-reported improvement in confidence (Pugh, 2008). Self-reported improvements to self-esteem were evident within both the *Family Man* and *Fathers Inside* evaluations, both of these evaluations also drew upon the inclusion of a family member's perspective during which changes to participants' self-esteem were also noted (May et al 2014, Ministry of Justice, 2013b, Ministry of Justice, 2014c Boswell et al 2005). The prison staff interviewed as part of the *Fathers Inside* programme also identified significant changes to participants' self-esteem (Boswell et al 2005).

Changes in participants' understanding and performance of the fathering role were identified within all programmes. The *Being a Dad* evaluation highlighted the programme's function to provide a space in which participants could reflect upon their parenting role and learn new approaches (McCrudden et al, 2014). The *You and Your Child* evaluation identified overall changes to participants' understanding of the parenting role, identifying specific insights such as the need for quality time with their child(ren) and changes to their perception of appropriate parental behaviour (Pugh, 2008). The children interviewed as part of the *Fathers Inside* evaluation all identified changes to the quality of their interactions with their fathers (Boswell et al 2005).

Both the *Being a Dad* and *You and Your Child* evaluations recorded respondents' self-reports of an increase in understanding of how prison had affected their children, with the *You and Your Child* evaluation explicitly linking this to the participant's determination not to reoffend (McCrudden et al, 2014, Pugh, 2008). Both the *Family Man* and *Being a Dad* evaluations reported improvements in participants' self-perceptions of awareness and reflection (May et al, 2014, McCrudden et al, 2014). Within the *Fathers Inside* evaluation, prison staff noted improved and more courteous attitudes from participants, lifting the atmosphere on the wing, staff attributed this to increased self-awareness as a result of the programme (Boswell et al, 2005).

With the exception of the *Being a Dad* programme, courses did not seek to directly involve the children of prisoners despite all evaluations referring to the impact of paternal incarceration. Participants of *Being a Dad* reported finding the additional monthly family events beneficial, enabling them to perform their parenting role in a way otherwise restricted (McCrudden et al, 2014). A participant of the *You and Your Child* programme commented that he felt that he would have benefited from course facilitators observing his child's visits in order to garner practical parenting advice (Pugh, 2008). Whilst the *Family Man* programme did include wider family members within the course, they were framed as an ally in the overall objective to reduce reoffending (May et al, 2014).



Mellow Dads Parenting Programme

4

The Mellow Dads Parenting Programme (MDPP) was established as result of the success of the Mellow Mums Project (Puckering et al, 1994, Puckering et al, 1996, Puckering et al, 2006) and has undergone a number of evaluations.

The 14-week programme follows a strict schedule of topics designed to increase self-awareness, wellbeing and parent-child interactions. Once a week, the group convenes within the prison facilitated by two course leaders from Walsall Council along with a member of staff from HMP Oakwood. Whilst the prison officer did not attend any formal training, he was chosen by the prison as an officer whose current practice was noted as empowering and non-judgemental. Initially, the morning sessions focused on building trust within the group in order for the sessions to later assist the participants in considering their past experiences and their understanding of how this had impacted upon them and their children.

Whilst the fathers are engaged in their morning group their children are transported to HMP Oakwood along with the children's mothers. Additional staff from the interventions team at Walsall Council are present to facilitate art and craft activities with the mothers, whilst the children are taken to the visiting hall to be met by their fathers. For the next 90 minutes the fathers have sole responsibility for their children; whilst MDPP staff are present, the purpose of the time is for the fathers to engage with their children in organised activities, free play and a group lunch. A requirement of the programme is that all child sessions are videotaped for the fathers to later watch and then delete. After lunch, whilst the children and their mothers are transported home, the group watch the video recordings. The course leaders focus on modelling the feedback process, reframing even difficult interactions as opportunities to learn. The afternoon sessions cover a variety of topics aimed at assisting the participants to consider child development, discipline and their own self esteem. Significant to the approach is the requirement that the group facilitators, including the member of prison staff, fully participate in the programme, sharing personal reflections of their own childhood and parenting experiences.



Her Majesty's Prison Oakwood is a privately run prison in the Midlands; within which there is a small family wing. The family intervention team from Walsall Council approached HMP Oakwood having noted that a high proportion of those men attending the Mellow Dads Parenting Programme within the community had previously been incarcerated. The Mellow Dads Parenting Programme pilot was restricted to residents of the family wing at the request of the prison.

Transfer onto the family wing is at the discretion of the Family Wing Manager and is on a case-by-case basis. Family wing prisoners are regarded by the wider prison community as the 'non problematic prisoners', often called upon to undertake the more 'trusted' jobs available within the prison. Prisoners must have a demonstrated record of adhering to prison rules. Visitors records are checked to consider whether there have been any issues during visits and checks with the Police Public Protection Unit identify those prisoners with offences against children and those with a history of domestic violence for whom transfer to the family wing is heavily restricted.

Whilst on the family wing, prisoners experience a significant increase in the privileges afforded to them. Whilst resident on the main wing, visits are restricted to weekly and are undertaken in what is known as the 'main hall', whilst in this hall prisoners are not allowed to move from their seat. This is in stark contrast to visiting privileges for residents of the family wing who are entitled to 4 visits a week, all of which are undertaken in the 'small hall' where they are able to move around the room freely to engage with activities such as a ball pit, books, board games, and access to activities such as painting and football. Staff within the family wing hold special events for the fathers and their families, most recently there has been a partners evening where a special meal was prepared and served to the prisoners and their partners. Over the summer, a school sports day was recreated at the prison, past events include Mothering Sunday, Valentine's Day, and Father's Day.

At the time of the study, 67 of the 68 beds were occupied. Staff from Walsall Council and HMP Oakwood were responsible for the selection of men onto the programme and restricted access to those with children under 5, children's residency within the West Midlands and men due for release within the next 2 years. Each prisoner was then met by course facilitators who explored the content of MDPP and verified their desire to attend. Seven men were eligible for MDPP and were enrolled onto the programme.

Across the country, Local Authorities are experiencing cuts of up to 40% in their funding from central government, with concerns being raised regarding Local Authorities' ability to provide even statutory services (Local Government Association, 2014). Walsall Council have undertaken a critical assessment of their services and announced cuts of over £28 million in this financial year alone (Walsall Council, 2015). Departments have been held accountable for the continuation of services and programmes, resulting in closure of children's centres, a reduction in parenting groups and services offered to children and families.

The pilot of Mellow Dads Parenting Programme (*MDPP*) in a prison setting has been the result of individual practitioner commitment within the Family Interventions Department of Walsall Council, with staff seeking to explore innovative approaches in the delivery of services despite the current climate of 'austerity' and the scaling back of family interventions.

The purpose of the Invisible Fathers study was to explore and offer an initial evaluation of the pilot; seeking to capture the experiences and interactions of those participating in the programme, to consider the presence of change in the participants' perceptions of themselves, their parenting role and their relationship with their child(ren). The overall study took a mixed methods approach within a longitudinal design, utilising questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to capture both the participants' overall experiences as well as measured outcomes. The use of mixed research methods enabled the overall evaluation to consider multiple perspectives, however, given the very different types of knowledge the studies sought to capture, these approaches were progressed as two contained and independent studies with the results explored upon completion.

Study A utilised interviews, performed pre and post-programme, to capture the participants' perceptions of their experiences through the use of semi-structured interviews, providing the programme facilitators with richer data, collated to enable commissioners to see how the programme is experienced.

Study B used questionnaires, undertaken at three points during the programme, to capture an objective perspective on changes to participants' attitudes and behaviours in areas such as wellbeing, as well as measuring indicators of parenting style, and self-efficacy.

Methodology

Initial literature searches conducted at the start of the project highlighted the problematic stereotypes of fathers held by a number of professionals (O'Brien, 2005. Dolan, 2014. Buston et al, 2012. Ferguson & Hogan, 2004). With many fathers reporting feelings of invisibility to health and social care professionals (DCSF, 2007) and their exclusion within service provision (DCSF, 2008). The use of participatory research within this study was not considered an approach, method or design, but a foundation to the study that clearly positions the approach as one which prioritised "insider knowledge" (Karnilowicz et al, 2014: 355). Partnerships with peer researchers have been utilised within service evaluation in a number of settings such as mental health (Palmer et al, 2009), homelessness (Groundswell UK, 2010), education (Cooper, 2014) and community development (Goodson and Phillimore, 2012), acknowledging the unique perspective of those who have experienced services and their invaluable knowledge when considering services' efficacy and development.

Data Collection Tools

The use of semi-structured interviews provided a space in which participants could explore and construct their experiences on a range of topics in order to jointly consider the presence, or absence, of change. Working in partnership with the peer researchers and drawing upon their experiences of MDPP in the community, a thematic framework was developed and interview questions were constructed to cover areas such as fatherhood and how this was informed, accessing parenting groups, engaging with other fathers, and a made up scenario designed by the peer researchers to assist in considering participants' acquisition of parenting skills.

Due to ethical restrictions and time constraints the interviews were transcribed and indexed prior to analysis. Working in partnership with the peer researchers, an inductive thematic analysis approach was utilised. Whilst there were a number of alternative approaches to exploring and understanding the participants' experiences, a thematic analysis approach was considered the most appropriate to use with the peer researchers (Matthews and Ross, 2010). Drawing upon the initial thematic framework the transcripts were coded and a redeveloped framework was constructed in order to understand how the participants experienced MDPP in prison.

Design Framework

A longitudinal framework enabled the study to jointly construct experiences prior to the commencement of MDPP and as the programme concluded.

Population

The seven men were enrolled on MDPP and were invited to attend an information session, six men attended and apologies were received by the seventh who was unable to attend due to other commitments; he requested information via his peers. The information session covered the aims of the research, informed consent, withdrawal, and the partnership with the peer researchers. Information regarding the study was left with staff. Whilst six men sought to be involved in Study A, only five were available for interview.

Peer Researchers

The peer researchers were recruited from the 24 men who had completed MDPP within the community. Letters were sent via the Local Authority to all 24 men with details of the research project and inviting them to an information session. Staff were briefed and given an information sheet, should the potential peer researchers have called them directly to discuss the research. Of those 24, 8 men contacted the members of staff who had facilitated their MDPP course, 6 of which went on to make contact with myself and 5 attended the information session. All 5 of those who attended sought to be involved in the research and completed a single day's training, along with six sessions focused upon analysing the data.

Peer Researchers

5 men aged between 20 and 40

4 of the 5 men were previously Looked After by the Local Authority

Between the group they had 9 children, aged between 6mths and 11 years of age

All 5 men and their families were known to children's services;

Child Protection, Adoption, Care Proceedings, Kinship Care

All 5 men identified as white British

Ethics

Study A sought to encompass ethics beyond a standard compliance with procedural ethics (Macfarlane, 2010) to produce a project positioned ethically from design through to dissemination.

Procedural ethics

Walsall Council, The University of Birmingham and the National Offender Management Service each progressed the study through their own rigorous ethical procedures. A budget of £1500 was identified by Walsall Council and it was used, in its entirety, to support the peer researchers. Transport and food were provided along with high street vouchers for all peer researchers upon completion of the project.

Beyond Procedure

When designing the study, it was important to examine for whom the research was being undertaken. Clearly Walsall Council and HMP Oakwood had an interest in the research and hoped that it would aid in the development of their service, however, the study aims to reframe the research to serve the interests of those receiving their services.

Research Aims

- To prioritise and illuminate the experience of the peer researchers.
- To challenge the perceptions of fathers commonly held by professionals.
- To explore the experiences of those participants on the MDPP pilot in prison.



During the first wave of interviews all participants noted their motivation for attending MDPP as being the additional visits with their children, one participant specifically mentioned the provision of one-to-one time with their child. Within the second wave of interviews when participants were asked 'How was Mellow?' all responded with comments about visits with children, not the course content. Typically, participants offered descriptions of their relationships with their children with only one participant reporting only factual information about the activities he had undertaken with his child during the MDPP visits.

All of the participants noted a greater awareness in a variety of domains. Typically, participants reported increases in an understanding of their children's needs, the impact of parental actions upon their children and a greater understanding of their emotions. Three of the five participants discussed how they have been able to recognise, understand and manage their emotions since MDPP.

Whilst not all participants were explicit about learning new parenting skills, in fact a number were adamant that they didn't learn anything as they knew all they needed to know, each gave examples of reflecting upon their own or other participants' interactions to develop their parenting. For three participants, the programme had provided a space in which they had been able to reflect upon their own childhood experiences.

During the first wave of interviews, participants were asked if they had accessed parenting services or parent and child groups within the community. All five responded that they had not, nor did they feel the need. Within the second wave of interviews all but one participant now stated that they would actively seek father and child groups or locate parenting classes should they feel they needed assistance. The use of a fictional scenario demonstrated varying degrees of change in parenting approaches. For some participants it was subtle changes in dialogue with their children, others reported significant alterations in parenting practice demonstrating a greater understanding of child development and parenting skills. The peer researchers found one participant's response to be problematic, suggesting that his approach had deteriorated. During the first wave this participant spoke of the use of the 'naughty step' and the need for his child to reflect upon their actions. During the second wave he referred to the use of a 'smack' to communicate to the child that they had done wrong.

Participants valued the course leaders and identified a variety of characteristics that they felt were vital to the group dynamics. The professional's presentation seemed vital to the participants in providing a space in which they could build relationships and trust, in order to learn. Three of the participants reported the development of new friendships whilst on the programme although none of the participants felt that they would draw upon these newfound friendships for support, citing the culture within the wing as not conducive to trusting others outside of the programme.

The provision of a space in which the participants could parent without the child's mother appeared to have a profound affect upon participants' perception of being a father. The peer researchers were struck by the reports from participants that it was only within this space that their role as a father was truly enacted. For one participant this had led to self-reported improvements in his relationship with the children's mother as he felt able to contribute to parenting discussions rather than observe. Improvements to relationships were cited by two other participants who reported improved communication with their partners.

Four of the five participants reported varying degrees in which the course had impacted upon their self-esteem and perceptions outside of the parenting domain. Peer researchers were particularly struck by the changes to one participant who, during the first wave had stated, when asked if he had ever given anyone else parenting advice, that he had nothing to offer. By the second wave, this participant was waiting to hear if he had been accepted as a peer mentor within the prison.

As a group, we found our theme of 'moving forward' problematic to position. Whilst the participants identified that individual parenting practices could be performed beyond the programme, it was clear that a continuation of the culture fostered within MDPP and enhanced fathering opportunities made available were not compatible with life on the family wing.



Relationships

Fathers had the opportunity to look after their without the presence of the child's mother. This improved the father - child relationship.

"When we're on a normal visit now and say she [child] is upset, she always used to go to her mum for the hugs and stuff, whereas now she'll come to me."

"We've [girlfriend] been sitting on visits talking a bit more."

"We [partner] talk quite regularly now to be honest."

"A little bonding session for me and him [son]."

"It gives me time with the kids, we've got a lot closer."

"Before he wouldn't even talk to me on the phone."

Gaining new skills

Participants openly attributed newly acquired skills to the MDPP course.

"Bickering. They pick up on that... I never thought of that before, but like since I've been on that course..."

"Say if a kid had made her cry at school I would have said 'when you go there the next day go beat them up...' whereas now I'll say 'tell the teacher, do it the right way'."

"My son, he's always got to be occupied... watching the video I could see the point where he was not so into doing that activity, so the next time I could see his behaviour rising and I knew I needed to get in there."

Childhood experiences

The life story exercise helped participants understand the impact of their childhood on how they parent.

"It's the first time I ever tried cocaine my dad actually gave it me and I shared that on MDPP and you could see how everyone on the group, not just the people from Mellow, and it... it made me think."

"It's brought things to light about how different my childhood has been."

Pre MDPP: "You follow their footsteps even though you don't want to."
Post MDPP: "[MDPP has helped]... so I don't follow in the same footsteps as my own Dad."

Confidence

Increases in self esteem and confidence were reported by participants.

"About halfway through it I just... I just got it. It highlighted things to me, that I could do better."

"It's given me that little bit more confidence. Not with my kids, but within myself."

"Push [myself] a bit more... I can do better."

"I've put in for a [peer mentor] course now... a violence reduction thing. If I get that I'll be helping other prisoners in the same situation as me."

Managing emotions

Participants gave examples of how the programme helped them understand and control their emotions.

"I've been able to highlight my emotions and understand them."

"A kid pushed my kid over at school the other day and he had to have stitches. And before I know for a fact she [partner] wouldn't have told me that as she'd have knew I'd have went off the handle. I know for a fact I'd have been effing and blinding and wanted to kill the five year old <laughs>."

Legitimate fatherhood

Examples of how the participants talked about changes to how they thought about being a father.

"I know they [children] are going back and telling their mum what they've been doing, but I get to [tell her] as well. I'm a Dad."

"Make me legit."

"I can tell her [girlfriend] what I've done with my son. Like I have a right to."

"... to be alone with your children. To be their father."

"It's nice seeing other kids with their Dad as well like. Cause it shows how important the Dads are to children in their life as well."

Moving forward

How the participants will, or will not, carry on their attitude and things they have learnt.

"Usually when I phone I say 'is your mum there?' I'll ask her about her day now. Show more of an interest."

"When I first come to jail I was writing to my son more and then it slowly stopped, whereas now I'll write him letters and stuff."

"[in the prison] you don't get people telling you 'well done' it's like... we're in here cause we did something [wrong] so we shouldn't feel good about ourselves. It's all about keeping behind your door, on your place."

Asking for help

How participants talked about seeking advice

"I see [counsellor] now... it's helped me out a lot and she's going to continue."

Pre MDPP: "Not really [accessing parenting groups] cause I don't like for people to think that I need help."

Post MDPP: "I would go [to parenting groups] I'd recommend them."

Life is different on the wing. On the wing I just wouldn't [ask for help],"

Pre MDPP: "[attending parent-child activities] Nah, I'd just go to the park."
Post MDPP: "activity wise, I would go now."

Course leaders

What qualities did they have?

"They was supportive, understanding and they didn't judge."

"She really did care."

"Genuine, down to earth. He [prison guard] shared, he's human."

"She's like a mum figure really isn't she? Someone who you can trust to speak to. She's really helpful and loving. She seems like a proper Mum, a loving person. She's helpful for anyone, you can just tell her like."

"If you ask him [prison guard] he cares, he wants to help you. It's not, not all about punishing. We know we've done wrong, the kids haven't though. He cares about that like."

Group relationships

Had they made new friends or were they getting on better?

"Everyone shocked me. We'd all be together, like a big family. It's no one Dad, we're all doing it. I felt proudness, gives you a boost."

"There are three lads I've never talked to on the wing but since I've been on... since I've done the group we have... you know, we've talked and whatever."

"We've been talking, about what my kid's been doing and what his son has been saying."

Methodology

A professionals meeting was held with representatives from probation, drug and alcohol services, and children's services in which individual practitioners recognised the value of the rich qualitative data prioritised within Study A but detailed the need for more objective quantitative data to satisfy the needs of individual commissioning groups. The commissioner's requirement for objective data led Study B to progress from a positivist position, seeking to measure respondents' outcomes to speak to the "effects and effectiveness of the programme" (Robson, 2001: 181).

Data Collection Tools

Given the need for generalisable data, questionnaires were identified as the most appropriate tool available, these were constructed by drawing on pre-existing measures already tried and tested within the prison services, family interventions team, and drug and alcohol services.

Measures used by the Family Intervention Team to evaluate their parenting programmes, were drawn upon to consider participants' perceptions of their parenting abilities (Kendall and Bloomfield, 2005) and their parenting styles (Arnold et al, 1993). Theories surrounding individual self-efficacy were explored and an existing 13-point scale was utilised to consider participants' perceptions of their ability to influence their outcomes (Payne, 2005). In order to consider how participants felt about approaching problems in their lives, the questionnaires drew upon the 'Stages of Change' model (Prochaska et al, 1992) and questions designed to consider participants' confidence in their own abilities to activate change (Tone et al, 2012). The study sought to understand the participants' wellbeing, drawing upon the existing measures used within the prison service to consider inmates' mental health and their perceptions of their relationships with both staff and peers (Liebling, 2009). Participants were also asked to complete timelines in relation to offending behaviours and drug and alcohol use. Three concentric circles prompted respondents to plot their social support, both in respect of themselves and their children (Hepworth et al, 2009). All measures were adapted to use the same five point scale to limit confusion for the participants and the staff administering the questionnaires during face to face interviews.

Design Frame

A longitudinal frame with three data collection points, pre, mid and post programme, enabled the study to consider progressive changes to participants' attitudes.

Population

The seven men enrolled for MDPP were invited to an information session, six attended and the seventh requested information via his peers. Information covered informed consent, withdrawal, and data storage. All 7 men consented to participate in Study B; the study noted that the research population was not of sufficient size to explore the response validity through statistical analysis.

Ethics

Walsall Council, The University of Birmingham, and National Offender Management Service, each progressed the study through their own rigorous ethical procedures. Staff from Walsall Council revisited informed consent, the right to withdraw, and the how the data would be stored before each data collection point.

Research Participants

7 men aged between 25 and 34*

1 participant had experience of foster care

Between them they had 14 children, aged between 6mths and 10 years of age*

1 participant reported that his family were known to Children's Services

All 14 children were reported to be living with their mothers

3 men identified as White British and 1 as Asian*

5 participants were repeat offenders, 2 were incarcerated for 1st offences

3 offences were regarding drugs, 3 relating to violence and 1 in respect of fraud

All 7 men reported that they were in a relationship with their children's mother

*3 missing answers

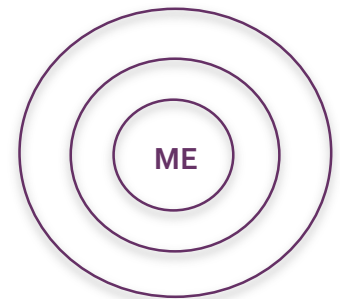
Research Aims

- To measure participants' perceptions across a range of domains.
- To provide commissioners with objective data regarding the efficacy of the programme.

Support Network

All 7 participants depicted changing support networks...

- Initially all networks were generic, using terms such as "family" or "friends", gradually all 7 networks became more specific to include names or roles such as "John" or "Aunty".
- All 7 participants gradually included professionals such as "GP", the name of the prison officer facilitating MDPP or "Mellow Staff".



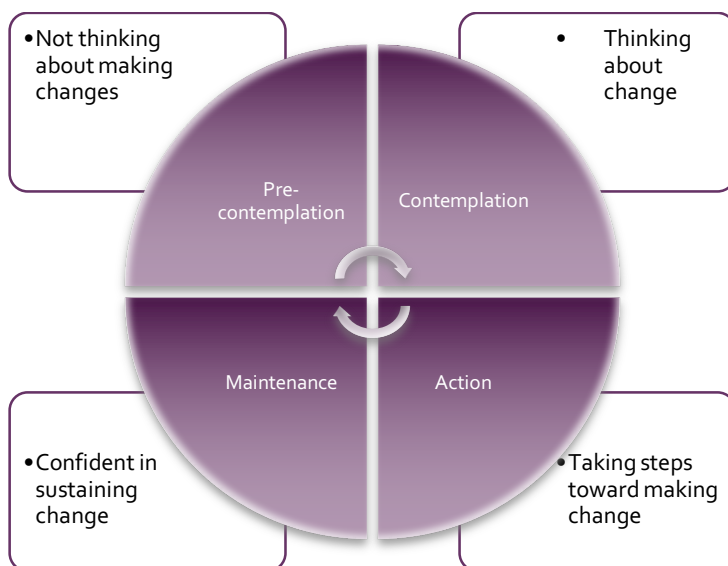
Self-Efficacy

6 of the 7 respondents answered all of the questions, of which six remained constant.

- 3 reported feeling in control of their outcomes.
- 3 reported feeling others were in control of their outcomes.



Stages of change



All seven participants reported changes...

- 4 made changes from maintenance, through contemplation and into action.
- 1 progressed from contemplation through action and into maintenance.
- 1 moved from action to maintenance and into contemplation.
- 1 travelled through pre-contemplation to action and then maintenance.

Prison Wellbeing

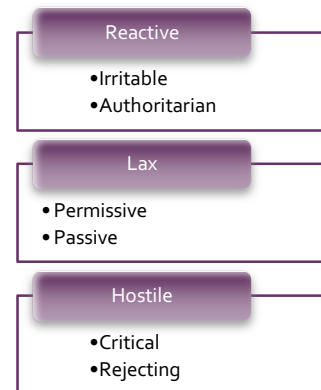
A number of respondents showed no directional changes, however, of the seven participants...

- 3 reported reducing levels of tension.
- 1 remained consistently concerned about his mental health.
- 2 reported increasing worries regarding their mental health.
- 5 felt that staff were less available.
- 2 felt staff were more available.
- 6 reported decreasing levels in the quality of their relationships with peers.

Parenting Style

All seven respondents showed progressive changes to their parenting styles...

- 7 reported decreasing signs of reactive parenting.
- 1 reported decreases in their lax parenting.
- 1 reported less hostile parenting.



Parenting Efficacy

6 of the 7 respondents showed progressive changes in their understanding of domains upon their parenting ability

- 4 reported an increase in play and enjoyment.
- 3 reported an increase in empathy.
- 2 reported increases in boundaries and discipline.
- 2 reported lower self-acceptance scores.
- 2 reported decreased learning and knowledge.



Free Space

A blank page was provided and participants were instructed that this was their space to draw, write or leave blank.

5 respondents wrote in the space at the final data collection point.

“... it helped me bond with my youngest... helped me see him grow up and be able to spend some quality time with him alone.”

“talking and reflecting... to reflect more and think before I act. I think about the future now.”

“I would like to point out that visiting times for the kids need improve [sic] so they can interact with their Dads on a more productive meaningful way e.g. better resources for children.”

“Mellow has really helped me even though at first I didn’t think I needed it.”

“My daughter has developed so much in her speech, confidence and being more independent since we have that one to one time with me during Mellow.”

“The prison need to understand that not all Dads in prison are bad fathers. Some are family men and want to change and make things right for their family and need to have more family time.”

“They need to punish the father, not the children.”

“Talking about my upbringing has helped me understand my roots and values as a person.”

All seven respondents displayed changes across all three data collection points with regards to their identified support networks, initially responses were generic, however, at varying points this changed to more specific named people or roles including the addition of professionals which was absent at the initial collection point.

The inclusion of professionals, predominantly prison staff, within all seven respondents' networks was an interesting addition given that five participants recorded decreasing perceptions of staff availability and support when questioned within the wellbeing section. However, one respondent annotated his questionnaire, reflecting that by the final data point he differentiated main prison staff from those upon the family wing, noting that, within the main prison, staff were less available and not supportive whereas within the family wing staff appeared to "care" and "have time" for prisoners. This could account for the contrasting responses within the two sections, along with the two participants who recorded increasing feelings of support from prison staff.

Other prisoners were notably absent from the support maps, this was evidenced within the wellbeing recordings, where six of the seven respondents reported decreases in the quality of their relationships with their peers.

Of particular interest was an individual response from a participant who had initially included a group of peers within his support network, who he had noted within the timeline exercise as being heavily influential in his offence, this group was later omitted from his support map during subsequent data collection points.

The changes to participants' support networks occurred at both the mid-way and final data collection points suggesting that such a change was not in response to specific directive course content, but indicative of an individual reflection as to the appropriateness of the identified support and their specific roles.

There was a clear absence of change identified within the self-efficacy domains with all six respondents who completed the section reporting no directional change regarding their belief that they controlled their general life outcomes. This was mirrored by the findings from the parenting-specific efficacy questions within which five respondents remained static and two reported decreasing scores in their belief that both self-acceptance and knowledge could impact upon their parenting. Worthy of note were the midpoint responses of four respondents who each altered one point on a 13-point scale (two toward feeling in control and two toward having no control), the scores returned to their original position at the final collection point.

Changes to respondents' beliefs in their ability to affect change in their parenting were reported by all participants across a range of domains, including playing, empathy, and discipline. These findings are

complimented by the responses to reports regarding parenting styles, during which all seven respondents reported a decreasing reactive parenting style with more appropriate levels of discipline than previously noted.

Further exploration is required in order to consider whether the measures chosen to capture changes to self-efficacy regarding general life outcomes were appropriate or whether the programme's impact upon self-belief is restricted to parenting beliefs.

Given the changes reported by respondents across a range of domains it is not surprising that each of the seven participants noted changes to their position regarding the stages of change at each data collection point. The free text response from a participant who had initially not felt he needed to attend the programme explains the findings that four of the seven respondents initially reported as being within the maintenance stage; content with maintaining their life as it was, before progressing to considering the need for change, to actively making changes in their lives.

Whilst other respondents appear to be travelling backwards around the cycle, it may be that three data collection points were not able to capture the rapidly developing approaches to change that the participants were experiencing. It is unclear whether these changes can be attributed to the programme given that we all travel through the cycle of change at varying speeds and on multiple occasions for a variety of areas in our lives. Further study utilising a control group would enable exploration of this issue.



The overall purpose of the Invisible Fathers study was to explore and capture participant's experiences of the Mellow Dads Parenting Programme, run for the first time in an English prison, and to offer Walsall Council and HMP Oakwood an initial evaluation of the pilot and consider the development of the programme within HMP Oakwood.

Both Study A and Study B captured participants' experiences across the duration of MDPP and found varying degrees of change in participants' understanding of themselves, their children, and of their parenting role. The participants in Study A explicitly linked these changes to their attendance on MDPP and when considered with the responses from Study B provide an alternative perspective and additional insights.

As identified within the literature review, MDPP is not the only parenting programme run in male prisons across the United Kingdom and this study is not only evaluation to report changes in participants understanding of their child's development and needs (McCrudden et al, 2014, Pugh, 2008), acquisition of skills in reflection (May et al, 2014, McCrudden et al, 2014) and alternative parenting practices (May et al, 2014, McCrudden et al, 2014, Pugh, 2008, Boswell, 2005) along with increases in individual participants' levels of confidence and self esteem (Boswell et al, 2005, May et al, 2014).

Whilst two other parenting programmes spoke of changes in participants' understanding of the need for 'quality time' with their children (Boswell et al, 2005, Pugh, 2008), unique to MDPP were the reported changes to the nature of father-child relationships and the way in which participants enacted their fathering role. Within Study A, a number of participants spoke of changes to children's presentation, offering descriptions which alluded to the changing attachment behaviours of their children. When considered with the responses within Study B, reporting a reduction in negative parenting styles and an increase in positive attributes, the study illuminates the journey parents have taken that have resulted in such a profound change in their perception of the father-child relationship. A key component in this change was the provision of a space in which the participants were the primary carers for their children, by providing alternative activities for the child's mother in another area of the prison. Participants spoke of previously enacting their role through the child's mother, a detachment in their participation in parenting that went beyond the physical restrictions of their incarceration

and despite receiving the maximum number of family visits permitted within the prison. If strengthening family ties is the foundation to the rehabilitation agenda (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2014), then the findings of this study would challenge the current policy of providing additional family visits as a way to enact this and highlight the need for more innovative approaches.

The study is mindful that the participants and their families within the Invisible Fathers study had already navigated significant barriers in maintaining their relationships; prison placements in other parts of the country, visiting environments restricting physical interaction, financial costs associated with prison visits, and the restriction of visits as further punishment. The research group in Study A were mindful that the participants were the prison's 'non problematic' population and that they had already acquired the necessary skills with regards to emotional regulation to be transferred to the family wing, yet still the study found participants were more reflective and had greater insight into their behaviour as a result of the programme. A number of participants had noted within both studies that they felt that MDPP was too late in their prison journey, that prisoners would benefit from such an intervention to assist them with their transition at the point of becoming incarcerated.

Positioning MDPP earlier in the prison journey would not only address those prisoners vulnerable of losing family links, assist prisoners in developing emotional regulation and appropriate behaviour but beyond reducing reoffending rates, to enact the proposal of reframing paternal incarceration as an opportunity to identify families at risk of poor outcomes (Ministry of Justice, 2007). The innovative partnership between Walsall Council and HMP Oakwood could go some way to identify those families for which paternal incarceration is only one of the symptoms of the disadvantages they face. Both Walsall Council and HMP Oakwood currently identify their vulnerable population in isolation of each other, yet this partnership offers a unique opportunity for the purposeful targeting of families whose children may be at risk of poor outcomes and the MDPP programme provides an evidence-based programme from which to support them.

The mothers of the children in the Invisible Fathers study were all in long term relationships with the participants, for those fathers who aren't in relationships with their child's mother then their ongoing relationship with their child is more vulnerable. The failure of professionals within the community to engage fathers is well documented (O'Brien, 2005, Dolan, 2014, Buston et al, 2012, Ferguson & Hogan, 2004), the incarceration of a father serves as another barrier. The experiences of the peer researchers as fathers of children subject to Child in Need plans, Child Protection Plans, and court proceedings allocated to Walsall Council are not dissimilar to the experiences of fathers across the country (DCSF, 2007, DCFS, 2008). The

passion and commitment from staff within the intervention team to address the inclusion of fathers needs to be authority wide, with professionals across the borough not excluding a parent because of their gender or their current imprisonment.

Those staff from HMP Oakwood involved in the pilot have shown commitment and compassion when delivering MDPP, summed up by one participant as having a performed understanding that whilst the fathers may have committed crimes the children of prisoners should be protected from secondary punishment. This ethos and commitment is not reported to be widespread within the prison and is a barrier to the ongoing performance of the reflective and nurturing environment created within MDPP.

Whilst it could be argued that the prison service are enacting the wider government approach of using children as a weapon to punish and reward prisoners, this study demonstrates that HMP Oakwood has the commitment and enthusiasm from key staff to take an alternative approach. However, whilst participants were able to identify how they would continue to perform individual parenting practices, such as planning activities and writing to their children between visits, it was unclear how the peer feedback and the reflective nurturing environment of MDPP could be continued beyond the programme. Participants clearly communicated the importance of this environment in reflecting upon their childhood, acknowledging the impact of their life choices in considering the need for change and in the development of more appropriate behaviours. The impact of the perceived loss of the MDPP culture requires further research with these participants at a later date, not only whilst they are in prison but at a later date upon release, to consider whether this loss alters their current desire to proactively engage with children's centres and parenting courses within the community.

Within Study B, the lowering self-acceptance scores of two participants was understood in the context of the difficult emotional journey the fathers were making when acknowledging the impact of their life choices and considering the need to change. The current partnership between Walsall Council and HMP Oakwood enabled these prisoners to be supported through ongoing contact with counsellors and Walsall Council staff. The research group of Study A were mindful that MDPP encourages participants to explore their own experiences and acknowledge the impact of their life choices but to do so within a prison culture that is not supportive or nurturing would be placing the participants at risk of emotional harm.

As with any research, there were restrictions to the available resources which limited the scale of the project.

- Within a larger study, the experiences of the partners, children, and course leaders would be captured; not to validate the participants' responses, but to consider the experiences of the programme for those surrounding the participants.
- Collection of additional data 6 months after the completion of MDPP would allow the study to explore participants' experiences once the programme had finished and to measure the ongoing effects of intervention.
- A larger research group in Study B would enable the results to be statistically analysed.

Beyond the restrictions in terms of practical resources, the researcher is mindful that the participants will have benefited not only from the course content, but from additional interaction with staff and the researcher. Whilst there is much debate regarding the extent to which involvement in research affects participant behaviour (see McCambridge et al for a comprehensive review), it is not unreasonable to conclude that within the Invisible Fathers study the impact of 'being heard' by the researcher and the positive interaction with their children, partners and others as a result of attending MDPP will have contributed to the findings of both studies.



The Invisible Fathers study set out to explore the pilot of the Mellow Dads Parenting Programme, performed in an English prison for the first time. Study A prioritised the perspective of peer researchers to give new insights and explanations that have been vital in understanding the participants' experiences. The objective data in Study B captured progressive changes in participants' attitudes and behaviours that when considered with the accounts in Study A clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of the Mellow Dads Parenting Programme.

Encouraging are the findings unique to MDPP, that this isn't just another parenting programme but that this parenting programme has the potential to go beyond addressing reoffending through the strengthening of family relationships and consider the experiences of children for whom parental incarceration is just one of the consequences of the disadvantage they face.



Walsall Council and HMP Oakwood have an exciting opportunity and this small scale study shows that the programme is effective and that the enthusiasm and commitment from staff in both organisations needs to not only continue but be built upon to harness the full potential of such a unique partnership in delivering an effective programme.

- Walsall Council and HMP Oakwood continue to build relationships with other agencies, such as probation and the justice system, to promote the programme during sentencing within local courts, enabling the families of local offenders to benefit.
- Mellow Dads is delivered earlier within the prison journey; with those prisoners whose behaviour is problematic, whose relationships with their families is at risk, harnessing the potential of such a unique partnership to identify families who would benefit from the programme.
- Both staff at Walsall Council and HMP Oakwood should explore the provision of a parallel mothers' group undertaken at the prison at the same time. Purposefully targeting families for whom paternal incarceration is only one factor.
- The staff at HMP Oakwood continue their efforts to promote father – child relationships beyond the provision of additional visits for good behaviour, by facilitating sessions whereby fathers can have sole responsibility for their children where there are no risks associated with this.
- All family wing staff at HMP Oakwood become trained Mellow facilitators, and that one of the two areas within the family wing becomes a Mellow Wing, where staff and prisoners promote the learning and continue the reflective culture of the programme.
- The prison group look to build similar partnerships within other areas of the country, drawing from the training and support available from the Mellow Parenting Charity.
- Walsall Council continue to work with the peer research group to offer insight and training within the children and families teams to challenge the assumptions often held about fathers and promote their inclusion.

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