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An Evaluation of The Nurturing Programme for Fathers at HMP Altcourse

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About this report

Merseyside is one of several areas allocated funding since 2019 by the UK government to establish a Violence Reduction Unit. To inform the continued development of the Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) since November 2019, Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), have been commissioned to evaluate the Merseyside VRP as a whole (Quigg et al, 2020, 2021, 2022), and selected interventions within their work programme. This report forms one of a suite of outputs from the 2022/23 evaluation and research work programme, and specifically presents an evaluation of The Nurturing Programme, which is a parenting programme for fathers at HMP Altcourse. All Merseyside VRP research and evaluation outputs are available on the LJMU¹ and Merseyside VRP² websites, or via the work programme lead, Prof Zara Quigg (z.a.quigg@ljmu.ac.uk).

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¹ <https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/research/centres-and-institutes/public-health-institute>

² <https://www.merseysidevrp.com/>

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Executive summary

There are approximately 87,700 adults in prison in England and Wales in 2023 (1). Longitudinal studies estimate that approximately 54% of adults in prison have a child under 18 years of age (2) and parental imprisonment affects around 312,000 children in England and Wales (3). Parental imprisonment is an adverse childhood experience, associated with poorer outcomes in education, health, and increased likelihood of engagement in antisocial behaviour and offending across the life course. There is growing recognition of the need for effective interventions to support these parents and their children. The existing evidence suggests prison-based parenting programmes are promising in improving parenting skills and relationships but there remains uncertainty on how these interventions can be effectively implemented. In light of this, Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) asked the Public Health Institute at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) to evaluate The Nurturing Programme, a parenting intervention at HMP Altcourse (North West England), in order to better understand: 1) the implementation of The Nurturing Programme (including barriers and facilitators, fidelity, and reach); 2) participating fathers' experiences and perceptions of The Nurturing Programme; and, 3) the intended and actual impacts of The Nurturing Programme on fathers, children, and their families.

The Nurturing Programme at HMP Altcourse

The Nurturing Programme is a 10-session parenting programme created by Family Links which aims to help parents and children live emotionally healthy lives, focusing on four main constructs: self-awareness, appropriate expectations, empathy, and positive discipline (4). A family link worker delivers the course over a five-week period (two sessions per week) for up to 12 men per course on the Family Intervention Unit at HMP Altcourse, a Category B prison in Liverpool (North West England).

Evaluation Methods

	Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in the design and delivery of the programme (n=3)
	Pre (n=30) and post (n=26) surveys with fathers undertaking The Nurturing Programme completed at the first (week 1, session 1) and final session (week 5, session 10). The surveys measured wellbeing using the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) (5) and parenting skills using the Brief Parental Self-Efficacy Scale (6).
	Semi-structured interviews with fathers (n=25) who had completed the programme explored their views on the intervention, areas for development and actual and anticipated impacts.
	Analysis of secondary data provided by the gatekeeper on the number of men participating in The Nurturing Programme and the course materials.

Findings

- Men applying to reside in the Family Intervention Unit at HMP Altcourse must meet certain criteria including having children (or a significant relationship with children in their wider family) and agreeing to engage with the programmes being offered within the unit, including The Nurturing Programme. Many men were initially reluctant to participate in the Programme due to a number of factors including a dislike of classroom learning, having felt judged as a prisoner and parent when attending previous programmes, and high confidence in their parenting skills. However, these concerns were allayed once men began the Programme, with the majority reporting a positive experience and learning new skills.
- A substantial number of men had received a recommendation to participate in the Programme from other prisoners who had previously completed it. Participants had several individual goals for participating including improving relationships with their children, reflecting on and changing their past behaviours, learning the skills required to keep a strong bond with their children whilst in prison, and parenting in a way that was different to their own upbringing.
- During the evaluation period (May-November 2023), the course ran six times at HMP Altcourse with 37 men attending at least one session of the Programme and 27 completing all ten sessions (a retention rate of 73%). The main reason for attrition was men leaving or moving to another prison before completing the course.
- Our findings showed high acceptability of the Programme among participating men. The interviews showed good awareness and retention of the Programme content with the most frequently discussed aspects being empathy, listening skills, improving communication, and discipline and praise.
- A key facilitating factor of The Nurturing Programme was the non-judgemental environment created by the course facilitator. Fathers in prison often feel judged (7) but the trusting and safe environment created by the facilitator allowed the participants to open up and fully participate in the course discussions. A significant proportion of interview participants also disclosed a diagnosis of autism, ADHD, mental health conditions or low levels of literacy, and these participants positively described how the Programme was delivered in a way which accommodated rather than stigmatised them for their individual needs.
- Participants reported several positive outcomes from the Programme including a statistically significant increase in self-reported wellbeing on the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) (5). However, pre and post survey showed there was no significant change in men's self-reported confidence in their parenting skills, measured by the Brief Parental Self-Efficacy scale (6). There may be several contextual reasons for this lack of significant change. The qualitative findings indicate that many fathers entered the Programme not anticipating that they would have much to learn from the course (i.e., with high parental self-efficacy) but reported learning new skills and strategies on completion of the course. The qualitative findings demonstrate several new skills learnt by participants including negotiating skills, empathy, active listening, improved communication and better understanding of their children's feelings and behaviours. The evaluation did not include any longer term follow up to see if men retained these skills post-release and this should be a priority for future intervention evaluation.
- Qualitative evidence from men participating in interviews also suggests positive impacts for their children and partners including improved communication, better behaviour at home and increased engagement at school. Future evaluations should prioritise capturing the perspectives of the children and partners of men completing the Programme.
- Stakeholders and men participating believed it was important to sustain The Nurturing Programme at HMP Altcourse, with participants recommending it be expanded to fathers in other

wings of the prison. The relationships and trust built by the family link worker were a key facilitator in embedding The Nurturing Programme and sustained funding would ensure this progress is maintained.

Recommendations

1. HMP Altcourse and Liverpool City Council should consider strategies to improve retention of fathers to all 10 sessions of The Nurturing Programme. This could include more intensive delivery (i.e., more sessions per week) over a slightly shorter time period, although participants stated a preference for some days for reflection in between sessions. HMP Altcourse could also factor enrolment in the Programme into decisions about when to move men to other prisons, to allow those who are near the end of the course to complete it.
2. The Family Link Worker and HMP Altcourse should collaborate to ensure they are delivering a whole family approach to interventions and support where The Nurturing Programme and other educational programmes sit alongside family contact. For example, aligning family days with course completion would allow fathers to put the skills learnt into practice and sustain them. Opportunities to integrate fathers into key milestones for their children (for example attending parents' evenings via video conference) would also allow them to observe the positive impacts for their children.
3. HMP Altcourse and Liverpool City Council should consider expanding delivery of the Programme to fathers in other wings of the prison.
4. The non-judgemental delivery environment created by the Family Link Worker was a key facilitator of the Programme which should be sustained. Future delivery of parenting interventions should maintain this trauma informed approach to ensure interventions are accessible to those with additional needs including neurodivergence, mental health conditions and low literacy.
5. The trusting, familiar links built up by the Family Link Worker are a key facilitator of the Programme which have allowed it to become embedded within the Family Intervention Unit at HMP Altcourse. Continuity of staff would therefore assist in sustaining the Programme.
6. The positive impacts reported by fathers highlight a continuing need for The Nurturing Programme at HMP Altcourse. MVRP should work with the prison and Liverpool City Council to review how this programme can be financially and strategically sustained.
7. Future evaluation of The Nurturing Programme should continue using the following additional measures: 1) capturing quantitative changes in parenting style and skills, 2) measuring outcomes and perceptions of the Programme for children and partners of fathers in prison, 3) capturing longer term outcomes for fathers particularly following release from prison. These outcomes would make a valuable contribution to the sparse evidence on the effectiveness of parenting interventions in UK prisons.

1. Introduction

In England and Wales, there are approximately 87,700 adults in prison of which 96% are male (1). A longitudinal study of newly incarcerated prisoners in England and Wales estimates that 54% of adults in prison have a child under the age of 18 years (2) and around 312,000 children in England and Wales are currently affected by parental imprisonment (3). Parental imprisonment is an adverse childhood experience associated with poorer outcomes in education and health for children across the life course (8). Children who experience parental imprisonment are more likely to face significant disadvantages, have complex family needs and are less likely to meet child wellbeing indicators (9, 10). Large scale longitudinal studies have found children with a parent in prison are significantly more likely to experience poor mental wellbeing (11, 12), lower academic performance (13-16), and are at greater risk of antisocial behaviour and offending in adulthood (17-20). Despite growing recognition of the needs of children who experience a parental imprisonment, the evidence on effective interventions to support these children and their parents remains sparse (21).

Parenting programmes are one such intervention which can be implemented to improve parenting skills, strengthen family relationships, and minimise the impacts of parental imprisonment on both children and adults (22). However, the evidence on effective parenting interventions for parents in prison is variable (21, 23) and research across Europe suggests only a minority of prisons provide specific interventions to support parents (11). A systematic review of 22 parenting interventions in prisons found that existing programmes tend to be delivered in a group format in a prison setting (ranging from 5-36 sessions) and use a variety of delivery modes alongside group instruction including videos, handouts, integrated group discussion, role play and between session individual activities or assignments (24). A meta-analysis of 13 of these studies found they were moderately effective in improving parenting skills and knowledge, parental wellbeing, and parent-child relationships in the short term (24) including children feeling less stressed, less depressed and having more positive parent-child relationships when compared with a control group (25). For example, a small-scale study which delivered a group programme over 17 weeks to 24 fathers in a single prison in Northern Ireland demonstrated improved parenting knowledge and relationships. This included fathers reporting improved understanding of how being in prison effected their child, awareness of parenting style, confidence as a parent and in communicating with their child and, understanding of their child's development and behaviour (26).

However, variations in programme content, institutional context and characteristics of participating parents across existing parenting interventions make it difficult to come to clear conclusions about how much parents retain the knowledge and skills they have learnt (21, 24). The quality of father-child relationships for imprisoned fathers is complex and dependent on the quality of this relationship pre-prison, the frequency of visits, experience of visiting, prison barriers to father-child contact in prison, and the role of the child's caregiver in promoting contact with their father (27). The majority of interventions do not provide transitional support to parents during the post-release period (24) despite parents desiring continuity of support once they leave prison (26). There is also a lack of direct involvement for children; in their systematic reviews of parenting interventions, Armstrong et al (24) found that only four of the 22 reviewed interventions had a direct child-involvement and Nilsen et al (23) found only four of the 21 reviewed interventions examined the impact of these interventions on children. A study of stakeholder experiences implementing a parenting intervention in 24 Swedish prisons found that while staff felt parenting interventions were an important area of their work, they

had difficulties implementing them due to an overreliance on individual staff members without appropriate structural and financial support or reduction of existing workload (28).

1.1 The Nurturing Programme at HMP Altcourse

The Nurturing Programme³ is a Merseyside VRP funded parenting intervention which runs for fathers at HMP Altcourse. HMP Altcourse is a category B prison receiving sentenced and remand adult prisoners and young offenders from Cheshire and Merseyside courts. The prison accommodates up to 1,164 men across seven blocks including a Family Intervention Unit where The Nurturing Programme is delivered. The Family Intervention Unit is a 60-bed single cell accommodation with men selected for the Unit based on a risk assessment and their commitment to maintaining contact with their family. The Nurturing Programme is a 10-week parenting programme designed by Family Links and delivered widely in Local Authorities across the UK (4). The Programme aims to nurture empathy and self-awareness and help participants become positive parents. An adapted version of the Programme is available specifically for use in prisons. At HMP Altcourse, the course runs over a five-week period (two sessions per week) for up to 12 men (per course) within the Family Intervention Unit. Merseyside VRP funded the Programme in 2022/23 to allow the secondment of a Family Worker from the Liverpool Children's Centre team. The Family Worker delivers the Programme along with baby bathing and massage sessions for fathers and their children and courses on resolving parental conflict and anxiety.

The existing evidence suggests prison-based parenting interventions are promising in improving parenting skills and relationships but there remains uncertainty on how these interventions can be effectively implemented. In light of this, Merseyside VRP asked the Public Health Institute at Liverpool John Moores University to evaluate The Nurturing Programme at HMP Altcourse (North West England) in order to better understand: 1) the implementation of The Nurturing Programme (including barriers and facilitators, fidelity, and reach); 2) fathers experiences and perceptions of The Nurturing Programme; and, 3) the intended and actual impacts of The Nurturing Programme on fathers, children, and their families.

1.2 Aim & objectives

The study aim was to implement a process and outcome evaluation of The Nurturing Programme. The key research objectives are:

1. To monitor, document and describe the implementation of The Nurturing Programme.

- To describe the implementation of the Programme.
- To understand the extent to which the intervention was implemented as planned (fidelity).
- To identify how much of the intervention was implemented (dose).
- To explore the uptake of the Programme amongst the target population (reach).
- To elicit the facilitators and/or barriers to programme development and implementation, and adaptations to programme delivery.
- To identify areas for development and sustainability.





2. To assess the perceptions and impacts of The Nurturing Programme.

- To explore key stakeholder perceptions and experiences of the Programme including fathers, children, families, and key staff involved in the delivery.
- To identify the intended and actual impacts of the Programme on fathers, children, and their families.

³ The Nurturing Programme is designed by Family Links. See: [Commissioner Guide to Training | Family Links | Emotional Health Training](#)

2. Methodology

The evaluation took a mixed methods approach which combined secondary analysis of programme monitoring data, quantitative analysis of survey data and qualitative engagement with fathers and programme implementors.

	<p>Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in the design and delivery of the Programme (n=3). Quotes from stakeholders are labelled S and participant number.</p>
	<p>Pre (n=30) and post (n=26) surveys with fathers undertaking The Nurturing Programme were completed at the first (week 1, session 1) and final session (week 5, session 10). The surveys measured wellbeing using the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) (5) and parenting skills using the Brief Parental Self-Efficacy Scale (6).</p>
	<p>Semi-structured interviews with fathers (n=25) who had completed The Programme explored their views on the intervention, areas for development and actual and anticipated impacts. Quotes from fathers are labelled F and participant number.</p>
	<p>Analysis of secondary data provided by the gatekeeper on the number of men participating in The Nurturing Programme and course materials.</p>

Stakeholders were initially approached by the researcher via email and provided with a participant information sheet. Written consent was taken and the interviews took place via Microsoft Teams lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded on Microsoft Teams.

The Family Link Worker acted as a gatekeeper and assisted with recruitment of men to the study. For the pre- and post-questionnaires, the gatekeeper provided men participating in the study with a participant information sheet at the first session of the Programme. Completion of the questionnaire was taken as implied consent. Questionnaires were initially piloted during the first course of the calendar year (data not included in the evaluation) and men participating found the scales acceptable and comprehensible. The questionnaires were completed during the first and last Nurturing Programme session at the prison and the Family Link Worker made clear to participants that they did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to. On completion of the Programme, the Family Link Worker also approached men who had completed The Nurturing Programme on the wing and asked if they would be happy to participate in an interview. The Family Link Worker scheduled the interview times and informed both the men and the prison staff. Two researchers visited the prison with the Family Link Worker on three occasions (after course 1 and 2, course 3 and 4 and, course 5 and 6 to ensure good recall of the Programme at the interview) and interviews took place face-to-face in the education room on the Family Intervention Unit with one researcher. Each participating man

was provided with a participant information sheet and gave written consent. Interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder.

2.1 Data analyses

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests to test for significant differences in pre and post measures. As recommended by Family Links, wellbeing was measured using the self-reported WEMWBS scale (5) which is a 14-item scale covering subjective wellbeing and psychological functioning. The scale is scored by summing each item answered on a 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time) Likert Scale, with a minimum score of 14 and maximum of 70. Using the standard WEMWBS analysis template⁴, a weighted average score was calculated for each person and scores were grouped into low (<43), moderate (43-60) and high (>60) wellbeing. Statistical significance between the mean scores at the first and last session scores were calculated using Wilcoxon signed rank test. Confidence in parenting skills was measured using the Brief Parental Self-Efficacy scale (6). This replaced the Family Links recommended tool which was the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (29), as this measure requires parents to have detailed knowledge of their children's behaviours and emotional responses which may not be possible for fathers in prison who are not observing their children's behaviours on a regular basis. The Brief Parental Self-Efficacy is a five-item scale answered on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) Likert Scale with a total score ranging from 5 (lower levels of parental self-efficacy) to 25 (higher levels of parental self-efficacy). Statistical significance between the mean scores for the first and last session were calculated using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis (30). The findings were triangulated to understand the implementation and outcomes of the Programme.

2.2 Ethical approval

Ethical approval was received for this study from HM Prison and Probation Services (HMPPS) National Research Committee (Ref 2023-148) and Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 23/PHI/009).

⁴ Guidance and templates for the analysis of WEMWBS are produced by Warwick Medical School and available at: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/using/register/resources>

3. Findings⁵

3.1 Programme dose and reach

Programme setting: HMP Altcourse Family Intervention Unit

The Nurturing Programme is offered to men who reside on the “Family Intervention Unit” or, as most referred to it during interviews, the “family wing”. The Family Intervention Unit is part of the HMP Altcourse Supporting Families⁶ strategy which is closely aligned with a number of evidence-based recommendations, critically, the Lord Farmer Review 2017 (31) which aims to strengthen prisoners' family ties, prevent reoffending, and reduce intergenerational crime. Stakeholder 3 illustrates the significance of the review within the family unit at HMP Altcourse.

“Lord Farmer was asked to do a review into the effect of parental imprisonment and... not the effect that it has on the guys in prison, but what effect that has on the children. And then you're looking at the ACEs and all that sort of stuff as to the potential of whether or not those children will end up in the criminal justice system... what came out of that was that it's not just about working with children, significant others are a major factor... that significant other doesn't have to be a partner... it could be a best friend, it could be a neighbour. It's basically somebody that is significant to that man that's in prison that will be there through the prison journey and when he gets out and that will be an influencing factor to not come back into prison” (S3).

Men who reside in the main prison can apply to move to the Family Intervention Unit once they meet certain criteria which, as outlined by stakeholders below, includes having children or a significant relationship with children in their lives (for example grandfathers or uncles) and agreeing to engage with the suite of programmes being offered within the Family Intervention Unit. The Family Intervention Unit was considered to be a calmer unit made attractive by the single cell availability and opportunities to see family more frequently. The suite of programmes offered on the Family Intervention Unit initially began with The Nurturing Programme, however, it has evolved and now includes a number of other programmes that promote attachment and bonding between incarcerated fathers, their children, and wider family at home. These include baby bathing, baby massage sessions at the Visitors Centre which men can participate in with their partner and child, and courses on parental conflict and managing anxiety.

“They apply to come onto the unit, and the unit is a 60-bed single cell unit... They need to basically take part in the courses, the Nurturing courses and... There are other programmes that take place and there's other things that they can get involved in” (S3).

“But they're doing bathing the baby and you know all that new-born care and then a baby massaging session to sort of promote that attachment and bonding. So, it is much wider than Nurturing, although it did just start off with The Nurturing Programme” (S1).

A small number of the men interviewed felt that this eligibility criteria was not always consistently applied as they perceived that some men who participated in The Nurturing Programme did not have

⁵ Quote Key: S=Stakeholder, F=Father

⁶ <https://www.nicco.org.uk/userfiles/downloads/5be00d29a8b7a-hmp-altcourse-2018-strategy.pdf>

children. A number of men also noted that when they had first arrived on the Family Intervention Unit, they had been told that they would have additional family days upon completion of the required courses, but this had not transpired.

“...some of the lads that done the course don’t have kids and I think that’s not fair to have blokes that haven’t got kids when there’s blokes on the wing that have if that makes sense” (F7).

“We get told when you come on the wing you have to do this Nurturing course and other courses before you can have family day. All the other wings get to have family days without having to do any kind of course or agreement or anything, so it just doesn’t make sense” (F12).

Motivations to participate in the Programme

Many of the men interviewed reported their initial motivation to enrol on The Nurturing Programme was to adhere to prison rules within the Family Intervention Unit: *“Got told I had to do it to stay on this wing, the family wing” (F12)*. A number of participants described initial apprehension or reluctance before joining the Programme due to a number of factors including a dislike of classroom learning and having felt judged and stigmatised when attending previous programmes. A large number of men interviewed also felt that they may not have much to learn from the Programme because they were confident in their parenting skills. In the majority of cases, these participants had these fears allayed once they began the Programme and reported a positive experience. Word-of-mouth from both staff and men who had previously completed the Programme on the Unit was also a considerable factor. Interestingly, most of those who were apprehensive at first reported positive outcomes on completion, and recommended the Programme to others already on the Unit or those who were new to it.

“To be honest, a lot of lads on the wing done it and they said it was a good course to do so I thought I’d give it a go” (F10).

“I’m on the family wing and I got told it was very good course before and I wanted to know if I could learn something from it, which I did. Bit of an eye opener compared to how we were brought up. But that’s why I went on it. I’m glad I did” (F18).

“So, it was just like word of mouth on the wing and that’s how I got told about it and then when they explained it was just something I wanted to give it a test really and see what it was about” (F23).

Interviewees also reported broader goals and motivations centred on improving relationships with children and partners, reflecting on and changing their own behaviours, and learning the skills required to keep a strong positive bond with their child(ren) whilst incarcerated. Some of the men said their motives were driven by their own childhood experiences of parenting including parental separation. Those who alluded to unhealthy or negative experiences with their own parents were explicitly aiming to do *“the opposite” (F6)* with their own children and felt that The Nurturing Programme would support this.

“I wanted to learn more about how to act around my son and stuff and keep that bond with my son, just to be a better person myself... how to make the right constructive decisions about my son’s life or anything to do with my partner. So, I wanted a bit of knowledge of like how you can change your behaviour or thinking” (F5).

“Just learning like basically like with discipling children, what to do, not what to do, when to do it, when not to do it. Like me, I’ve done a lot of time in prison, I didn’t really have a good childhood myself, like so my mum and dad split up, so it was one of them. I didn’t really see my older brothers and sisters growing up. I wasn’t treated the best as a kid. I want to blame my parents but, I can see why some of the things I did, why I did. So, it’s to understand that how to treat children, what to show them, what not to show them” (F24).

“It made me realise the way they parented me, by doing this course, it’s quite toxic how I was brought up, you know, it was very unhealthy. And it’s probably the cause of a lot of my problems in life and it’s just even more sort of concrete in my head, like do you know what I mean, I’m not gonna let that happen for my kids” (F6).

The interview findings showed that a small number of the men believed it would be in their favour at upcoming court hearings (as most are on remand at HMP Altcourse) to have completed the Programme, and some also reported completing a number of other programmes whilst incarcerated so that they would be looked upon favourably by the judge.

“I went last year about doing it because for a number of reasons, one... because I’m on remand do you know what I mean, just so it’s like a box, I could just show that I want to go to court that I am trying to sort of correct some of my behaviour and that” (F6).

“Truthfully to start with I was doing it just to make it look good when I go to court” (F7).

Programme reach

During 2023, the Nurturing Course ran seven times at HMP Altcourse, and pre and post survey data from six courses (May – November 2023) are included in this evaluation. The first course (February/March 2023) was used to pilot the pre and post surveys, for face validity with men finding the WEMWBS (5) and Brief Parental Self-Efficacy (6) scales both comprehensible (assessed through completed surveys) and acceptable (assessed through feedback to the Family Link Worker).

Between May and November 2023, 37 men attended session one of the Programme and 27 completed the final session (a retention rate of 73%). Pre-course surveys were available for 30 men, of which 26 also completed post course questionnaires. Table 1 below provides a summary of the number of men who attended session one of the course and were retained until session 10 (the final session). Half of men participating were aged 18-35 (50%) and half aged 36-50 years (50%). The majority were of white ethnicity (87%, Table 2).

The main reason for attrition was men who were on remand leaving or being moved to another prison before they could complete the course. As described in the quotes below, this created uncertainty for the course delivery and particularly for the men participating. It was suggested that in some cases this could lead to reduced engagement in the course content and relationships with other men participating.

“That’s what I said to [Family Worker], I feel sorry for you doing this course and doing these things because the fact is you didn’t know whether I was gonna be here today, I mightn’t be here today do you know what I mean” (F4).

“So, they have a lot of uncertainty in there. They don’t know. Someone could come in for them one day and go ‘Come on, we’re going’... And building relationships with anyone,

they're sort of like 'Why would I build relationships when I know that I might be moving on soon?' So, I think that's part of it as well" (S2).

Table 1: Recruitment and retention per course

Course (2023)	Number who attended first session	Number who completed last session	Number completing pre-course questionnaire	Number completing post-course questionnaire
April/May	6	6	6	6
May/June	6	5	6	5
July/August	6	3	3	3
Aug/Sept	5	3	5	3
Sept/Oct	7	5	5	4
Oct/Nov	7	5	5	5
Total	37	27	30	26

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of participants completing pre-course questionnaire

Age group	Number of men	%
18-25 years	4	13.3
26-35 years	11	36.7
36-50 years	15	50.0
Ethnicity		
White or White British	26	86.7
Other	4	13.3
Total	30	100

Programme dose

The Nurturing Programme is designed to run for weekly sessions over a 10-week period. However, this was adapted for the prison environment, with the course running over a five-week period for two sessions per week. Generally, the fathers participating in the evaluation found this delivery model acceptable. As quoted below, some participants preferred having time to reflect on the course content between sessions compared to previous courses where they had received all of the sessions consecutively over a shortened time period.

"I thought it was good. I am glad it wasn't just for two weeks. I know previous it has just been for the full two weeks, every day for the full two weeks. I think it did work better because... a couple of days a week and then normal, obviously like your work and stuff like that and then another couple of days. It kind of got to the point where I was looking forward to it. Do you get what I mean, because it kind of spreads it out and stuff like that" (F11).

3.2 Programme content and delivery

The Nurturing Programme aims to help adults and children live emotionally healthy lives and focuses on four main constructs: self-awareness, appropriate expectations, empathy, and positive discipline (4). The sessions cover a range of topics including: giving praise, discipline, parenting styles and family

rules, choices and consequences, communicating clearly, kinds of touch, ages and stages in children's physical and emotional development, and problem solving and negotiating (32). Findings from the interviews showed good awareness and retention of the course content, with participants able to recall and describe many of these core concepts. The most frequently discussed aspects were empathy, listening skills, improving communication with their children, and discipline and praise.

"A lot of it was on a board where we interacted or... she asked us stuff and we gave answers or our thoughts. There was some written bits where we filled in booklets or pieces of paper. Also listening, but we were participating as well... Discipline, empathy, ways to improve communication... We weren't discussing just the good, the way things shouldn't be done or perhaps be done better and hopefully try and learn better ways to communicate with our children mostly, and in the family environment" (F16).

Stakeholders emphasised that the course was about supporting all parents to develop rather than making any judgements about the participants' parenting skills. This was reflected in the participant interviews, where all participants spoke positively of the non-judgemental, informal delivery style of the course coordinator. This was described by participants as an important factor in their engagement in the Programme. A small number of those interviewed interpreted the instructive language and tone used in The Nurturing Programme book as passing judgement on their parenting skills ("*don't tell me how to be a dad. I'm the best dad ever apart from me being here*" F5). As illustrated in the final quote below, this was described in contrast to the non-judgemental style used by the course facilitator and participants felt comfortable to discuss this with them and provide feedback.

"This is not the bad dads' class, I say, this is about you being more in tune with your children. It's giving you the tools to see things a little bit differently, about self-awareness about positive discipline, it's about empathy, the big thread [why] everyone wants to do it is being empathic" (S2).

"[Family Link Worker] is boss. If I'd had a teacher like her at school, I probably wouldn't have got in any trouble. She's amazing like honestly, I think if anyone else had taught it, like I went on a course before and the woman she treat [sic] me like a prisoner whereas [Family Link Worker] treat [sic] me like a Dad, if that makes sense" (F7).

"The book actually says to you, you should do this, and I'm thinking that's instructing you on how you should behave as a parent. When we left the lads gave feedback of, 'well I don't think no one's got the right to say...they should do that, because you learn from your own mistakes'... it could have been worded in a way of like, this may be... a better route... And that was the only negative I took from it" (F5).

The Nurturing Programme sessions were delivered in an informal, interactive, group setting which participants felt was a favourable delivery style. Furthermore, it was considered by most as being a safe space. Participants with literacy difficulties, neurodiversity, and mental health conditions all described initial apprehension about the group setting but spoke positively of how the facilitator created a space where everyone could talk openly and accommodated their needs.

"I struggle being around people quite a bit when I'm on the outside I mean. It usually has always just sort of been my partner and my kids. And that's just like, my world. I don't really have much to do with my family. I don't really have like a big social group, so I tend to get stuck in that bubble, do you know what I mean, and because I've got mild autism and stuff like that as well. So socially, like I struggle with people. Like there were

times I did struggle, like coming in and sitting with a group, you know, but it was, it wasn't difficult. It was quite relaxing" (F6).

"At first everyone is a bit apprehensive aren't they, after a couple, well I think after the first session we was all chilled. Just, we all engaged, it was good coz [Family Link Worker] made us relax, so it was easy to just, not let go but, just be yourself. Coz in here [prison] you tend to suppress" (F18).

3.3 Programme facilitators and barriers

Facilitating factors

Organisational level

Stakeholders identified a number of facilitating factors to programme implementation such as the initial funding and support from the Merseyside VRP who *"funded for a secondment for someone in the children's centres to go into Altcourse and deliver [Nurturing Programme] ... and I thought, you know, I'm going to give this a go. So, I applied for it and got it" (S2)*. Senior management support from the prison, who were supportive of interventions to improve prisoners' wellbeing, facilitated prompt access to the necessary vetting and training needed by the Family Link Worker. A supportive and flexible approach from the Family Link Worker's employer (Liverpool Children's Centres) allowed consistent delivery of the Programme (with new cohorts every 6 weeks) and allowed the Family Link Worker to be a consistent presence within the prison, resulting in positive relationships with staff and prisoners at HMP Altcourse.

"From a funding perspective, even better for us because... there's nothing financial from the prison's perspective of having this facilitated... the vetting brings a financial cost, the training brings a financial cost... but there's no... monthly or weekly financial cost or an annual contract, you know, so it's fully funded" (S3).

"We've got a good senior management team and we've got good directors... we tend to be able to implement everything really that comes in and it's all for the benefit of everything else that's running" (S3).

"...you can work four days in our course and then you can work Friday for the children's centres. But that's not saying that if the family wing, they've got a family day next month, on a Friday, so that's not saying if there's something going on I can't go in. It's quite flexible" (S2).

The course facilitator described feeling 'accepted' within the unit by both staff and incarcerated men. This was facilitated by being easily identifiable as non-prison staff (*"I think because I don't wear any uniform, I don't wear the G4S is the uniform, they don't see me as a threat" (S2)*) and by delivering multiple interventions on the unit, which made her a familiar face. When delivering certain programmes, prison staff could observe (for example during baby bathing or baby massage in the Visitors Centre) and in some cases this resulted in positive feedback from staff who made recommendations of prisoners who could benefit from the courses.

"When I'm doing the baby programme in the Visit Hall, all of the staff, they'll come over and they'll look at what I'm doing and they'll go 'Oh god, this is great. Isn't this lovely

what you're doing? This is what we need is we need more of this'. So, you know, they are slowly coming round" (S2).

"They're getting used to me now and they're getting to know who I am, they're getting to know what I'm about and what I'm doing. So, they will come up to me and say 'Are you running your course today? And I'll go, 'yeah, yeah'. And then they tell me 'Oh, we were talking to such and such and he was interested in it, you know'" (S2).

Individual level

Participating fathers described three factors which facilitated their engagement and successful completion of the course: peer support, the non-judgemental environment, and the reflective nature of the content.

Participants alluded that prison wings are an environment where trust is limited, and 'male bravado' is commonplace. They described how discussions among prisoners tended to be very impersonal and discussing their family and children was not commonplace: *"I wouldn't ask people like how their kids getting on coz it's not my thing" (F25)*. However, it was reported by many men participating that the peer group style of The Nurturing Programme sessions broke down some of these barriers and encouraged sharing of personal stories. This knowledge of each other's families led to more positive relationships and discussions between men outside of the Programme.

"Everyone in my group was participating and everyone was talking about their kids you know what I mean saying 'I do this with my kids, I do this with my kids'. So, your kinda relating in a way and coz you're in prison so you're all kind of in the same situation" (F24).

"There's like a bravado and then there's this wall, isn't it? It's like this, this wall they put up. And I think being on The Nurturing Programme is breaking that down a little bit as well. They're becoming a little bit more empathic, a little bit more, well, not vulnerable, but showing a softer side to themselves" (S2).

"If you share stuff then they tend to share stuff that they wouldn't share with anyone else. Because you're being humble, do you know what I mean. It's showing your vulnerabilities and things like that so it kind of breeds, do you know what I mean. Because you bottle things up a lot. It does help. You notice, when you do talk to other lads, they talk back. It's just getting that, getting over that initial thing and that was a good setting for it" (F11).

As previously discussed, the course facilitator tried to create a non-judgemental environment for the Programme and participants acknowledged that this facilitated their engagement. Participants compared this to previous stigmatising learning experiences including feeling judged for being a prisoner and for having difficulties understanding at school. A number of participants also discussed being diagnosed with autism, ADHD, mental health conditions and having low levels of literacy all of which have the potential to further their experiences of stigma. Being able to participate in The Nurturing Programme in a non-judgemental environment led participating men to feel they could safely engage, share, and learn from the course. This also encouraged some of the men to engage in other courses being ran by the Family Link Worker including parental conflict, baby bathing, and managing anxiety.

“Brilliant stuff to make you feel like you are not in jail do you know what I mean? For that little half an hour or hour, whatever the session is... at the time it just makes you feel normal again, you come in here you do this you do that, then back to reality out there” (F14).

“Without her I probably wouldn’t have even lasted five weeks, I never went to school, never finished school. Like, I just didn’t have an interest because they just used to treat me like an idiot whereas she just sat, if you didn’t understand something she’d explain it, she went out of her way to make you feel, she understands we’re in jail but just because we’re in jail doesn’t mean we’re a bad dad or bad people. Certain people’s lives lead different paths, and she made you feel included instead of just a piece of crap” (F7).

“Just dead down to earth. She’s willing to listen to everyone and she encourages you to open up a little bit... she’s just got a good demeanour, you didn’t feel embarrassed, you could say anything in front of her, or the lads, you know everything was easy” (F21).

Some of the men discussed how the format of Nurturing Programme allowed them to reflect on their own lives, childhood, and family relationships. This led to increased understanding of how they themselves were parented had impacted them growing up and allowed them to reflect on some of the mistakes they may have made in their own parenting. For several men, this resulted in a change to their mindset; instead of looking back negatively at their parenting experiences, they were looking forward and making positive changes.

“I even read a few little things out to me Mum on the phone ‘well this is what you would have done... but this is what you should have done’” (F18).

“It made me... realise how easy mine [childhood] was, because there were people within the group who’ve got different situations. And mine was more of a positive situation. So, then you count yourself lucky then as to what you’ve got going on in your own life. That side that was quite special” (F5).

“I’ve been a dad since I was 17... the stuff I’ve learnt in here made me realise that some of the stuff I’ve done at home maybe isn’t the right way to go about things” (F7).

“It changes your mindset a little bit about being a dad. Not change, just goes to show you where you can make improvements and whatnot, you know what I mean. We all make errors don’t we... It’s about rectifying them isn’t it?” (F4).

Barriers

Factors considered as potential barriers to participation by stakeholders included cultural differences, age, literacy, and general negative perceptions of the Programme prior to commencement. Some discussed the likelihood that those who may be older or who had already raised a family may not be inclined to enrol on the Programme.

“Sometimes that’s difficult for the likes of that generation to also try and alter the way that they’ve been brought up and the way they’ve brought their children up because they see nothing wrong in that way. Times have moved on and that’s from a different place” (S3).

“I’d like to think I’m quite a good parent, so I just didn’t really see the benefit of me doing it to be truthful” (F12).

Furthermore, cultural perceptions on parenting can also vary and this was also considered a possible barrier to participation and engagement. Navigating these barriers, as illustrated below, included the course coordinator being patient, transparent, and informative to all fathers on the family unit.

“Sometimes you have cultural background issues, whereas it’s like ‘No, that’s not going to work because that’s not the way our culture works with bringing children up’, and that’s a factor” (S3).

“Prisoners mindset when they come in. You know, if they’ve got negativity and they haven’t got that open mind when they come in. That can be another barrier... I think just trying to draw them in. I think that’s the only way you can do it. Just keep going at them and hopefully they’ll see that I’m not there to tell them about how to be a better dad, I’m not telling them how to bring up their kids. I’m just giving them ideas and different ways of dealing with stuff” (S2).

3.4 Impacts of the Programme

Impacts on participants

Improved wellbeing

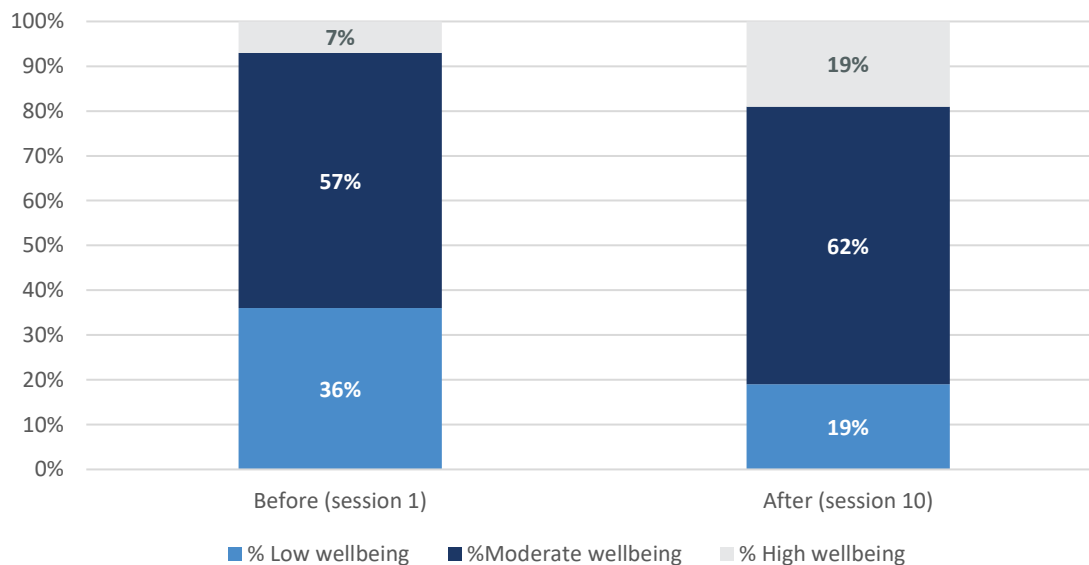
The wellbeing of men participating in the Programme was measured at the first and last session of the Programme using the WEMWBS scale (5). WEMWBS is a self-reported 14-item scale used to measure wellbeing by focusing on positive aspects of mental health and is recommended by The Nurturing Programme to measure programme impacts. As summarised in Table 3, there was a significant positive change in men’s wellbeing (4.19, $p < 0.05$) from session one (mean score 47.8, SD 9.4) to session 10 (mean score 52.5, SD 9.5). As shown in Figure 1, there was an increase in the number of men reporting moderate (57% vs 62%) and high wellbeing (7% vs 19%) and a decrease in the proportion of men reporting low wellbeing (36% vs 19%). At an individual level, 66.7% of men ($n=16$) reported a meaningful positive change in wellbeing, while 12.5% ($n=3$) reported a meaningful negative change in wellbeing. While these scores demonstrate that the Programme had a positive impact on men’s wellbeing during the five weeks they were participating in the Programme, further follow-up would be needed to understand if these improvements in wellbeing were sustained long term.

Table 3: WEBWMS scores at first session vs final session

	Before intervention	After intervention	Change	Positive change?	Statistically significant change?	Wilcoxon signed rank test P value
Total no. of responses¹	28	26				
% Low wellbeing	36%	19%				
% Moderate wellbeing	57%	62%				
% High wellbeing	7%	19%				
Mean score	47.8	52.5	4.19	Yes	Yes	p<0.05
Standard deviation	9.4	9.5	8.7			

1. Two pre-survey respondents were excluded because there were missing items on the WEMWEBS scale.

Figure 1: WEBWMS scores at first vs final session



Strengthened relationships

Most of those interviewed reported positive, strengthened relationships with both partners and their children, which they attributed directly to The Nurturing Programme. Strengthened relationships with children were reported as emerging through using the skills acquired in The Nurturing Programme sessions either over the telephone or during a family visit to the prison. Men felt that their increased awareness of the needs of their children through listening, empathy, and negotiating was responsible for positive changes such as improved communication with children, active listening, and giving praise.

“I had the course on Wednesday it was, and I had the visit one day and me little girl was being naughty and messing around and normally I’d say, ‘stop it’ and shout at her. I never, I said, ‘what’s wrong?’ she sat on me knee and she tell [sic] me. That course probably helped me honestly” (F1).

“The Nurturing Course... it’s definitely helped me understand [my kids] more... I’m not saying I’m the best dad in the world, but I do listen to them, I’ll do anything for them.

But they need time, and you need to listen to the kids. So, when lads say stuff to me on the wing about this about that, 'I've just come back off the visit and the kids were screaming', you gotta think well there's a reason why they're screaming... Most of its attention with kids, I think. My little lad come and see me last night with me little girl, he's 13 and she's eight, so they're sitting on a visit and they both fighting for your attention in a nice way. So what I tend to do is I have me little girl on me knee for 15, 20 minutes and then she goes and plays, then I'll get him over and things like that help you don't they... I said to the little lad last night when me little girl left... 'thanks for letting your sister come', coz he didn't want her to come, and he went 'alright dad'. And I had to tap him on the back and give him a little praise for what he'd done so that's good, turn the tables, and say thanks for what you've done" (F1)

"I never used to say to him when he was three and a half, I'm proud of you because he didn't know what it meant. And then learning from the course now, he's just had sports day yesterday, and I said I'm proud of you for winning the race and he says, 'thank you daddy, thanks for being proud of me'" (F5).

The qualitative interview findings with men showed that for most, The Nurturing Programme taught them how to be an active partner or co-parent whilst incarcerated. One of the recurring themes from the men was they had learned to understand how their partner is feeling on the outside, and how to navigate any family or parental issues that may arise through joint decision-making without being patronising to their partner, thus reducing interpersonal conflict, and improving relationships.

"I've learned to take a step back and think about it, but I also understand its difficult because when we are in the class, our families and partners are out there struggling... I got on the phone and said: 'don't shout at him, don't shout, do it this way, this is the best way to do it'. And then I got 'don't tell me how to be the best mother, you're the one who is in there'... because we picked it up on the course and then you think, right, okay, you got to take a step back now. You've got to not say that now" (F5).

"Coming to decisions together and stuff like that, even listening to your kids and stuff like that" (F14).

"I try and listen a bit more. Try and be a bit more perhaps thoughtful to people, well to me partner and children at home, who, they're obviously going through the situation without me so it's a little bit different for us in here to outside... It just gives you a bit more thought on how you should probably lead your life or help other people in your life a bit more" (F16).

Some of those interviewed noted how they intend to use the skills they have acquired from The Nurturing Programme upon release from prison particularly in terms of co-parenting and their relationship with their partner.

"I should hopefully be out in about five or six weeks, and I am hopefully going to put a lot of stuff into place... Just to listen more. Not to just like jump into things, to discuss things first. Cos when you jump into things, like I said before, speaking about it a couple of times, it's about identifying ways we can go round it and coming up with the best ideas we can" (F11).

“I can teach her little things out of this. I think it’s really useful definitely, especially if you’re like a first-time parent or if you’ve not had the best childhood then yeah, it’s good” (F24).

Confidence in parenting skills

Men’s confidence in their parenting skills were measured using the Brief Parental Self-Efficacy Scale (6). Previous evaluations of The Nurturing Programme in community settings have used the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (29) which is a standardised measure of parent-reported child emotion and behaviour. However, after consultation with the Family Link Worker running the Programme at HMP Altcourse, it was decided the SDQ would not be an appropriate evaluation measure as some fathers may not have had sufficient contact with their children during the intervention period to be able to complete the detailed questions about their children’s emotions and behaviours and that this could potentially be upsetting for some of the men participating. The SDQ was therefore replaced with the Brief Parental Self-Efficacy scale (6), which is endorsed by NHS Digital, has been used to evaluate parenting interventions in a range of family settings, and focuses on parents’ confidence in their own skills rather than focusing on changes in children’s behaviours.

As illustrated in Table 4 below, there was only a very small change in parental confidence from the first to final session (22.2 vs 22.7) and this was not statistically significant (p=0.3). There may be several contextual reasons for this lack of significant change. Firstly, fathers’ initial scores on the scale were high (mean 22.2, maximum possible score 25) and fathers who were resident on the family intervention unit were more likely to be in regular contact with their families to maintain an active role in family life. Secondly, as previously discussed, the qualitative findings indicate that many fathers entered the Programme not anticipating that they would have much to learn from the course (i.e., with high parental self-efficacy) but found on completion of the Programme that they had learnt new skills and strategies that they had previously been unaware of. Furthermore, the qualitative findings demonstrated improved confidence in a number of parenting skills including negotiating with children, empathy and active listening skills, and better communication and understanding which are discussed below.

Table 4: Parental Self-Efficacy Scores at first vs final session

	Before intervention	After intervention	Change	Positive change?	Statistically significant change?	Wilcoxon signed rank test P value
Total no. of responses¹	27	25				
Mean score	22.2	22.7	0.5	Yes	No	p=0.3
Standard deviation	2.4	2.8	0.4			

1. Three pre-survey respondents (n=30) were excluded because there were missing items on the Brief Parental Self-Efficacy scale.

Negotiating

Through The Nurturing Programme, the participating men stated that they had learned ways to negotiate with their children in a variety of situations by changing previous parenting behaviours to result in better outcomes for both parent and children. The fathers discussed examples of implementing these negotiating skills with their children on a visit or during a telephone call, for

example, how to calm an upset or angry child or allowing a child to be involved in the decision-making as illustrated below.

“As it went on like learning little things like negotiating with a 6-year-old which is difficult, but... she’s got a green coat and a black coat, so it was giving her the choice, so she weren’t having to do as she’s told, it was like ‘come on you need to put it on its cold, what one, your black one or green one’ - mad to suggest, but it works. It was funny, do you know what I mean, like to know something as simple as that can actually get you somewhere” (F22).

“It’s like when he gets a cob on dead easy, like I’ve learned how to talk him down a bit, so he calms down and stuff like that now” (F19).

“I had it in the group session and thought about different ways of dealing with different situations with the children because I got a six-year-old, but he was five at the time. So instead of shouting at him or saying, ‘you’re not having this’, I looked at the scenarios of doing things differently” (F1).

Empathy and active listening

Participants reported improved empathy and active listening which many of the men felt they had not done effectively in the past. Many said they were surprised to realise that they had not previously understood what empathy involved and how to apply it in their parenting. It was evident in the interview findings that using these skills resulted in improved relationships with children and partners whilst in prison.

“I feel like I’m listening more and I’m not over-speaking to them when they’re telling me things on the telephone. I’m taking more notice of what’s being said whereas sometimes I’d just say to me girl who’s sixteen ‘oh just listen to your mum’ but now I’m taking her opinion a little bit and giving her a little bit more of my time” (F17).

“...learned a lot about empathy which I thought I already knew, but I didn’t... just I didn’t really understand the difference between sympathy and empathy, which, now with empathy I know that you don’t have to agree with it, but you can still come down to the same level of and take on and understand a bit more” (F19).

Communication and understanding

Improved communication and understanding the needs of their children was a common thread in all conversations with the men. Learning taken from The Nurturing Programme regarding how to communicate and converse better with their children was taken on board by the men who then put it into practice on either a telephone call or when the family visit them at the prison. It was very clear that this not only improved communication and led to more engaging conversations with their children (rather than arguments or lack of dialogue); but rather positively impacted their overall wellbeing with telephone calls and visits more enjoyable than in the past.

“When we first started it was like, so obviously you phone up, I’ve got 4 kids... It was “good”- because I used to phone ‘how are ya?’ ‘okay’, ‘how was school?’, they’d say ‘good’. It was basically a repetitive thing and then it was sort of like I didn’t really know what more to ask or how to ask. But then it taught me like to maybe just say things like

what I've done today and then let them try to engage with me do you know what I mean. It's been good" (F18).

"Just like speaking to me little girl like I'll say, 'right what did you do at school' and she go 'oh I forgot'. Sometimes I'd go 'come on you can't have forgot' she haven't [sic] forgot she just couldn't be bothered telling me. Sometimes I press like 'oh what do you mean, what did you do' do you know what I mean. Now like, I understand she just wants to talk about something else or she just wants to go and play, and I'll speak to her after do you know what I mean, it's just the way children are" (F20).

Impacts on the prison

Interestingly, stakeholders noted the positive impact The Nurturing Programme had on the Family Intervention Unit as a whole. As a result of the peer group setting, there seemed to be a reduced need to maintain bravado among men on the Unit and a willingness to connect more with each other. It was suggested that this had a wider effect on all the men residing in the Family Intervention Unit which was deemed to be a calmer environment than one might expect a prison wing to be.

"Nobody wants to live in a bad environment or a hostile environment when they're within the prison. It's not nice and it's not comfortable. But some of these interventions and the courses bring lads together and knowing a little bit more about each other. Because the different courses they go on, they'll meet different guys, they won't always be the same ones and it helps, it does help" (S3).

"It sort of like, bonds them. I know it sounds a little bit cheesy, but it bonds a little bit more and they find out a little bit more about each other. So hopefully when it's association time...they're like 'Yeah, you were on the group today, are you coming up?'. So, I think there's benefits for that, definitely" (S2).

"It opens it up a little bit more because they know a little bit more about each other, which creates that better atmosphere and makes the guys interact with each other a lot better. Interacting with each other a lot better also maintains calmness" (S3).

3.5 Sustainability of the Programme

Overall, both stakeholders and fathers had positive views of The Nurturing Programme and its current delivery within the prison. Some of the men interviewed made suggestions on how the course could be improved for them personally and for their partner and children. These included more collaboration with partners and children as part of the course both on-site and with the families through the children's centres. Another suggestion was that there should be an option to video call the family after each session to debrief with partner and children and discuss what was learned that day.

"Yeah, coz I think it's alright me learning but probably better if the two of you are learning" (F16).

"I think like to come in here and do it together the only way it could get better but apart from that it's alright" (F14).

“Maybe a facetime call to your family, a facetime visit to your family after it would be nice” (F17).

“Maybe if you could get your kids involved a bit more, that’d help, I think... Come in on one of the days where we actually sit and do the course with the lads maybe yeah. It could be a little bit difficult, but I think it would help” (F19).

In terms of continued delivery and sustainability of The Nurturing Programme, stakeholders all believed that it was important to continue to be able to offer the Programme at HMP Altcourse. Furthermore, it was felt that the initial overheads and costs to implement the course were a ‘one-off’ and if the current Family Link Worker were to carry on as programme coordinator it would keep financial costs (other than employer salary) to a minimum.

“I just hope they don't go ‘right, OK, twelve months to go’ because I've put all this stuff into place. And then I'd go and there's nobody else there. There is nobody there to carry it on. So yeah, hopefully” (S2).

“The continual maintenance of these courses taking place is quite easy. You know it’s; it's not rocket science... you've got what [Family Link Worker] is doing at the moment... the Nurturing course. She's also doing baby bathing, which is for little ones up to the age of 12 months. She's then doing baby massage and then there is the new pilot. And that was something that [Family Link Worker] turned around and said... this is something that can complement the other work that she's doing, which is fantastic. It's just developing everything else that's going along. And it's doable” (S3).

It was widely agreed that the option to enrol on The Nurturing Programme should be available to all prisoners at HMP Altcourse, not just those on the Family Intervention Unit. This was largely due to the positive outcomes reported by fathers who believed the course would be beneficial to other fathers.

“I think it should be offered across the whole jail not just people on one wing, saying this is a family wing, there’s loads of people who’d probably benefit, more on the wings than in here. Because you tend to get the more sensible people coming onto this wing if I’m truthful” (F12).

“We’re all in the same boat whether we’re in the family unit or not to be honest. It’s great that it’s on the family wing but there’s lads all over the prison and they’re good people and they’ve got kids they could benefit from this all over the prison really” (F21).

4. Summary of key findings

Parenting programmes are implemented in prisons to improve parenting skills, strengthen family relationships, and minimise the impacts of parental imprisonment on both children and adults (22). However, the evidence on effective parenting interventions for parents in prison is variable (21, 23) and research across Europe suggests only a minority of prisons provide specific interventions to support parents (11). This report evaluates the implementation of an existing parenting programme (The Nurturing Programme) at HMP Altcourse, a Category B Male Prison in Liverpool (North West England). The intervention was funded by Merseyside VRP.

Overall, our evaluation demonstrates that implementation of The Nurturing Programme for fathers in a Category B prison environment is feasible and acceptable to both stakeholders and participating prisoners. The Programme ran twice weekly sessions over a five-week period to align with the prison schedule and try and reduce issues of retention. Low retention rates are an acknowledged difficulty with prison interventions (33) and this was reflected in our evaluation where only 73% of men beginning the first session completed all ten sessions. This is a particular challenge in remand prisons, where the prison population is transient (34). While participants spoke favourably about the five-week delivery period, a slightly shortened delivery time (e.g., sessions three times a week) could help alleviate some of these retention issues. In addition, HMP Altcourse could take programme participation into account when making arrangements to move remand prisoners to other prisons to increase opportunities for course completion.

The Nurturing Programme was delivered on the Family Intervention Unit which requires men to be actively engaged in their children's lives and willing to participate in the interventions delivered on the Unit. This appeared to be a successful setting for delivery and men reported positive engagement and outcomes from the Programme. Being based on the Family Intervention Unit also allowed the Family Link Worker to build positive and trusting relationships with staff and men on the Unit. These positive relationships, along with financial support from Merseyside VRP and strategic support from HMP Altcourse and Liverpool City Council, allowed the Family Link Worker to develop a series of additional interventions at the prison including baby bathing, baby massage, resolving parental conflict and management of anxiety. Existing research on Family Intervention Units suggests that whole family approaches which offer parenting courses alongside family focused interventions (such as family days and stay and play activities) can lead to improved outcomes for prisoners and their children (35). However, some participants noted that family days and contact with their children had not occurred as frequently as anticipated at the Family Intervention Unit over the past 12 months, and this could limit fathers' ability to put the skills learnt on the course into practice and sustain them longer term. In addition, both stakeholders and participating men noted that fathers on other wings of the prison could benefit from The Nurturing Programme and HMP Altcourse should consider expanding the delivery to other parts of the prison.

A key facilitator of The Nurturing Programme was the non-judgemental environment created by the course facilitator. Fathers in prison often feel judged (7) and the trusting and safe environment created by the course facilitator allowed the participants to open up and fully participate in the course discussions. A significant proportion of interview participants also disclosed a diagnosis of autism, ADHD, mental health conditions or low levels of literacy, and these participants positively described

how the course was delivered in a way which accommodated rather than stigmatised them for their individual needs. There is growing recognition in the UK of the importance of trauma-informed approaches, and the approach taken to delivery of The Nurturing Programme aligns well with the six key principals of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural consideration (36). Trauma-informed approaches include recognition of the intersectionality between trauma and biases based on characteristics such as neurodivergence and mental health conditions, and this is particularly important in UK prison populations where there is higher prevalence of these conditions (37, 38). Participants described how this non-judgemental delivery allowed them to reflect on their own parenting as a child, understand how this impacted upon them growing up and regulate their own parenting practices accordingly. This suggests potentially positive impacts in reducing generational cycles of trauma and adversity. Stakeholders also reported positive impacts on the prison environment, with improved relationships between prisoners leading to a calmer atmosphere on the Family Intervention Unit.

The Nurturing Programme led to a number of positive benefits for participating fathers including improved self-reported wellbeing, strengthened relationships with their children and partners and increased empathy and skills in communication. However, the evaluation did not observe a significant change in self-reported parental self-efficacy using the validated survey scale. Our qualitative findings indicate that many participants were quite sceptical upon beginning the course, feeling both resistant to being branded a “bad dad” and not anticipating that they had much to learn (i.e., their parental self-efficacy was high). However, our qualitative findings demonstrate that fathers learnt a number of new parenting strategies and approaches and were working to implementing these strategies during phone calls and visits with their children. Future quantitative evaluations of The Nurturing Programme in prison settings should consider which measures can best capture these changes. Family Links currently recommended using the parent reported Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (29) to measure programme impacts, however this measure was not deemed suitable for prison settings as it requires detailed knowledge of children’s behaviours which may not be possible for fathers in prison to observe. Our evaluation suggests that measures which capture more nuanced changes in parenting styles and strategies might be more appropriate for future research in this area.

Qualitative interview evidence from fathers suggests that The Nurturing Programme resulted in positive changes for their children and partners. Men discussed improved communication with their children, and some provided qualitative examples of better behaviour at home and engagement at school. Men also discussed improved communication about parenting with their partners. Further research is required to capture these changes from the perspective of prisoners’ children and partners. Previous systematic reviews of parenting interventions in prisons have highlighted the lack of evidence on the impacts of these interventions on children (23, 24). Attempts to engage children and partners in this evaluation⁷ were unsuccessful and should be prioritised in future research.

This evaluation did not include any longer term follow-up to measure whether men participating in The Nurturing Programme sustained the skills they learnt longer term, particularly after their release from prison. Longer term follow-up post-release is acknowledged as a particular challenge of prison research (39) and existing research highlights that the majority of interventions do not provide

⁷ Our evaluation aimed to complete paired interviews with prisoners’ partners and children either at HMP Altcourse Visitor Centre, a local children’s centre or via telephone/MS Teams. The Family Link worker, acting as gatekeeper to partners, asked fathers who had completed The Nurturing Programme to invite their partners to participate. If they wished to participate, it was intended that the Family Link worker would gain their telephone number or email address from the father and make initial contact to arrange the interview.

transitional support to parents during the post-release period (24) despite parents desiring continuity of support once they leave prison (26). In order to meet the ambitions of the Lord Farmer review (31), processes for longer term follow-up are needed to establish whether parenting interventions are effective in the longer term to improve outcomes for both parents and children experiencing parental imprisonment.

Overall, this evaluation found that implementing The Nurturing Programme for fathers on the Family Intervention Unit at HMP Altcourse was both feasible and acceptable. Our evaluation also demonstrates a number of positive outcomes for fathers who engaged in the Programme. However, several contextual factors including the time limited nature of the funding, role changes for the programme facilitator, and a change in the HMP Altcourse prison management company could threaten the sustainability of the Programme.⁸ The relationships and trust built by the Family Link Worker were a key facilitator of The Nurturing Programme's success. Previous research highlights overreliance on individual staff members without appropriate structural and financial support or reduction of existing workload can limit the sustainability of parenting interventions in prison settings (28). Pauses or changes in the Programme at this stage could mean the successful work undertaken to embed the Programme at HMP Altcourse is lost.

Recommendations

1. HMP Altcourse and Liverpool City Council should consider strategies to improve retention of fathers to all 10 sessions of The Nurturing Programme. This could include more intensive delivery (i.e., more sessions per week) over a slightly shorter time period, although participants stated a preference for some days for reflection in between sessions. HMP Altcourse could also factor enrolment in the Programme into decisions about when to move men to other prisons, to allow those who are near the end of the course to complete it.
2. The Family Link Worker and HMP Altcourse should collaborate to ensure they are delivering a whole family approach to interventions and support. This includes planning a holistic programme where The Nurturing Programme and other educational programmes sit alongside family contact. For example, aligning family days with course completion would allow fathers to put the skills learnt into practice and sustain them. Opportunities to integrate fathers into key milestones for their children (for example attending parents' evenings via video conference) would also allow them to observe the positive impacts for their children.
3. HMP Altcourse and Liverpool City Council should consider expanding delivery of the Programme to fathers in other wings of the prison.
4. The non-judgemental delivery environment created by the Family Link Worker was a key facilitator of the Programme which should be sustained. Future delivery of parenting interventions should maintain this trauma informed approach to ensure interventions are accessible to those with additional needs including neurodivergence, mental health conditions and low literacy.

⁸ During the course of the evaluation, there was a change in prison management at HMP Altcourse which resulted in changes in personnel and staff roles. The Nurturing Programme was provided with one year's funding by MVRP and as this funding ends, Liverpool City Council are redefining the Family Link Workers role which may impact upon the sustainability of the programme. These changes occurred part way through the evaluation period and are not captured in the stakeholder interviews (which focused on implementation), but are included in the discussion as contextual factors which may impact sustainability.

5. The trusting, familiar links built up by the Family Link Worker are a key facilitator of the Programme which have allowed it to become embedded within the Family Intervention Unit at HMP Altcourse. Continuity of staff would therefore assist in sustaining the Programme.
6. The positive impacts reported by fathers highlight a continuing need for The Nurturing Programme at HMP Altcourse. MVRP should work with the prison and Liverpool City Council to review how this Programme can be financially and strategically sustained.
7. Future evaluation of The Nurturing Programme should continue using the following additional measures: 1) capturing quantitative changes in parenting style and skills, 2) measuring outcomes and perceptions of the Programme for children and partners of fathers in prison, 3) capturing longer term outcomes for fathers particularly following release from prison. These outcomes would make a valuable contribution to the sparse evidence on the effectiveness of parenting interventions in UK prisons.

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