



# THE LITERACY LINK

*Connecting children and parents in justice-involved families through literacy-rich experiences and environments*

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT & RELATIONSHIPS • UW-MADISON DIVISION OF EXTENSION



***“He feels like his dad is with him, helping him read.”***

*Caregiver of a child who received a video recording and book through The Literacy Link*

***“She seems much happier and talks about her mom more often than before the visits. Her mom is more a part of her life now. They have a connection again.”***



*Caregiver of a child participating in The Literacy Link TeleStory video visitation program*

## **Situation**

The United States incarceration rate exceeds those of most other industrialized nations. Recent estimates suggest that 1 in 14 children have had a parent incarcerated.\*

Research suggests that children with incarcerated parents are at risk for delays in cognitive development and may experience socio-emotional difficulties.

UW research found that young children with a parent in a WI county jail experienced:



-  higher levels of emotional and conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer challenges (in comparison to the national norm)
-  delays in critical communication skills, particularly reading, talking, and listening

Children of incarcerated and other justice-involved parents often face further adversity, such as poverty, parental substance abuse, and highly stressful living situations. If we want communities of healthy adults who contribute to the economy and society, then we must invest in young children's literacy development.

We can make a powerful difference by investing early!

## **Response**

The Literacy Link is a program of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension. It brings literacy and learning opportunities to young children who have a parent or caregiver involved in the local correctional system. In partnership with local jails, correctional systems, libraries, and other partners, The Literacy Link:

-  promotes language and literacy skills in children by creating literacy rich experiences in jail and justice settings that extend into the home
-  fosters healthy family relationships by promoting positive literacy focused interactions between children and their justice-involved parents and caregivers

Our focus on family relationships is backed up by research that shows strong family ties buffer the negative impacts of childhood adversity. Positive interaction with parents helps to maintain and strengthen the relationship during incarceration and helps children deal positively with other stressful situations.

## Strategies

### **Making Reading Memories: Recorded Book Reading Program**

After participating in a reading workshop offered to parents in the jail, participants are video recorded reading books for their children. The book and recording are sent to the child. The goal is to increase literacy opportunities and maintain the parent/child relationship during incarceration.



### **TeleStory: Library-based Free Video Visits**

Instead of traveling to the jail or paying a private company for a remote video visit, children can now visit with their parent in jail through a secure video system located in a public, tribal or school library. The library-based video visit includes child-friendly spaces with books and educational toys, more personal time together, flexible scheduling, and a free book for the child with each visit. Before the visit, parents in jail are offered a workshop on visiting and reading with their child so they can be ready to make their time together full of learning and positive interactions.

\*Murphey, D. and Cooper, P.M. (2015). *Parents Behind Bars What Happens to Their Children?* Retrieved from URL: <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2015-42ParentsBehindBars.pdf>

### **Parent Education & Support**

**In visitation lobbies** offering information and community resources to families waiting to visit their loved ones.

**On electronic tablets** loaded with parent education tools for parents to use while incarcerated.

**Through coaching and workshops** where justice-involved parents learn how to use reading and literacy as a tool for positive interactions that strengthen parent and child relationships.

**With Parenting Inside Out**, a research-based program for parents with young children to learn nurturing and responsive parenting.

### **Physical Space Changes**

Waiting and visitation areas in jails, courts and other justice spaces are transformed to offer literacy-rich experiences. Child-focused additions include family-friendly visitation learning stations, along with seating and other adaptations to make visits more positive and engaging. Educational wall toys and decals challenge children's spatial skills. Children can take home a free book with each visit so reading high-quality books continues in the home. At one site, a token-operated vending machine distributes free books to children visiting their parents in jail.



**Extension**

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

## Results

In the two years that The Literacy Link has been active in six pilot sites:

-  **1,900+** new, high quality books have been distributed to children of justice-involved parents
-  **340** parents have participated in workshops covering the importance of reading to young children and practicing science-based reading techniques
-  **1,000+** literacy focused engagements have taken place between parents/caregivers and children through structured video visits, recorded book reading, and child-friendly face-to-face visits



To learn more, contact:

**Mary Huser,**  
Program Specialist  
[mary.huser@wisc.edu](mailto:mary.huser@wisc.edu)

**The Literacy Link  
Workgroup:**

Mary Campbell Wood, Heidi Ungrodt, Liz Lexau, Pam Wedig-Kirsch, Bev Baker