



The Literacy Link

USING LITERACY-RICH EXPERIENCES TO CONNECT
CHILDREN WITH THEIR PARENTS INVOLVED IN THE
CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM



Extension

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



<https://theliteracylink.extension.wisc.edu>

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Child and Family Well-Being in the Era of Mass Incarceration

INTRODUCTION

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. At the end of 2016, over 6 million adults were under correctional supervision in the U.S., with more than 2 million incarcerated in jails and prisons and over 4 million on parole or probation¹. In Wisconsin, 100,500 individuals were under correctional supervision¹, with people of color disproportionately affected^{2,3,4}.

Often invisible in the mass incarceration epidemic are the children of the justice-involved. In the U.S., approximately 7% of children have experienced the incarceration of a co-resident parent at some point in their lives⁵. In Wisconsin, about 88,000 children have had a parent in jail or prison during their childhood⁶. That's enough children to fill Lambeau Field.

Research suggests that, on average, parental incarceration is harmful to children's development^{7,8,9,10,11,12}. There are also negative consequences for the broader family system. For example, research has found reductions in incarcerated fathers' engagement in parenting¹³ and caregivers' mental health and well-being^{14,15}.

Despite the risk associated with incarceration, the systems in which children are embedded can provide critical opportunities for intervention and support. While the family system is often targeted through parent education and youth mentoring programs¹⁶, few dual generation strategies exist that provide opportunities for parent-child connection while the parent is incarcerated or on parole or probation.

The Literacy Link

STATEWIDE APPROACH

The **Literacy Link** is a program of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension. Led by University Extension educators, The Literacy Link promotes positive, literacy-based interactions between young children and their justice-involved parents and caregivers.

In partnership with local jails, libraries, and other community partners, the goals of The Literacy Link are to:



Promote language and literacy skills in children by creating literacy-rich experiences in jail and justice settings that extend into the home



Foster healthy family relationships by promoting positive, literacy-focused interactions between children and their justice-involved parents and caregivers

Through four targeted strategies, The Literacy Link provides research-based interventions that address the needs of parents, caregivers and their children.

THE WISCONSIN IDEA

2.

The Wisconsin Idea is elegantly simple: Extending the resources and research of the University beyond its walls to all Wisconsin residents. The Literacy Link capitalizes on Extension's extensive access to cutting-edge research to build evidence-informed programming that benefits justice-involved children and their families.

WHO WE REACH

The Literacy Link takes a **family systems approach** to serve young children, their parents involved in the justice system and the caregivers with whom they live during their parents' absence. While some interventions target justice-involved parents *or* their children, The Literacy Link provides opportunities for parent-child engagement through literacy-based activities, focusing on both generations to buffer the intergenerational impacts of incarceration. While the primary focus of The Literacy Link strategies is justice-involved parents, any justice-involved family member with young children can participate.

The Literacy Link focuses on young children, from birth to age 8. Advances in neurodevelopmental science suggest that reaching children in the earliest years of life can have a profound impact on their development. Capacities that flourish during the early years of life, including attachment to caregivers and emergent cognitive skills, may be impacted by a parent's incarceration¹⁷.

Research suggests that children are most likely to experience the initial incarceration of their parent prior to their 9th birthday⁵. By intervening when children are young, The Literacy Link provides support and resources that serve to *buffer the stress of incarceration* during important periods of development.

The Literacy Link strives to reach a diversity of families, including those that are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

Nationwide, research suggests that certain populations, including children of color, those with low economic resources, and children residing in rural areas are more likely to have experienced parental incarceration⁵. **The Literacy Link strives to reach families that are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.** This includes serving families that live in tribal communities, in cities and towns with large African American populations, and in rural counties.



LITERACY LINK STRATEGIES

MAKING READING MEMORIES



After participating in a parenting skills workshop offered in jail, parents are video recorded reading one or more books for their young children. The books and recordings are then sent to the children. The goal is to increase literacy opportunities for children and maintain the parent-child relationship during incarceration.

RECORDED BOOK READING

A virtual literacy connection between parents in jail and their young children

SPATIAL CHANGES TO VISITATION



Waiting and visitation areas in jails, courtrooms, 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, high-quality, age-appropriate book with each visit, to continue reading at home. In one county, a token-operated vending machine distributes free books to children visiting their parents in jail.

CHILD-FRIENDLY VISITATION

Learning-rich jail and justice settings that foster parent-child engagement

LITERACY LINK STRATEGIES

TELESTORY



FREE, LITERACY-FOCUSED VISITS

Children visit local libraries to connect in real-time with their parent in jail

Instead of traveling to the jail or paying a private company for a remote 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 materials, flexible scheduling, and a free, high-quality book for the child to take home after 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 positive, child-centered interactions.

PARENT EDUCATION



PARENT EDUCATION

Science-based education that boosts the nurturing skills of justice-involved parents

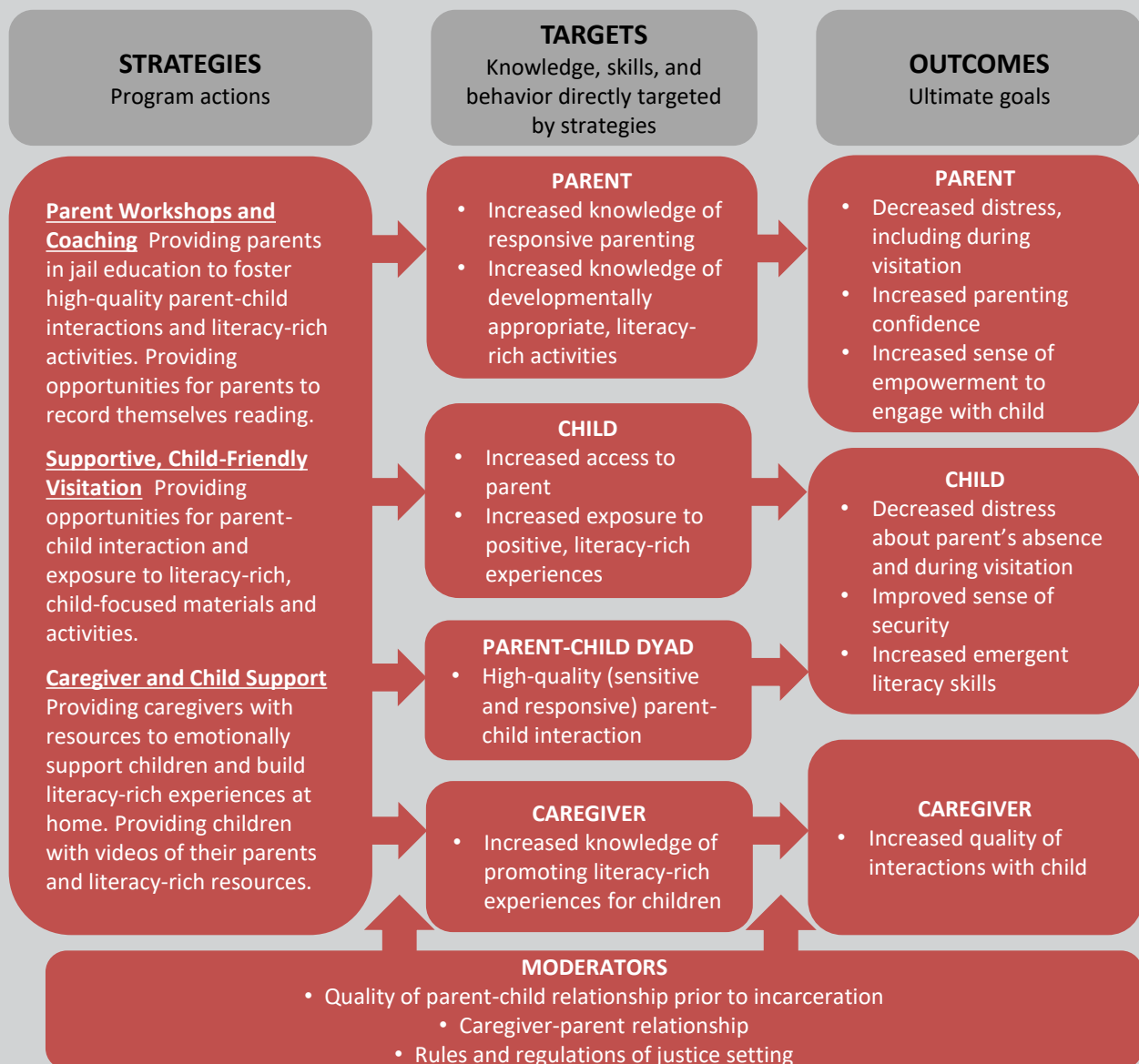
A variety of supports provide parents in jail with information about parenting from a distance and providing literacy-rich experiences for their children. Parenting Inside Out[®], a research-based program for incarcerated parents, boosts parents' confidence and skills in parenting. Electronic tablets are loaded with parent education tools, such as Extension's Parenting Future Readers fact sheets. One-on-one coaching and group workshops are also offered in justice settings to educate parents on how to use literacy as a tool for positive interactions.

THEORY OF CHANGE

The Literacy Link’s theory of change provides a roadmap for implementing strategies and measuring impact. It is comprised of four components:

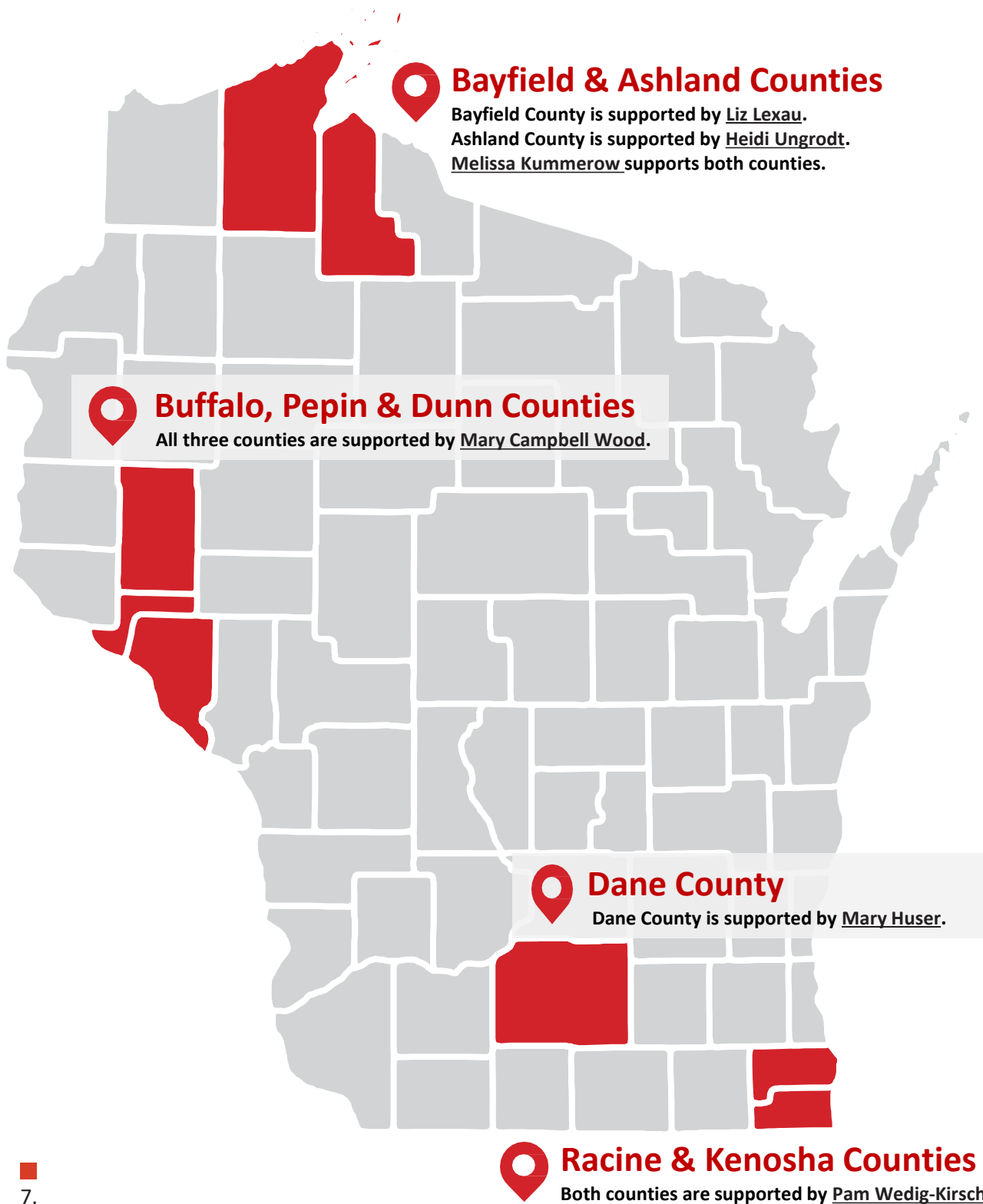
- **Strategies** are the person- and place-based key ingredients that describe *what* about the strategies work.
- **Targets** are the knowledge, skill, and behavior change in individuals who are directly impacted by the strategies. Targets explain *how* the strategies lead to outcomes.
- **Outcomes** are the meaningful changes in well-being that follow changes in targets. Outcomes demonstrate *why* the strategies are important.
- **Moderators** identify *for whom* the interventions may work best and in what contexts.

The theory of change was built from the IDEAS Impact Framework out of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University.



WISCONSIN PILOT SITES

The Literacy Link currently operates in **8 counties** supported by University Extension educators and staff. Each county works with local partners to determine The Literacy Link strategies that are appropriate for the local context.



STAKEHOLDER QUOTES

We have a responsibility to serve all of the public that this state encompasses. Not just the few, but all regardless of where they are, what has impacted their lives...where they come from. It doesn't matter, we have that responsibility.

UW SYSTEM PRESIDENT RAY CROSS
remarks about The Literacy Link
UW Board of Regents Presentation 2019

“

It put in perspective that even though I am here, I can still connect with and parent my child.

PARENT IN JAIL
who participated in a Making Reading Memories workshop

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 that connection again.

”

CAREGIVER
of child who participated in Telestory

“

We have had parents read to children who have never read to them before. This is the first time they've ever read to their child, from the jail...it's very positive in that connection that has been made.

SHERIFF PAUL SUSIENKA
remarks about Making Reading Memories
UW Board of Regents Presentation 2019

He reads now! He wouldn't read before. He used to prefer to play with guns and things and he wouldn't read a book.

CAREGIVER
of child who participated in Making Reading Memories



OUTCOMES

Child, Parent, and Justice-Settings

The Literacy Link team relies on a variety of methodologies to document outcomes associated with our efforts. These include qualitative descriptions of programming conducted at each pilot site, observations of parent-child visitations, interviews with community partners, and surveys from incarcerated and justice-involved parents and their children’s caregivers. While measurement tools are standardized across Literacy Link strategies, Extension educators adapt the tools to meet their local communities’ context and culture.

Below is a brief description of the key outcomes The Literacy Link targets.



PARENTING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Strategies build parenting knowledge and emphasize the importance of responsive “serve and return” interactions and age-appropriate, literacy-based play. Goals include increasing parents’ confidence and sense of empowerment to engage with their children.



CHILDREN’S EXPOSURE TO LITERACY-RICH ENVIRONMENTS

Children are exposed to literacy-rich spaces within justice-settings that promote high-quality parent-child interaction. Children are provided books and other literacy materials to foster their emergent literacy at home.



POLICY, SYSTEMS AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Extension educators work directly with local correctional settings to improve visitation spaces and adapt current visitation and operating policies to promote and maintain the child-parent connection.



CHILD OUTCOMES

- Strengthen connection to parent
- Increase exposure to literacy-rich materials

Children’s outcomes are primarily assessed through caregiver self-report surveys distributed four weeks after children’s first contact with The Literacy Link. Caregivers are asked to reflect on the extent to which their children’s involvement with The Literacy Link has strengthened the parent-child relationship. Caregivers also provide information about the extent of their children’s involvement in Literacy Link programming and the perceived effects of that programming on their children’s well-being.

Children’s exposure to literacy-rich materials and change in literacy habits are assessed through questions including the number of days in which caregivers read to children, library visits, and number of books in the home. Children’s preference for reading is also assessed through caregiver report.



PARENT OUTCOMES

- Strengthen parenting skills
- Increase confidence to engage with child during justice involvement

Parent outcomes are assessed through parent self-report surveys. Parents are surveyed after their involvement in jail parenting workshops and after recording a video or participating in a Telestory visit. Although each Literacy Link strategy has specific parent surveys, certain key outcomes are measured across strategies. These include parents’ perceived parenting skills, such as the ability to engage in certain literacy activities with their children, and parents’ confidence to maintain contact during incarceration and justice-involvement.

Parents are also offered the opportunity to guide future programmatic decision making by providing feedback via survey responses and focus groups.

CHILD & PARENT OUTCOMES

EVALUATION & QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Extension has partnered with the Population Health Institute within the UW-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health to implement a comprehensive and rigorous evaluation of The Literacy Link strategies. The Institute is led by a team of experts in their fields and has a long history of partnering with federal, state, and county agencies and tribal nations to examine a variety of behavioral health programs for criminal justice populations, including diversion projects, problem-solving courts, and family reunification programs.

The evaluation is led by Dr. Lindsay Weymouth, who has over a decade of experience working with families that interface with the criminal justice system. Dr. Weymouth has expertise in child development within the context of risk and has published widely in peer-reviewed academic journals and handbooks, including the recently published *Handbook on Children with Incarcerated Parents*.

The Literacy Link evaluation includes process and outcome methodologies, with emphasis on documenting reach, or the extent to which programming is reaching families, and dose, or the amount of programming each family receives. Quantitative and qualitative methods are used to assess key targets and outcomes as detailed in The Literacy Link's theory of change. The evaluation also documents policy, system, and environmental changes that occur in correctional settings that partner with The Literacy Link.



University of Wisconsin
Population Health Institute
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

OUR VISION

Our vision is to transform the lives of justice-involved families by reshaping the lived experience of young children with jailed and justice-involved parents.

IMAGINE...

The transformation of jail and justice spaces across the nation into creative, innovative and interactive literacy-rich environments where any child brought into that space is surrounded by learning opportunities.

IMAGINE...

Every jail in Wisconsin has a space designated for recording book readings...a place for jailed parents to select a book and record a message for their children. It's a comfortable, literacy-rich space that inspires parents in jail.

IMAGINE...

Families throughout Wisconsin going to designated spaces in community libraries that are welcoming, safe, private and learning-rich. Children connect with their incarcerated parents in supportive, child-centered environments.

IMAGINE...

Probation offices, social service buildings and court spaces that build literacy and parent engagement into reintegration plans that offer parents ways to contribute to their children's development.

Yes, we think big, but we have science and public good on our side. We welcome inquiries from those who seek to be:

- A **catalyst** for positive community change that shares our purpose to ensure access to resources and opportunities for justice-involved families
- A **partner** that thrives on innovation, creativity and research and honors the lived experiences of vulnerable families
- A **funding force** that can help us reshape the experiences of children with incarcerated parents

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