

Impact Report 2022-2024

Every child deserves the opportunity to thrive! But for many children in Wisconsin, that chance is disrupted when a parent enters the legal system. Research shows strong family connections during this time help children stay on track emotionally and developmentally.

In Wisconsin, an estimated 7% of children—about 88,000—have experienced a parent's incarceration.¹ This doesn't include children whose parents were incarcerated but didn't live with them, so the true impact is likely even greater. Families of color are disproportionately affected: Black and Native American adults in Wisconsin are incarcerated at nearly 12 times the rate of white adults, reflecting long-standing inequities in our legal and social systems.²

When a parent is incarcerated, the whole family feels the effects - children, caregivers, and parents all face stress and disruption. But when families are supported in staying connected, the negative impacts of separation can be reduced.³

That's where The Literacy Link comes in. A nationally recognized program from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension, The Literacy Link brings researched-based literacy and learning opportunities to families impacted by incarceration. Partnering with prisons, libraries, and community agencies, the program helps children stay connected to their parents and supports caregivers in fostering learning and resilience.

What We Do

In partnership with jails, libraries, family-serving organizations, and others, we:



Foster healthy family relationships in justice involved families through positive, literacy-focused interactions between children, their parents and caregivers.



Build children's literacy skills through engaging experiences in jails, community settings and in the home.

Why It Matters



Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships help buffer children against the damaging impact of too much stress.



Early literacy skills build a foundation of success for children.

"[Children] 'serve time' just as much as their parents do when they are separated. When we offer Making Reading Memories we open up the doors to continue the parent-child connection."

~ Heather Pyka, Dunn County Justice Partner

Our Strategies

The Literacy Link tailors responses to the needs of local partners, offering strategies that reach parents involved with the justice system, their children and the children's caregivers.

MAKING READING MEMORIES	Parents take part in the Read and Connect workshop, which highlights the benefits of reading aloud for child development and strengthening family bonds. They are then recorded reading a book for their child, and the video and book are sent to their child.
FAMILY FRIENDLY SPACES	These spaces transform jail waiting and visiting areas into welcoming environments for children and families, during what can be an otherwise stressful time. Each visit includes a free, high-quality book for the child to take home.
PARENTING INSIDE OUT - LITERACY LINK	This 10-session program helps parents strengthen family connections and build resilience during and after incarceration. Adapted from the evidence-based Parenting Inside Out program, our version includes family literacy and a caregiver outreach components.
FAMILY SUPPORT	We connect caregivers and children impacted by incarceration with community resources, educational workshops, and print materials that address the unique challenges of justice involvement – promoting resilience and family well-being.

1 Annie E Casey Foundation

2 Prison Policy Initiative

3 Reaching Beyond Bars: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin and their Families

Our Impact



723 parents reached through Read and Connect workshop

1179 children reached through Making Reading Memories

116 parents reached through Parenting Inside Out

80% of parents took their first ever parenting class

"Many [parents in jail] expressed that they have developed a deeper appreciation for bonding with their children and prioritizing what makes their children feel valued... I believe that continued support of the Making Reading Memories program will only yield great benefits to both the parents and the children."

*~ Nichole Garza,
Brown County Justice Partner*

* These numbers reflect three years of programming. Parents and children were counted once per year, so if a parent/child participated in multiple years, they were counted in each of those years.

Family Friendly Spaces

Our program has significantly enhanced spaces and programs within justice settings to support literacy, parenting and connection.

- Added books, toys, interactive activities and book vending machines to visiting areas.
- Hosted monthly literacy-enriching child-friendly visits in both a jail and prison.
- Implemented Literacy Link programming in 18 Wisconsin prisons and jails, including virtual programming to ensure continued access to resources across facilities.



← Book vending machine in Dane County Jail.

↓ Child materials in Racine County Jail visiting space.



Making Reading Memories

After the workshop and video recording, parents completed a survey. Results showed a notable increase in positive attitudes and confidence in nurturing parenting practices. Specifically:

99%

Felt that the program helped them feel closer to their child.

92%

Intended to keep a strong bond with their child.

92%

Felt more confident reading to their children.

"It made me feel like I was there for my daughter even though I couldn't be there in person. Also, I'm glad that she will have that video to hold onto and treasure as a memory."

~ Parent Participant

We also gained valuable insights from the caregivers whom the children lived with while their parent was in jail. Among the 43 caregivers who completed a follow-up survey, we documented the following:

93%

Felt that the program helped their children stay connected to their parent in jail.

82%

Of children had a positive reaction to watching their parent read to them.

56%

Of caregivers read to their children more often after receiving the video.

"My son loved having the book to read along with. He loved being able to replay it over and over... Even now, he holds the book close to him, as a comfort even now that the person is no longer in jail. It was a great way for them to connect."

~ Caregiver Participant