

Submission to Inquiry into the Victorian Criminal Justice System (Friends of Castlemaine Library)

20/07/2021

Introduction

Friends of Castlemaine Library (FOCAL) was set up in 1995 to lobby on behalf of the Castlemaine Library, to raise funds to support the Library and to run literacy programs for the community. In 2012, to celebrate the International Year of Reading we organised a program called 'Read-Along Dads' in local Loddon prison which enabled prisoners to record an audio book for their child. The recording (on CD) was sent to the child together with the book. This was meant to run for no more than 6 months but it was so successful that we decided to obtain more funding and after a number of small grants and crowd funding we were fortunate to obtain funding from Corrections Victoria and the Victorian Legal Services Board. This funding has been renewed and the programs expanded to Middleton (a large new annexe of Loddon) and the Tarrengower women's prison.

While it is unusual for a group such as ours to become involved in prison programs in Australia, it is not uncommon around the world for libraries/ associated community groups to provide traditional library services or to offer extension programs in prisons.

Description of the 'Read-Along Dads' Program

We receive sufficient funding to deliver services 1.5 days per week for 40 weeks per year. This enables our facilitator to involve an average of 140 prisoners per year in the program, and to make an average of 356 recordings per year for their children (under non pandemic conditions, less currently). The parents are offered a large choice of suitable high quality books for the age group of their children and are helped with the recording. Even functionally illiterate people can participate as the facilitator reads each sentence and the parent repeats it. Any mistakes can be edited out and a CD (or other audio file eg USB stick) produced. This is sent to the child with a copy of the book. Parents are the main participants but the program is also offered to brothers, grandparents, uncles and aunts. As well we also deliver other literacy sessions such as book groups and creative writing.

We have much feedback from prisoners that they and their families receive many benefits from the program. (See attached comments)

To ensure high quality the facilitator of these type of programs should preferably be well versed in children's literature and have a back ground in education and training.

It is possible to deliver this program by Zoom or similar technology, but preferable to actually be face to face in the prison. Whichever way it is delivered it is best that it is done individually and not in a group setting so that any embarrassment about mistakes etc. is limited. Other aspects of the program, eg prisoners decorating CD covers (which many love to do), are fine in a group setting, although this is limited in pandemic conditions.

Outcomes of 'Read-Along Dads/Mums'

1. Connection to family.

It has been hypothesized that if prisoners maintain a connection to their families (particularly the children) that their re-offending will be less. Our program was given funding in the first instance because Corrections Victoria (through the Pip Wisdom grants) wanted to support innovative programs that aimed to do this. There has been research carried out in the UK (Storybook Dads) that found participants in their programs exhibited less re-offending. In Victoria Monash University Criminal Justice Research Consortium has carried out a study showing that prisoners involved in both a parenting education program and a 'Read-Along Dads' type program were 82% less likely to re-offend. This took place at Margoneet Prison farm over a seven year period and the results were presented by Dr Catherine Flynn at a Corrections Victoria large gathering in February 2020.

Figures show that 50% of prison population reoffend within two years of release

2. Improved literacy for prisoners

Overall prisoners have a functional illiteracy rate of at least 40% and it is thought that this may well contribute to their offending in the first place. TAFE and other programs do exist in prisons to improve this but many people find it embarrassing to acknowledge their lack of reading ability. We have found that our program provides a way into literacy for some because reading children's books for a reason other than personal literacy improvement enables prisoners to get started without embarrassment and they go on to become independent readers over a period of time.

3. Improved literacy and connection to parent for children

It is commonly thought that children of prisoners are generally 'at risk'. 'Read-Along Dads/Mums' helps to develop a positive relationship for the child with his/her parent and hopefully allows the child to feel less abandoned and know that their parent still cares for them. In feedback prisoners often mention that the books give their children and themselves something to talk about on phone calls. Improved literacy for the children is assisted as well as emotional help as will be seen in the comments at the end. A program like this may be able to cut through the awful cycle of children repeating a parent's mistakes and ending up in prison themselves.

Recommendations for the future

The purpose of writing this submission is to put before the Victorian government a simple and effective program that can reduce recidivism for a large group of prisoners, that is, parents, who make up almost half the prison population.

It is recommended that 'Read-Along Dads/Mums' be rolled out in all Victorian prisons on a permanent and properly funded basis. Some prisons in Victoria have a similar program but on a small scale and not properly funded.

Our program is delivered for \$37,000 per year to three prisons, a relatively small amount considering the possible benefits. A different model could be envisaged where suitably qualified prison programs staff deliver the program rather than an outside facilitator such as ours and computer education staff, if they are present, could help with the technology.

Whatever the model, the criminal justice system needs programs that provide a large number of prisoners with more ways to rehabilitate and this is one way to provide parents (and some other relatives) in all Victorian prisons a possibility of doing so.

Here are some recent quotes, all from 20/21, from prisoners about their involvement in Read-Along Dads/Mums.

(Personal visits from families not allowed in lockdown periods)

“It’s good, they enjoy getting the books. She loves jokes and will try them out on everyone. It’s been a good way to keep in touch, I haven’t been able to call them now for a few weeks.”

“My boy is autistic and he really liked getting the book and listening to my voice.”

“Even though he can read much better than me, hopefully he will learn by my mistakes, and that it’s good to give things a go.”

“It’s been a little bridge to my family during this time, very much needed, and is still so necessary.”

“This book is perfect, he isn’t eating at the moment, so it’s a good fit. I don’t know what else to do.”

“He listens to it in the car, he talks back to me because he thinks I’m there!”

“They love this, it’s good they can listen to my voice anytime they like.”

“She is loving Pollyanna, she is swapping reading that and A Wrinkle in Time. I remember reading Pollyanna at her age, we had a good chat about that.”

“Thank you. My daughter and my niece have loved this. My niece runs to the letterbox every day asking if she has a book from me. It has helped me stay connected to my family and my brother’s family. You rock.”

“Thanks for your patience, it was a tongue twister today, I wouldn’t have stuck with it if you didn’t give me some space.”

“Thanks, I don’t speak to them that often because they are on a mobile. This is grouse, now I can have more contact.”

One Dad was very pleased to be able to record the same book that he has read with his son on their Shine visit. He said that way his son had a record of what they did together, and could remember that day.

“Thanks they really enjoyed it. My current partner helped my ex make more copies of it, so they had copies of it wherever they went. She loved listening to it too.”

“I did one at Margoneet for the oldest, now I can get to do one for the youngest.”

"Thanks for coming in over this time, it was good to see a different face. My kids liked getting something from me more regularly."

"Read Along Dads has been such an important way of staying connected to my nephews. They get so excited to receive the books. Lisa [facilitator] is so patient and wonderful and caring (!)

"Sometimes it feels like it can be you against the world, but doing this has been saving for me. Thank you for doing this course, it has been a life saver. If you don't have close family supports, and without this course, I think you are going to get more shallow, and get more deep into the prison life, and you are not going to be able have shared experiences and reflect on memories with your family, so therefore you grow even more apart. But with this course, with Read Along Dads, it means so much to everyone. Like I can only feel that on an empathy level, from everyone what they feel – when we talk about read along dads and everyone who does it really loves it. Cos nothing means more than trying to get back into the community and being with them, and yeah, connecting with our children and this is the only way we can when we from in here. We all know why we are here but, we reflect on our actions every single day. We all get a down stage when we go oh yeah, but it's what you remember when you leave, I reckon, it's my first time here. When I leave, I'll appreciate you coming and doing this for us here."

Thanks miss, they all cried when they got the CD. My missus cried, my mum cried, and my daughter loved it. I told them I'm only in prison, I'm not dead."

"I've been at Beechworth [where a similar program was running] and my son kept asking me, where's my next book, Dad?"

"This is great, I won't do another one for my youngest this time, as she is still reading the BFG we sent last time. It's her favourite book as well, it's really nice for both of them."

"This and the stuffed toys has been so good for my kids. Who knew that getting a book and a cd from me would mean so much to my son, especially."

"My son is non-verbal so it's been really hard, but he listens to the CD over and over."

"This is my last time. I don't think you know how much we appreciate this, how much it means to us. I chose this book (Allison Lester Drawing book) as we can do something together when I go home. I thought we could draw together. I'll get her some pencils. That way it will be a good start for us to get to know each other again. We can just draw, and not have to talk at first."

"X is home from school now, so this is really good timing, it will give him motivation to keep reading."

"She loved Thelma the Unicorn. I had made her a stuffed Unicorn, so it was a perfect choice."

"He said he liked hearing me laugh on the CD. He didn't want me to be sad all the time when I was in here."

"Getting these books is the highlight of his week, especially now as he can't go out."

"He runs up to the post box every day to see if he has anything."

“He has trouble at school, with his reading and writing, so he has been bringing the books I send him in with him, and the teacher helps him, as those are the books he wants to do.”

“Thanks for doing this, it’s my 3rd time now and my kids just love it.”

“This is my first grandchild, so at least she can hear my voice.”

“She has loved getting these books, they all do, even the older ones.”

“I’ve been in prison for 6 years, and she is 6 years old. This is a start – something I can do so she knows who I am now.”