The Reach Out Family Communication Programme Evaluation Report

SEPTEMBER 2026

REACH OUT

PARENTING FROM PRISON PROGRAMME

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES PRISON RESEARCH GROUP

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Foreword

FusionCPL is a community-based addiction project working with individuals and families in Dublin 10, in the community and within the prison system. It was through our Prison Link service that the need for Reach Out first became clear: imprisonment creates real barriers for parents trying to stay involved in their children's lives, and support around communication and child development can make an enormous difference.

I sought funding to explore what a structured response might look like, working with Aileen O'Donoghue, then CEO of Archways. We commissioned Archways to develop the programme, giving parents the tools and confidence to stay meaningfully present in their children's lives across the distance of a sentence. I would also like to acknowledge Hugh Doogan, current CEO of Archways, for his continued support of the programme.

Dr Seán McDonnell designed Reach Out, drawing on the best available evidence and his extensive experience in family intervention, and has continued to guide its delivery and safeguard its fidelity ever since. Our Reach Out co-ordinators have been essential on the ground: Stacie Halligan built the foundations, and Joanne Eady has carried that work forward since July 2024, co-ordinating delivery and mentoring participants herself.

The programme would not run without prison governors, officers, and school staff, particularly the schools in the Dóchas Centre, Mountjoy, and Shelton Abbey, who keep it running cycle after cycle. We are also grateful to the other agencies working within the prison system whose co-operation and goodwill help make Reach Out possible.

We are equally thankful to our Reach Out Committee and Board of Management for the advocacy and governance underpinning it all, and to our funders to date: St Stephen's Green Trust, the Probation Service, Tusla, and the HSE. Securing sustainable, long-term funding remains our priority, and this evaluation is an important step in making that case.

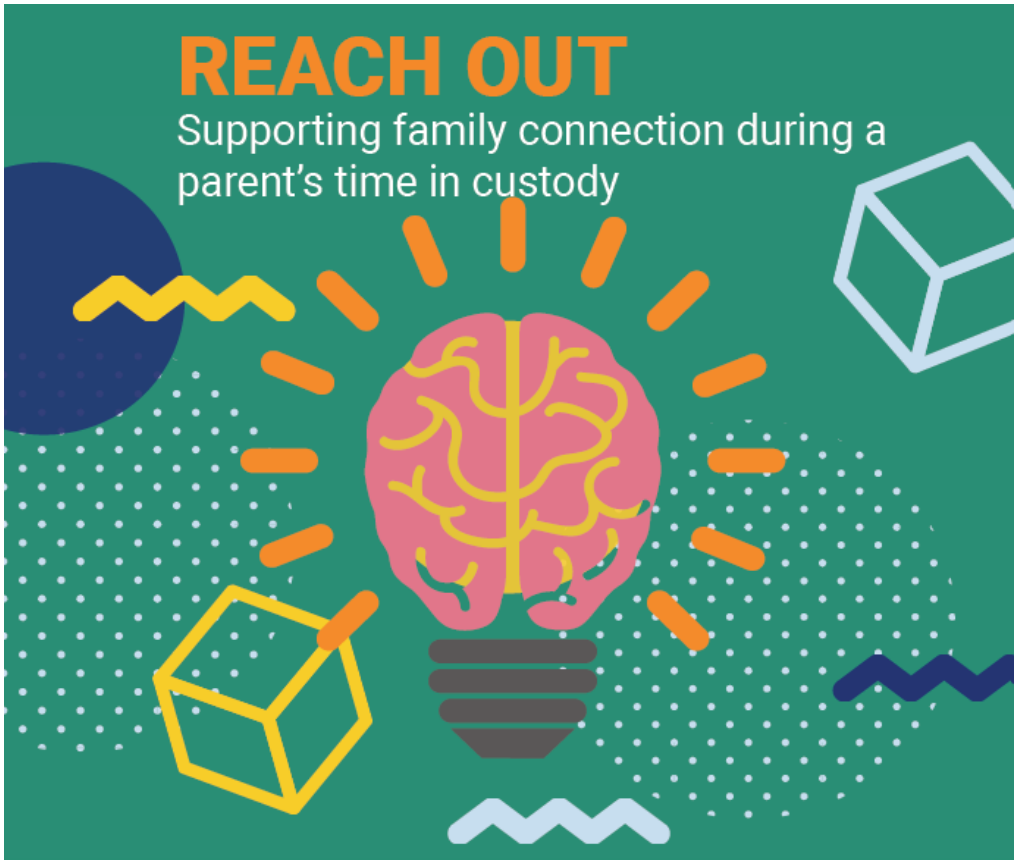
This independent evaluation by UCC and UL confirms what we have seen since the first pilot: supporting incarcerated parents to communicate meaningfully with their children makes a real difference to parents, children, and families alike. We believe it makes a strong case for Reach Out to be made available to every incarcerated parent in Ireland.

Most of all, our deepest thanks go to the families themselves: the parents who trusted us with their hopes for their children, and the children who waited for them. Their courage and openness are the true heart of this programme, and everything we have learned exists because they were willing to share it. To the researchers, prison staff, school teams, and mentors who supported them along the way, thank you.

The children on the other side of those prison walls deserve nothing less than our continued effort on their behalf.

Kathy Watts

Manager


REACH OUT
Supporting family connection during a parent's time in custody

Acknowledgements

This report is part of a wider research project being undertaken by the Children and Families Prison Research Group (University of Limerick and University College Cork) exploring the implementation and impact of family focused interventions within the Irish prison system. This research project is made possible by the financial support of St Stephens Green Trust and the Irish Research Council. In addition, the research approach is supported by contributions of members of the expert advisory group Action for Children and Families of Prisoners. We are grateful for all for their continued support and advice.

We would also like to acknowledge the support provided by the Irish Prison Service, Prison Governors, staff, and teachers who provided access, support, and advice in recruiting and engaging with men and women confined within the Irish prisons.

Finally, but importantly, this report draws on the experiences and contributions of mothers and fathers, families, prison staff, facilitators and FusionCPL/Archways staff who generously shared their time and expertise. Without these vital contributions this report would not be possible.

Summary

Introduction

Reach Out is a programme developed between FusionCPL and Archways.

FusionCPL, established in 2003, is an organisation rooted in providing supports to those coping with addiction, both in the community and those living in prison. Based in Cherry Orchard, Dublin 10, the organisation provides a range of supports including counselling, group training, therapy and personal development. Significant to the development of Reach Out, they also employ a Community Prison Links worker who provides a key link between the community and prison services.

Archways is a national organisation dedicated to developing, researching, and promoting evidence-based, high-impact programmes for children, young people, parents, and professionals. It works in partnership with agencies across family support, community, education, health, and child welfare sectors.

Having identified the need for a programme that supports relationship building and communication between incarcerated parents and their children, FusionCPL commissioned Archways to design a bespoke family communication programme designed and implemented for families with a parent living in prison. The programme consists of five interlinked components:

1. Child interest surveys – Through which the imprisoned parent can increase their knowledge of their children through sharing the child(ren)'s current interests, preferences, and activities.
2. A child development module
3. An enhanced communications module
4. Mentoring
5. Trainee Workbooks

The programme runs over 10 weeks and at the end of the programme participants and their children may access a family visiting day, subject to individual prison approval. The programme is based on therapeutic principles and involves self-development work on the part of participants. Currently, the delivery is primarily prison-based.

Drawing on the experiences of those involved, the following report is an external evaluation of the roll out of the programme in four iterations across three different prisons within the Irish prison service: once in each of the two men's prisons, Mountjoy and Shelton Abbey, and twice in the Mountjoy Female Prison – the Dóchas Centre.

Methodology

This study used a mixed method approach to capture the experience and impact of those participating in the Reach Out Family Communication Programme within three prisons in the Irish Prison Service, along with their families, the prison and education staff supporting the programme, and FusionCPL/Archways staff who implemented it. Programme materials were reviewed by the evaluation team, and an interview schedule

was developed to guide interviews and included topics such as (1) expectations/experiences of the programme, (2) challenges of participation, (3) expectations for the future. Incarcerated fathers (*N*=20), incarcerated mothers (*N*=15), partners/ family (*N*=7), children (*N*=2), facilitators (*N*=4), prison officers/staff (*N*=11) were interviewed before, during and after the implementation of the programme. All interviews were semi-structured, recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative data was analysed using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In addition, ethnographic research was conducted drawing on observations and insights of the research team as they undertook repeated prison visits.

Aims and Structure of the Evaluation

This evaluation aimed to capture the experiences and impact of those participating in, facilitating and implementing, the programme. It asked the question:

1. What are the experiences and perspective of participants and stakeholders of the Reach Out family communication programme?

Findings

The overarching finding of this evaluation is that the Reach Out programme is an original and valuable addition to children, family and parents in the Irish Prison Service. Reach Out does not replicate existing programmes/services but does provide support through its mentor role to families of incarcerated parents that are otherwise largely unsupported.

The evaluation found the 10-week programme to be effective in enhancing communication and relationships between incarcerated parents and their children. The programme appears to be well received by participants and valued by prison staff who support its implementation. There was also evidence of significant positive spill-over effects within certain aspects of the prison services, including the development of family day visits in the Dóchas Centre. Finally, the evaluation highlights that were the Reach Out programme to be expanded to prisons across the Irish Prison Service it would lead to improved communication and links between parents in prison and their children and families on the outside.

Arising from the outcomes of the qualitative interviews, four sets of recommendations are made relating to Funding, Operation, Staff and sustainability, and post-programme support.

Specifically, it emphasises the need for a review of FusionCPL/Archways staff roles. This is in order to support programme implementation and build on potential expansion of the programme, adequate resourcing, and standardised procedures to support consistent delivery and scalability, while maintaining the use of independent mentors. Operational improvements should include clearer communication with participants and families, structured recruitment oversight, and strong collaboration with prison management. Expanding access to family visits is identified as a core goal. Finally, the report highlights the importance of continuity, suggesting refresher opportunities, repeat participation,

and the development of post-programme supports, including family mentoring and potential community-based extensions.

Recommendations

Funding:

- Develop a clear funding strategy that facilitates FusionCPL achieving ongoing resources to roll out the programme across the overall prison system so that it can be delivered to all parents on a sustainable and ongoing basis.

Staff and sustainability:

- Articulate and define the clear and distinct roles for staff on Reach Out, or who have a role in the delivery of the programme, with specific descriptions of components. This to include clear outline of the role of mentors and recruitment of same.
- Maintain the current model of mentors being drawn from qualified staff outside of the Irish Prison Service/wider prison staff and provide mentor support in both male and female prisons.
- For further roll out, FusionCPL should ensure adequate funding is sourced such that sufficient suitably qualified/experienced staff are hired. This would support the high-quality nature of the programme informed by therapeutic principles, and that involves navigating complex relational and structural systems.
- Provide suitable training and ongoing Continuing Professional Development for staff to effectively equip them for working within the prison with groups experiencing marginalisation, trauma etc. This could include cultural awareness training, ethics, trauma informed practice.
- Develop standard operating documents that establish the key actions that take place within all components of each staff role. This will ensure efficient hand over of any roles where necessary as well as streamlining onboarding of new staff to support the programme.

Operation:

- Develop and maintain information sharing mechanisms. These should be clear, in plain language, indicate to participants key elements of the programme and are available prior to start date of each programme cycle. The development of co-designed information sharing materials with previous participants should be explored.
- Provide similar accessible information for family members, including the children, of participants. The development of co-designed information sharing materials with family members would be extremely beneficial and should be explored.
- Regular reports on participant recruitment to regularly update FusionCPL management as to who is recruited to ensure that it is in line with the criteria set

out in the Reach Out programme. FusionCPL staff should have the final say on recruitment over Irish Prison Service staff.

- Develop ongoing dialogue with a key manager within each prison where the programme is being rolled out to ensure smooth delivery and operation of the programme. This should be carried out by an operating staff member who is designated to undertake this role and who has oversight of the implementation within the prison.
- Adopt the stated aim that all prisons provide Family Day visiting to participants and their children. Discussions with prison management should take place with a view to achieving this outcome. While it is recognised that this may not be achievable immediately, it is recommended this should be a core goal recognising that quality family engagement is vital for mothers and fathers and their children equally. It is also a goal that will in part support successful community and family re-entry and integration.
- Explore the potential for an extension to the programme from 10 weeks to 12 and the inclusion of modules on child development into later teens and young adult age groups. This recognises the broader impact of parental imprisonment, the lifelong role of parenting, and the ongoing experience of children and young people.
- Enhance communication practices with family members about the nature of the visits and processes that may be encountered prior to each visit.

Post- programme support:

- Once Reach Out has achieved a more sustainable funding basis and is mainstreamed in prisons on a rolling basis, FusionCPL should examine the potential for participant access to "refresher" activities. In addition, participation in the programme should not preclude parents from repeating the programme. This reflects the fact that parents may need to re-engage with the programme, as their child moves to a new developmental stage, or where a parent's access/care arrangements change, or where a prison sentence has been extended.
- Explore with other prison-based projects the potential for developing a family mentoring role that would provide ongoing support or "Aftercare" during and after the conclusion of Reach Out.
- Explore the possibility of developing a bridging programme that could run simultaneously with parent/caregiver in the community. Families and children are completely under-supported in the context of parental imprisonment in Ireland at the present time and, with adequate resources, Reach Out has the potential to provide a complimentary model of community supports.

Introduction

Literature Review

Parental incarceration is widely recognised as a significant social issue with far-reaching consequences for children, parents, and family systems. A substantial body of international research demonstrates that children with an incarcerated parent are at increased risk of emotional and behavioural difficulties, disrupted attachment relationships, and poorer long-term outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2020, 2021; Murray et al., 2012). These outcomes are shaped by a range of interrelated factors, including socio-economic disadvantage, changes in caregiving arrangements, and experiences of stigma. Within this broader context, disruption to family relationships, particularly difficulties in maintaining effective parent–child communication, are consistently identified as important mechanisms that contribute to adverse outcomes (Arditti, 2012; Murray & Farrington, 2008; Murray et al., 2012).

Specifically, incarceration represents a profound interruption to everyday family life. Parents are removed from their caregiving roles, and opportunities for routine interaction such as shared activities, informal conversation, and emotional exchange, are significantly reduced (Arditti, 2012; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014). Reflecting this, evidence indicates that imprisonment can weaken parental engagement and undermine relational continuity, particularly in contexts where opportunities for meaningful interaction are constrained (Arditti, 2012; Bradshaw et al., 2025). Over time, these constraints may contribute to increasing emotional distance between parents and children, especially where contact becomes infrequent or limited in quality (Arditti, 2012; Murray et al., 2012).

The quality of communication between incarcerated parents and their children is therefore a key component of relationship maintenance under conditions of separation (Loper et al, 2011). Communication is often restricted to structured and time-limited interactions, such as prison visits or telephone contact, which can limit opportunities for open, reciprocal, and emotionally responsive dialogue (Arditti, 2012). These interactions are shaped by institutional rules and environmental pressures that may inhibit natural patterns of communication, resulting in exchanges that are primarily functional or information-focused rather than relational (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014).

Research suggests that these constraints can influence the nature of interaction over time. For example, communication during incarceration may become dominated by questioning or information-seeking behaviours, reflecting the limited time available and the desire to maintain awareness of children's lives. While understandable, such patterns may reduce opportunities for shared reflection or emotional exchange and, in some cases, may place pressure on children. Sustained reliance on these forms of interaction may contribute to reduced engagement, with some children gradually withdrawing from contact (Arditti, 2012; Murray et al., 2012). The parent-child separation can lead to the incarcerated parent having a 'frozen' image of a child and not being attuned to developmental changes. There can then be a mismatch between the parent's

communication efforts and the child's developmental needs. Conversely, evidence from developmental research suggests that communication characterised by warmth, responsiveness, and reciprocity, for example, shared activities or emotionally attuned dialogue can support relationship continuity and emotional security, even in contexts of separation (Arditti, 2012; Bowlby, 1988).

Maintaining meaningful communication is also significant for incarcerated parents. Continued engagement with children can support parental role identity and contribute to a sense of responsibility during imprisonment (Arditti, 2012; Bradshaw et al., 2025). In addition, research indicates that stronger family relationships are associated with more positive post-release outcomes, including improved reintegration and lower rates of reoffending (Duwe & Clark, 2013; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014). Taken together, this evidence suggests that communication plays an important role in sustaining family relationships during incarceration, with potential benefits for both children and parents.

Despite this, parenting programmes delivered within prison settings have often encountered challenges in strengthening family relationships. Many interventions adopt a model focused on the delivery of parenting knowledge and skills within the prison environment. While these approaches can increase awareness and understanding of parenting practices, they are often limited by the structural realities of incarceration, particularly the restricted opportunities for parents to apply learning in direct interaction with their children (Arditti, 2012; Ely & Sampson, 2017). Additionally, many programmes are developed without incorporating the perspectives of either the parent in prison or the child and family outside. As a result, translating knowledge into sustained changes in communication and relationship quality can be difficult.

Within the Irish context, research by Parkes and Donson (2018) highlights how institutional arrangements can shape not only the frequency but also the quality of contact between children and incarcerated parents. Their findings indicate that interactions may be constrained in ways that limit relational engagement, with practical and environmental factors influencing how communication takes place. This suggests that maintaining contact alone may be insufficient to support relationships, highlighting the importance of the nature and quality of communication that occurs within these interactions.

Reach Out Programme development and design

In response to the challenges described above, FusionCPL, in collaboration with Archways, developed the Reach Out Family Communication Programme. The Reach Out programme focuses on enabling incarcerated parents to engage in structured forms of interaction with their children despite physical separation (FusionCPL, 2022). A review of the programme materials, along with interviews with stakeholders, indicates that the programme design, and the development of its content, were carefully considered to take into account the experience of parents and caregivers, both in prison and community, and the experiences of children, along with the particular environmental characteristics of the Irish Prison Service. The programme has a number of interlocking

components. Alongside education on child development, it places particular emphasis on communication-based and relationship-based activities such as child interest surveys, mentalisation-informed activities that facilitate perspective taking in the parent, and skills in managing brief contacts with children, either in person, phone, or video. Each component plays a key role in the process, and the overall programme facilitates parents to build effective skills, implement them and to practically link with their children through the available channels of visits, phone calls, video link and letters.

The programme aims to support the parent-child dyad to create shared narratives and memories and support deeper parent-child relationships. The child development module, delivered in a group classroom format to programme participants, is intended to be focused on intimacy and connection. The module allows parents to learn, for example, how many times a child will think about their parents in a day. The discussions are informed and supported by therapeutic-informed approaches such as mentalisation-based approaches involving exercises in perspective taking which the participants engage in, which support parents to see the full picture from everyone's point of view. In addition, drawing from a family therapy approach, child interest surveys are used to support the re-establishment of the relationship between parent and child(ren) through the sharing of information about current interests, preferences, and activities.

In addition to these elements, the programme involves each participant engaging with a mentor drawn from the staff of FusionCPL and Archways. The previously run pilot phase of Reach Out included prison officers undertaking some mentoring roles. However, this approach is no longer used recognising that the mentoring role is better suited to a person independent of the prison. The mentor can play a range of roles but is central in supporting participants engaging with parenting in the prison context. The critical impact of mentoring lies in its ability to clarify for participants where change is important, namely each participants relationship with their child, how they communicate and how the child sees them. In addition, the mentor provides a key link between children and families outside and the parent inside.

Finally, subject to individual prison approval, a family day facilitates a more enhanced family visit for participants and their children. In contrast to normal visits which offer a 30-minute slot on a weekly basis, the family visit provides time and physical opportunity for contact such as play, sharing of food, and an extended opportunity for the practical use of learnt communication skills to deepen parent/child bonding.

While the Reach Out programme takes account of the challenges of facilitating visits in prison settings, its overarching goal is to support parents to overcome fear and discomfort and accept that the relationship with the child is paramount, and that the relationship can be sustained through separation, when parents can be present consistently, if not intensively.

In this way, the programme is intended to support more reciprocal and emotionally engaged forms of interaction that are also appropriate to the child's developmental

stage. The programme is underpinned by a manual that guides facilitators in delivery and yet is flexible and adaptable to different prison settings, and particularly in response to gender of the parent. The programme is designed and implemented to meet a range of literacy abilities and can be adapted according to the cohort of students.

The Reach Out programme has been described as adopting an "inside-out" model of parenting, in contrast to more traditional approaches that focus on delivering parenting support within the prison setting. In this approach, parenting is conceptualised as being enacted from within the prison outward, through communication and interaction with children in the community (FusionCPL, 2022). As a result, it does not assume that a generalised parenting programme or approach can be transplanted into the prison context, but rather specifically acknowledges the context of, and barriers created, by the parent-child separation and the prison environment.

The emphasis on communication within the Reach Out programme is consistent with wider evidence suggesting that relational processes are central to effective family support in the context of incarceration. Interventions that prioritise interaction, such as shared activities or structured communication tasks, have been associated with improvements in relationship quality and parental engagement, although the evidence base remains limited and context-dependent (Arditti, 2012; Duwe & Clark, 2013). This highlights the need for further research to understand the specific mechanisms through which communication-focused programmes may contribute to positive outcomes.

While initial pilot research highlighted benefits in terms of communication and relationship development (FusionCPL, 2022), FusionCPL invited researchers from the University of Limerick and the University College Cork to provide an external evaluation to assess the extent, consistency, and sustainability of these outcomes. In particular, evaluators were asked to contribute to understanding how communication practices are shaped within the programme, how participants engage with its components, and how contextual factors influence the implementation and effectiveness of the programme.

Methodology

This report used a mixed method approach to explore the impact and experience of those involved in the Reach Out Family Communication Programme rolled out across three Irish prisons, Mountjoy, The Dóchas, and Shelton Abbey. Programme documentation was reviewed and an interview schedule was developed to guide interviews and included topics such as (1) expectations/experiences of the programme, (2) challenges of participation, (3) expectations for the future

In order to achieve this, fathers (*N*=20), mothers (*N*=15) were interviewed in prison. Facilitators (*N*=4), prison officers/staff (*N*=11) were interviewed before, during, and after the implementation of the programme. Partners/family members (*N*=7), children (*N*=2) were interviewed in the community during and after the implementation of the programme.

Table 1. List of interviewees

Interviewee	Number
Mother	15
Father	20
Partners & family	7
Children	2
Prison staff	11
Programme staff	4

All interviews were semi-structured, recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, researchers adopted an ethnographic approach, drawing on observations and insights from repeated prison visits. In this way, findings and recommendations were informed through internal discussions of the research team during data collection.

Qualitative data was analysed using an inductive thematic analysis. While most interviews were recorded verbatim, some participants expressed a desire not to be recorded. Consequently, in such circumstances researcher field notes were taken instead. Interview data was analysed using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved a staged approach to the data. First, data was read and reread multiple times to acquire an in-depth knowledge of the content. Next initial codes were developed initially remaining close to original meaning. Third, initial codes were amalgamated into secondary themes to capture overarching perspectives. Using these overarching perspective's broader themes were created capturing meaning within the original codes. From these detailed descriptions of the final themes were created. In the final step data was reread to assess the extent to which final themes captured the original transcripts.

Processes and People

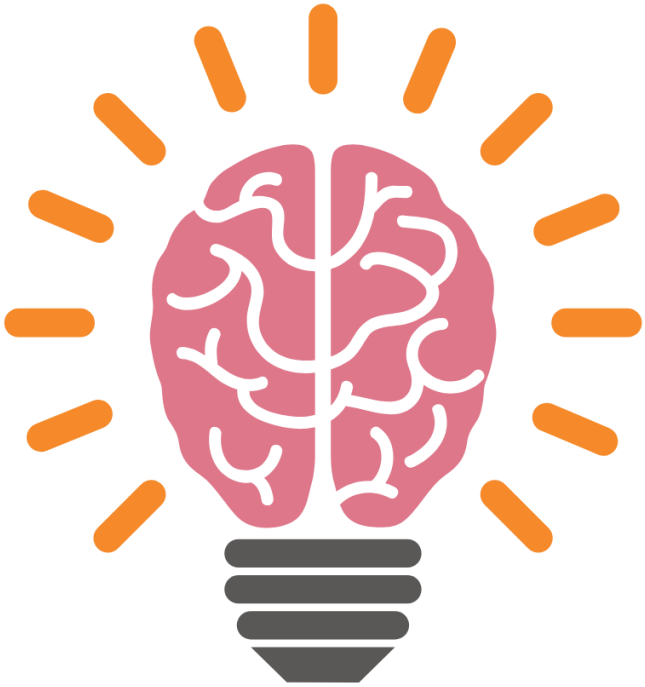
This report was created by researchers from the University of Limerick and the University College Cork including Daragh Bradshaw (DB), Fiona Donson (FD), Elaine Rogers (ER), Aisling Parkes and Lynn Fenton. Questions were drawn up through a consultative process involving all authors as well in consultation with an expert advisory group Action for Children and Families of Prisoners. This group consists of researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and families impacted by family imprisonment. Interviews were conducted by DB, FD, and ER. Analysis was again conducted through a consultative process involving all authors. On completion of initial data analysis, findings were presented back to FusionCPL in the form of a visual presentation as well as through an initial draft for feedback and reflections. Researchers integrated the feedback throughout the report but did not amend aspects related to either the analysis or programme findings.

As with all research activity, there are a number of limitations with the current approach. First, researchers had limited time with programme participants living in prison, which constrained the depth of engagement and data collection. This resulted in some cases, somewhat limited participant engagement. Additionally, the research team recognises that issues of trust may have led to guarded responses on more sensitive topics. Second, in relation to parent participants who had been released following or during the programme, the researchers found it challenging to follow up given the prison system's loss of contact, geographical displacement and participant's reluctance to re-engage with the research. Third, efforts to engage with a broader range of children beyond those directly involved was extremely difficult.

Conversely, there are equally a number of strengths associated with this report. First, it includes the involvement of both fathers and mothers within the Irish prison system, ensuring that diverse parental perspectives are represented. Second, it incorporates the voices of family members, including two teenage children, which adds valuable insight into the broader family experience. Third, it captures multiple iterations of the programme across different contexts, rather than limiting the work to a single site or one-off delivery, thereby enhancing its robustness and relevance. Fourth, the inclusion of follow-up measures with families after the programme's completion, and in some cases after release, provides important insight into its longer-term impact.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Irish Prison Service, the University of Limerick, and the University College Cork Research Ethics Committees.



Reach Out design and operation

Reach Out operates as a high-quality programme in both its design and implementation. Staff roles within the programme are varied and involved a range of core components and competencies including practical implementation, participant selection, training, mentoring and liaison with prison staff and management. The evaluation highlighted some important components within the programme.

Table 2: Themes

Theme	Theme Name
Theme 1	Recruitment of programme participants
Theme 2	Mentoring
Theme 3	Family day visits
Theme 4	Barriers to working in the prisons and the need to maintain a high-quality programme
Theme 5:	Future developments

Theme 1: Recruitment of Programme Participants

Appropriate and effective recruitment of participants is vital to the successful implementation of each iteration of the Reach Out Programme. The criteria for selection of suitable candidates, as Reach Out currently operates, is strict and set out clearly within the programme framework. As one staff member made clear, to be selected a person must **not be**:

> *serving a sentence for any domestic abuse. Also [there must not be] any abuse against children. (staff A)*

In addition, participants need to be in custody for the duration of the programme and not have work commitments that would prevent attendance at the classes. Engagement with all parts of the programme is seen as essential underscoring the holistic nature of the programme. However, at times it can be difficult to ensure time commitments and continuity of custody given the prison itself has control of such aspects, and some participants were released or transferred between prisons.

Recruitment takes place in a variety of ways including the holding of an information session in the prison by the team (after which the prison service will gather the names of those interested) as well as a combination of advertising and other forms of promotion amongst agencies who work with parents in the prison system. Information is gathered from the potential participants on their individual situations concerning contact with family/children and this information is then factored into the selection process.

The current operation of Reach Out is run without a guarantee of funding. Therefore, programme continuity cannot be guaranteed, and as a result, through this evaluation, tensions have been generated within the recruitment process. In particular, a small

number of participants joined the programmes after the initial start date where other participants had exited prior to completion. A desire to ensure as many suitable participants could engage with the programme as possible led to occasional decisions to facilitate late joining (although still within the early sessions of the programme). This is less than ideal as it can undermine the cohesion of the group-based delivery, disrupt the group dynamic, and undermine skills development for the individual participants but also more broadly for the group. As one staff member noted:

> *If the funding was in place that you would have the beauty of being able to [ask] 'how long are you doing a sentence for?' … 'you'll definitely be on the next [course], these are the dates of the next one'. We just don't have that continuation…. (staff B)*

Theme 2: Mentoring

The mentoring role looks different for each person and in each prison, and as a result the staff are adaptable. Indeed, the experience of mentoring on Reach Out illustrates the potential for mentoring more broadly as a support mechanism within prisons. Previous experience of mentors being drawn from prison staff was found to be less effective as a result of split roles on the part of staff and difficulties of trust and openness from those living in prison. The current model of FusionCPL/Archways staff providing this role is clearly more effective. It facilitates key aspects of the programme in a very real way:

> *checking in with the mentee who did the course to make sure that when he went back to the cell he was ok… that he is not left in a bad place mentally (whole load of garbage or guilt)* (Staff A)

The mentoring role extends to engaging the families outside of the prison with the same material as the prisoners.

> *picking up the phone to the person on the outside to let them know what the course is covering at the time … and to see how they are getting on with the child and to let them know what may happen at the next visit. So they are fully aware of what learning the mentee had done… and that they [the family member on the outside] can support the child. (Staff A)*

However, given that it is not possible to condense ten weeks of learning into a 15-minute phone call, the material is currently delivered in broad strokes with a focused and tailored narrative for the families. This explains why the families sometimes appear to not know exactly what the participant is learning but they do notice the change.

Theme 3: Family day visits

The inclusion of family day visits at the end of the programme was observed in the women's prison (Dóchas Centre) but not in the men's prison (Mountjoy). A similar visit in Shelton Abbey, specifically linked to the Reach Out programme, was not run as one had already been facilitated on a more general basis within this open prison. It is important to note that such visits, while an important aspect of Reach Out, can only be facilitated with the approval of each prison. As a result, there is variable implementation of this

element of the programme and factors such as overcrowding and security play a significant role.

Family visits provide significant opportunities for children and families to spend more quality time with their loved one in prison. This is not just a "perk" of the programme but an important opportunity for participants to practice and integrate their learnings and as a result see the positive impacts from their participation. For the mothers in prison, a real strength of the family day is that they have the opportunity to input into the design of elements of the day.

> *What I think is great about the family day is that we try to use their input, like what is their vision of it, it's not about me, it is their day. So how do they see it. (staff B)*

This is typical of the commitment of Reach Out staff in not only supporting the mothers, but also empowering them, whilst also seeing that the women have opportunities to parent their children on the day.

A significant shortfall of programme implementation in terms of delivery resulted, therefore, from the practical limitation imposed by Mountjoy prison. The family visit component had previously been available in the pilot stage of the programme (2019). As one staff member noted, having these visits at the end of every course "would be the dream" (staff B).

More broadly, it is important to note the amount of work that goes into organising the family days in the Dóchas Centre as this illustrates the complexity and time-consuming nature of it primarily for the Reach Out staff:

> *In the Dóchas, I have to make sure I have at least two weeks, I have all the family who are going to attend, everyone has to be put through the system, they have to be all on their visiting lists. Um… on the day I have to make sure I continue to ring all the families; make sure they bring ID … all that kind of jazz. So I have to prep all the families. Make sure there is a smooth entry into the family day. Then I also on the day have to make sure I have a print off of everyone attending for the main gate, the Dóchas gate when you walk in to sign in, and whoever is the head officer on in the room. I can't rock in and not be prepared. (Staff B)*

Reach Out staff facilitate all the family logistics in terms of getting people in. While the staff member was provided a handover document upon taking over the role, the running of the day has since evolved and is not reflected in the document in its current form. In reflecting on the potential for a broader roll out of Reach Out this illustrates the need for FusionCPL to review and clarify roles and practice within their staff framework to ensure sustainability going forward. This would ensure consistency and continuity of good practice where roles change, and new staff members take on the role.

Theme 4: Barriers to working in the prisons and the need to maintain a high-quality programme

The staff understand intimately the reality of working in the prison system which helps the process and also makes staff expectations realistic:

you can't talk about implementing in a prison and not talk about barriers. (staff A)

Staff noted that barriers to implementation take many forms - everything from not having a room to deliver the programme, to participants not being able to attend due to staffing issues, and beyond the prison, social workers not answering phones or calling back. A lack of consistent funding was also identified as a barrier to implementation.

As a key staff member says

It's a high standard program, we don't go in there ever not prepared. (staff A)

What is particularly significant is that, despite the funding challenges that have been ongoing and the degree of uncertainty regarding running the program going forward, the level of commitment to the program is commendable.

The Reach Out program is delivered to a high standard the entire time because it has to be, and they deserve that. (Staff B)

It is clear that learning from each cycle is integrated back into the next phase. The result is that FusionCPL continues to meet their impactful goals.

Theme 5: Future developments

FusionCPL/Reach Out staff appear keenly aware of the need for post programme mentoring and also the current lack of supports for families more broadly within the Irish context. However, in the context of resource restraints, such a step is not a component of the current Reach Out programme design.

You know, there is an add-on piece that we could do really if we have funding, and I think it would be, and that would be to kind of do a bridging program simultaneously with the parents outside and the children. (Staff A)

There are opportunities for the expansion of the Reach Out programme, and for other initiatives to be informed by learnings from this programme, for example the family day, and the mentoring component. The challenges of parenting from prison, maintaining relationships, and supporting child and parent contact that is illustrated by Reach Out, reinforce the need for mentoring to be rolled out within the prison system more generally. These challenges include the limitations on visits, calls and video links, the artificial nature of short contact windows in supporting relationships and the practical difficulties of visiting for many families particularly where they are geographically distant from the prison. It could therefore be another project, one that might build on Reach Out in co-operation with other prison-based projects such as Barnardos (supporting Traveller women in the Dóchas Centre), Red Cross and the Solas Project (Compass Prison Programme).

The research set out below highlights that stakeholders and participants are in agreement: Reach Out has a positive impact and should be offered to parents in all prisons on an ongoing basis.

Family Programme Participants Perspectives on Reach Out Programme

Mother's experiences

As part of this evaluation, the team interviewed 15 women across two cycles of the Reach Out Programme during 2025. Women were interviewed at the outset of the programme and then at the end. Overall, it is clear that the interviewees were overwhelmingly positive about the Reach Out programme. Three key themes emerged from the interviews:

Table 3: Themes identified through Interviews with incarcerated mothers

Theme	Theme Name
Theme 1	Motivations and knowledge
Theme 2	Connections and development
Theme 3	Challenges and impact

However, central to all the reflections was the belief that the programme should not only continue, but be mainstreamed throughout the prison system:

> *The Reach Out Programme must not stop … they must accommodate every woman in prison, like give everyone an opportunity …. (Mum 9)*

> *The programme is brilliant and it should be in every prison, it really should. It is amazing. (Mum 11)*

A particular strength identified by many of the women was the opportunity it gave them to work on self-development alongside deepening understandings of child development, communication skills and the integration of practical skills.

When asked which components were particularly beneficial, participants highlighted the process of learning about child development/brain development which they could then link to their child's development, their own experiences as mothers (and children) and their fears around parenting.

Theme 1: Motivations and knowledge

When asked about their motivations for joining Reach Out, there were a number, but they centred on their role as "mam" and the desire to strengthen their family bonds:

> *I want to be a better Mam. (Mum 5)*

> *I'd love just to be a proper mother. (Mum 4)*

> *To get more contact with the children. (Mum 15)*

Families were mentioned a lot in conversation with the women in relation to the key people in their lives. Even when struggling, women highlight that families are central supports. This then links to reasons for undertaking the training.

Options for strengthening connections with family, particularly children, are relatively limited within the prison school context. Parenting programmes do exist, but the benefits of Reach Out for the women were layered. The women had a clear understanding that communication was central to building and supporting their family relationships:

> *[W]hat I like about what I am hearing [about Reach Out] is that we will be able to think more about our communications with our children and then we can improve that [consciously] and with support from the prison to action that. So improve the contact I have with the kids and make it better. (Mum 2)*

> *Just to have more confidence, more stability to have conversations, to be around the kids and just get a lot more … involved with the kids and see them a lot more. And to be able to say – yer, I'm here (even in the context of being in prison). (Mum 4)*

Participants could therefore see the potential for building key skills that would help them take back some control and forge better access and connections to their children

> *I know not every mother's perfect but it's just to see if there better ways to maybe bits we've lost out on and that we're going to prove to be a better mother. (Mum 6)*

Some mothers also expressed concern about their child's understanding of prison, for example, that their child didn't understand that they were in prison, why they were there, or what it was like for their mother. They saw the programme, including the family day visit, as a way of supporting their children's understanding of prison and reassuring their children that they were okay.

> *Where [child] hasn't been asking me a lot of questions (when first in prison) but now he has asked me … what colour jumpsuit are you wearing? Now he knows I'm wearing clothes. He was asking, was I on a rock bed or did I have a mattress? So it was just, he wasn't afraid to ask these things he asked and,,, so just being more open … and letting them know it's ok to ask whatever they want. (Mum 11)*

Also important for the women was the family day visit. This was particularly significant for the first cohort interviewed. Between the first and the second iterations of the programme in the course of this evaluation, the Dóchas Centre had integrated family visits more broadly into their calendar and so many of the women in the second group had already had the experience of spending quality time with their children over an afternoon. Nevertheless, it was clear from the interviews that ordinary visits were a source of stress for many women and failed to provide them with effective contact:

> *Kids nearly only settle after 15 or 20 minutes 'cause everything that's going on around them…. There's other people, other families and they're like "what's going on?" (Mum 11)*

They do run family days… the [regular] visits here are only 20 minutes …. the kids are only getting used to their surroundings and they are having to leave…. Run family days that go on for 3 hours, so you can bring you kids in, they get food, play games, get toys and bring them home … so I am really just looking forward to doing that. (Mum 15)

[the family day is] not as scary as it is in the visiting room when you have officers in there. Yeah, it's real relaxed and there's actual stuff for the kids to do. (Mum 3)

In terms of knowledge and expectations, some women were very unclear about what the programme might entail prior to it starting. This links heavily with the way in which information is delivered, the process, and the recruitment stages, of the programme along with participants' abilities to take in the knowledge and understand it at the point of recruitment. Some women did understand and threw themselves into the process. However, pre-intervention, knowledge was variable.

Already identified as an existing limitation of the programme delivery, women joining the program after the start was a factor within this where they may not have been completely briefed or missed out on the initial induction stage. This appeared to arise in some situations where prison staff rather than Reach Out staff championed the inclusion of women where places became available due to participants leaving the programme for various reasons. This would not be a problem were the programme to run on an ongoing basis throughout the year. Continuity of practice – allowing the program to keep looping rather than waiting longer periods for opportunities to arise – would likely reduce this pressure to slot participants into a programme that has been up and running, when a place becomes free.

Theme 2: Connections and development

As noted above, the women particularly enjoyed the opportunity to gain knowledge of child development (across a range of ages), parenting, and communication skills. A significant strength of the program which is unique within the context of prison-based training in Ireland is the linking of child development knowledge, relationship and communication-building skills and activities, and the opportunity to practice the skills learned during visits. Self-development and learning is facilitated through the programme which includes opportunities for reflection on progress, on relationships, on their own experiences of parenting. Together this multi-component programme facilitates participants in developing a better understanding of the daily lives, experiences, and needs of their children and their partners, and to position themselves to embrace the important role they can play in their child's life.

When you are in here everything is so chaotic that when you do get your visit, video call or whatever with your kids, it's like your brain just goes completely blank, because it is just you in that room talking to your children on a video call … so like I was getting quizzes and all off [Facilitator Name] …. Just learning how to just forget where you are and what's going on and just be present there with them. …

When you know what you're going to talk about and how to talk about things with your kids.... (Mum 1)

While the program has a number of core elements, a central functioning component is the development of trusting and supporting group dynamics within the cohort of participants, and their trainers/mentors. This is particularly apparent in the group work dimension of the program which takes place in the classroom. Participant selection is at times key to this process, and to date, it appears that generally this has been successful. As noted above, late entry to a programme cycle can be disruptive and create some unnecessary challenges and this should be (and overall appears to be) avoided. A sustained roll out of the program on an ongoing basis will make this even more feasible.

Trust is understandably a central issue; many of the women were very positive about the group work:

We know whatever is said in the group isn't going to be carried back ... we are all talking about our children, it's a very emotional subject, so it is nice to know that there are girls in there that when you are saying your story they are not going to be running back and spreading them around. (Mum 15)

For others, the one-to-one dimension of mentoring was a safer space in which to explore difficult issues of motherhood and family

I'm more settled with my one-to-ones, I've got more done in my one-to-ones, because I wouldn't feel comfortable sitting in a group of women and opening up because everything is carried back to the yard and you've people looking at you, you know why they are looking at you because you've spoke about those things that day.... (Mum 8)

The role of the mentor was very important for many of the women who found the one-to-one dimension to be particularly powerful and even experienced elements of counselling and coaching within the process (even though it is not designed in this way).

[The mentoring] felt good. There were things that me and [the mentor] talked about that I hadn't talked to anyone in here about, not even my counsellor ... it felt like [the mentor] was a counsellor ... [they are] very good at [their] job like and there was no judgement at all. (Mum 10)

[the mentoring] gives you the time to just sit down and discuss the things that maybe you are not comfortable talking about in the group – one-to-one time where you can just say 'this is going on with my social worker ...'. (Mum 3)

A common reflection was the trust and non-judgemental nature of the process:

[the mentor] met you where, you are. [They] didn't come in at all, like guns blazing.... (Mum 8)

The link with the outside, something of an additional support for the women, was important. The mentor's ability to share information, to link in with family, to reassure both those inside and outside that each were doing ok.

Unsurprisingly, the family days were extremely welcome for the mothers as a space where their knowledge around communications and development could be placed in the practical context of parenting and linking with family. The days were described as being "so calm, loving" with strong "bonding vibes". The chance to spend longer periods of time with children and to do normal maternal and family things with them were extremely valued:

> *sharing food, sharing a plate, … it's very important to have a meal together. (Mum 9)*

Criticism of how these days operated in practice were directed not at Reach Out but at the prison, and in particular the security team. A decision to refuse entry for family members caused particular upset:

> *it was nothing to do with Reach Out, it was the prison. (Mum 11)*

Prison staff who facilitated the visits were praised for not wearing uniforms and being supportive. While conversely the security officers were seen as a source of tension, reinforcing the extremely negative experience of children entering the prison to see their mothers.

Theme 3: Challenges and Impact

Connections developed within the Reach Out programme were significant, but more time is needed for these to be maintained and supported. A clear challenge lies in how to achieve that. As currently implemented, and in the challenging financial context of short-term delivery of the Reach Out programme, there are difficulties concerning continuity of care for participants. Within the design of Reach Out, a lot of work has been invested in ensuring that participants are not left in situations of distress because of their engagement with the programme. This is particularly clear through the development of the mentoring piece. However, the programme also highlights the overarching limited supports for mothers within the prison system. Reach Out offers significant development opportunities for participants over 10 weeks. However, as one woman voiced it:

> *After ten weeks we still have years to be here, are we going to be having once in a while are we going to be having a visit with [Reach Out staff]? …. That's important for us as well. (Mum 5)*

While interaction with the family day at the end of the process can also trigger significant emotional challenges for mothers:

> *After seeing my kids like on the Reach Out, I hadn't seen my kids in … months, so [the family day] was the first time seeing them in … months I'm kinda going through the separation anxiety again. It's like I'm grieving someone that's not even gone*

you know what I mean. … There's a really bad low [afterwards] … so it is hard…. It's like restarting all over again. (Mum 1)

This powerfully illustrates the need for ongoing support beyond the programme itself. In the current operation of the Reach Out, mentors continue to provide important supports for the women even after the end of the course. However, there is a challenge of sustainability in this context. Reach Out in its current format is not designed or resourced to provide this continuity, and as the programme increases in operational size, providing aftercare will become more challenging. This may then require consideration of the development of mentoring programmes beyond the operation of Reach Out, something that could be developed in collaboration with other organisations.

The impact of participating in the Reach Out was most straightforward where women already had access to their children through phone calls, video calls and in person visits. Women highlighted strengthened relationships with their children

I learnt how to communicate and get to know my kids. That was challenging. (Mum 14)

And improved confidence in themselves

I think it made me more confident as a parent. (Mum 1)

While the developmental dimensions were very clear for women who were able to process and deal with their guilt at being in prison, and in moving beyond this to concentrate on their relationships

Learning how to kinda forget where you are and what's going on and just be present and be there with them. (Mum 1)

Significantly, where women were working to reconnect with children in care (whether kinship or state) that resulted in limited or no access at the time of participation, involvement in the programme helped them develop access plans and build the confidence to engage more effectively with carers and social workers. The care system can be challenging to navigate at the best of times, but when a mother is in prison even contacting a social worker can feel/be impossible given limited access to phone calls and the frequency of staff movement. The strength of the combined system of Reach Out linking the mentor into supporting women progress through the system was clearly visible here where a combination of support for access planning linked with the ability of the mentor to be in contact with social workers. These mothers would benefit from future access to Reach Out once access is improved/formalised, allowing them to work on communication in the context of renewed mother/child contact.

Father's Experiences

In general, the men were very positive about their experiences. They spoke about what they enjoyed and got out of the initiative as well as issues they faced. While many spoke about a lack of information of what to expect, a key aspect identified by the men was the honesty, openness and expertise of the facilitators once the course got underway. While

information sessions are delivered at the outset of the programme, the circumstances surrounding the delivery can impact the way in which the information is received, many men spoke about the importance of consistency. They indicated that while consistency was something they did not expect from a prison-based initiative, it was particularly difficult when their expectations of Reach Out were not reached. Equally, fathers spoke about perceived fairness where any punishment/restrictions were not applied on a group basis but only to those seen to 'break the rules' either within the Reach Out programme or more broadly within the prison setting, whereas those who comply with regulations and requirements would receive preferential treatment.

Three themes were identified in the interview data:

Table 4: Themes Identified through interviews with incarcerated fathers

Theme	Theme name
Theme 1	Motivations and expectations
Theme 2	Knowledge and experiences
Theme 3	Consistency

Theme 1: Motivations and Expectations

There was a wide range of motivations and expectations spoken about by the male Reach Out participants. This may be reflective of the different routes through which they became aware of the opportunity to participate. For some, awareness of the initiative arose out of word-of-mouth with no specific motivation or expectation other than positive recommendations from others. This has implications for the delivery and experiences of participants, as a key aspect relating to consistency is how information about the programme is delivered not only within but between prison complexes.

Others were made aware of the group through other means. Participants, when asked about how they heard about the initiative, their responses highlighted a range of contexts:

> *We got dragged into it last Wednesday, they just came round the chief dragged us all in just asked if we all had kids come on in there so I was just thrown at us like, I was obviously interested as I wanted to better myself as a parent especially being in jail like…no one really knew about it, it was just a last minute kinda thing (Dad #)*
>
> *One of the lads said there is a person taking names for a parenting course so I said I would do it (Dad #)*
>
> *Chief was saying there was a parenting course so I would pop in… …we were sitting outside, me and a few of the lads and the chief was saying there was a*

parenting course and she said do ye want to do it cos ye have children, and I said okay, I will do it I will have a look at it (Dad #)

Family communication is a central aspect of the initiative and men reported a wide variation of existing relationships. While this can raise dilemmas for facilitators as to where to pitch the content, many men spoke about how they learned from seeing the family situations of the other men in the initiative as well as the potential issues for them in the future. Being able to impart their own experiential learning was also seen as a strength highlighted by the participants. Additionally, for some, connection to family was seen as a positive aspect of their self-identity. They were keen to emphasise how settled their relationships were, were glad to be engaging and learning from the programme and saw the programme as an indication that they had positive relationships with family on the outside. Conversely, others reported a more complicated engagement with partners on the outside and were wary of placing additional requests such as engagement with mentors on the outside. This can represent a potential issue for developing sustainable effective family communication behaviour.

Me and me wife and my… children are very happy, we are a very close family (Dad #)

I was thinking that not anyone knows it all so if there is anything I can learn through this parenting course I'd love to learn it, know what I mean, cos I does me best but I know I am not perfect do you know that kinda way (Dad #)

She doesn't have time for this, (Dad #)

These fathers were in stable family units and were engaged on the initiative as a means to maintain connection and engage in areas of interest and importance to them.

In contrast, other fathers had more fractured relationships with their children, partners and ex-partners on the outside. Some of whom spoke about using the course as a means to gain access and to demonstrate to families and court settings of their commitment and potential as fathers.

The reason I am doing it is to get a cert for when I go back to court… realistically is so that I have something to throw back at her when I go back to court, she has loads to throw at me (Dad #)

I was talking with your colleague last week as she explained why people do this course, and I was saying lovely, if she is getting a phone call with me ex, and … is saying he is doing this and he is doing that it is only going to make her more relaxed about it so that is what I would be looking for in the course. (Dad #)

She [partner on the outside] would know I would be more proactive… … …just think I will have a more contact with me kids, I think it will help in that regard. (Dad #)

Some fathers who did not have access at the time of the programme spoke about how they hoped to in the future and would like to have the skills to interact and care for their children

Have a better relationship with your family and your kids and stuff as well and if ye were separated when would try and find common ground or something you know, whatever is best for the kids (Dad #)

In contrast to the wide range of motivations, there was a general uniform lack of knowledge on the specific content of the initiative. *Do you have any idea of what is coming up?*

I don't know much we were just given a quick introduction, but I haven't really much knowledge of it…I expect better parenting skills (Dad #)

I don't know what to expect, they said a psychologist is coming in or something (Dad #)

I can't really remember it was just its 10 weeks, and you get something out of it, the social worker contacts his ma and stuff like that (Dad #)

Theme 2: Knowledge and experiences

Fathers commented upon the specific knowledge but also the honesty of facilitators. It was the openness with which the facilitators shared with the group that impressed the men. Reflecting the rapport that was developed between the facilitators and participants, one father indicated their intention to follow up with facilitators once he gets out. There was also an appreciation to the space provided to the men to talk about their family, balancing the knowledge content and experiential aspects of the sessions.

It was good to understand, it got you thinking about what you say around kids what they think and what goes on in their heads, you know… (Dad #)

It was probably the most enjoyable class I have had at the school…twice a week…It was nice to talk, like you know the way you are proud of your kids, like to be able to talk with like… (Dad #)

Throughout the interviews, fathers spoke about how they valued the time and skills provided by the initiative particularly around their family relationships. It provided time, space, and perspective through which they could reflect upon their relationships with their children. Many spoke about how they had never considered this aspect before.

It was very good for me, I don't even think about this…ever…(Laugh), you know that was like, some questions were difficult for me cos I would be very surprised, yea, I should know these things, and I don't know, Why? What happened? I think that I know my kids (Dad #)

When we get exercises with the kids, I start straight away, I get more interest in my kids (Dad #)

I learned a lot of stuff actually, … … … how to speak with [them], finding common ground like, more like how's your friends at school, what's your favourite class, just asking questions they can answer rather than let them trying to make conversation with me, do you hear me. So, yea… … (Dad #)

There was evidence that skills were developed to facilitate back and forth conversation with their children. While not universally reported, it does illustrate the potential in some participants to develop broader parenting and communication skills:

I learned a lot of stuff actually, I learned how to speak to them on their level just there on the quick phone calls, get points across to them, a lot of the time, I notice [name] is more visual so if I am talking to [name] on a video calls he would be more interactive in the call cos he'd see me where as when I gets 6 minutes on the phone he gets so distracted… … …[name] is different the stuff with [Facilitator Name] now how to speak with [them]… … …more like how's your friends at school, what's your favourite class, just asking questions they can answer rather than let them trying to make conversation with me, do you hear me. So, yea (Dad #)

I am getting a lot more information through the phone calls back and forth just asking certain questions that she has answer for me and then start asking me different questions like how's life there and what's it like with your friends and just making sure that I am okay and there is no danger around me or anything like that, do you know what I mean, yea so there is loads of different things that are…I was actually thinking of bumping, popping over to [Facilitator Name] when I get out, we have only five weeks left (Dad #)

Theme 3: Consistency

Consistency and continuity were factors for the fathers. In one of the iterations of the course delivery, there appeared to be significant logistical issue with delays in delivery, and changes to the expected format. For fathers, this reflected a perceived lack of care on the part of the prison system and undermined the trust developed in the process of the initiative rather than a criticism of the programme itself. Visits represented a particular area of inconsistency for fathers with only those in Shelton Abbey getting access to prolonged time with their children on a face-to-face basis. This is in stark contrast to the strengths highlighted by mothers, families and prison staff. While fathers were in different prisons, fathers were aware of differences in the iterations between prisons and were very vocal about the perceived injustice that they should as a consequence of somebody else's behaviour. Equally, fathers were sensitive to any

perceived deviations from their understanding to how the programme was to be rolled out.

> *I thought it was really good… …the only thing I would say is that they never rang back to me, do you know what I mean…someone never rang home… … [they were supposed to contact] the kids Ma. (Dad #)*
>
> *Would have been nice to get the visit… …I did hear there was a visit at the end*
>
> *It would have been nice to get the visit…It was ran over in the Dóchas but there was drugs or something coming in… (Dad #)*
>
> *I never got my phone call…never called home (Dad #)*
>
> *I thought it was very good we did that mediation and I thought we would get back to her, but she got through that first time but then she never answered back (Dad #)*

Finally, similar to the women, many of the men brought up the short-term nature of the course highlighting the need for continued support and in recognition of the importance of their family relationships,

> *Will [the course] be on again, like what's the story? (Dad #)*

Family members experiences

Telephone interviews were conducted with nine family members who had varied relationships with the incarcerated parents participating in the programme. These included one husband, two sisters, one father, two mothers, one partner, and two teenage children. The majority of these (*N*=6) were with family members of women in the Dóchas Centre with one partner of a man in Mountjoy. Children's perspectives were captured indirectly though caregiver comments but also directly from two older children accounts.

Throughout the interviews, families spoke about the issues they faced in supporting their loved one inside prison as well as caring for the needs within their own family units. They expressed a cautious optimism about the initiative commenting on how they can see their loved one return to what they used to be. They spoke about behavioural change in regards family interaction and communication and in one instance how this change has continued post release. They spoke very highly about enhanced visits, as well as the potential for alternative channels of communication and interaction with the prison. They also talked about accessing support outside of the prison system via connection with the mentor.

However, family members also spoke about a lack of knowledge on the specific content of the initiative. Some were unaware there were additional elements outside of the enhanced visits. Others commented that having greater knowledge of the programme

would facilitate conversations and actions they could engage with to support the parent on the inside.

A key aspect highlighted by family members was the need for continuity and consistency. Family members spoke about how expectations around the procedures surrounding the enhanced visits were different to what they actually encountered. Security measures in place at the gates of the prison were viewed to be particularly at odds both to what they had been told and contrary to the ethos of the initiative itself. In some cases, this has led to a reluctance to re-engage with the enhanced visits.

Four themes were identified in the interview data:

Theme 4. Themes identified through interviews with family members

Theme	Theme Name
Theme 1	Cautious positivity
Theme 2	Centrality of the enhanced visits - "It was just normal"
Theme 3	Families' lack of knowledge and control
Theme 4	Continuity and consistency

Theme 1: Cautious positivity

Families spoke very highly about the initiative. They highlighted aspects such as recognising who their loved one used to be prior to the criminality. Family members spoke about a continuation of their previous interests in education and caring for themselves. Throughout, family members expressed hope that this would continue but also concerns about how feasible it would be outside of the structure of the initiative.

> *Ahh, now I don't know if I can attribute it to the course or not cos it's a treatment but her engagement and whole demeanour has definitely improved a lot I would say in the last 3 to 4 months, she is more engaging like she was very withdrawn much, much more engaging with other members of the family as well, now I am not sure what I would attribute that to like but ah I certainly would be feeling that certainly the course, course certainly didn't do any harm, especially to the children (#6)*
>
> *In her relationship and communication with you was there any change in that?*
> *I would say that has improved yea, you know that was one of her issues she was very withdrawn from everybody, was very hard to get her into a conversation or to, she is more engaging definitely in the past number of months you know, but as I say I am not sure what to attribute that to like, she has more of an awareness of things you know… which wasn't there for a while you know, (#6)*
>
> *When I went up she was a totally different person, like she looked great she had put on weight she was happy looking she was healthy looking do you know she*

was thriving very well in the Dóchas I will say that she was going to school she was doing art she was making thing for the kids, us, DVDs, books she was thriving so well and she was a whole different girl, it was great to see her cos that's the way she used to be so when I seen her like that I did cry cos it brought back so many memories do you know of how god she actually was and how good she looked and took care of herself and stuff like that and so I think it is an awful shame to see that when they get out they don't really stick by it and they kinda go back to the old type of a road I think that's a bit of a…(#3)

she also like I feel like she knows am, more about, like how me and my brother kinda react to things and she knows how to respond back and she has got like, and I feel like she knows what to say more than before… (#4)

Equally, family members whose partner had completed the course the previous year spoke about longer term benefits

she knows what they [children] want [inaudible] be able to talk to them (#5)

like before my mam was locked up she was in a very dark place, and then after a while of her being in there, she got rehabilitated in some sense the way her mood changed, her whole personality changed, she was a different person like since she first went into the Dóchas …and the programme must of really helped with that (#3)

In one interview, a family member spoke about how these positives continued post release, as their loved one was more focused on daily aspects of family life and took a more engaged approach to understanding the children's specific needs.

"*…focuses on caring for [childs] hair playing with them and he has more understanding of [child] autism he was blindsided by that but now he has accepted it and he has been great with [NAME] (#2)*

Family members commented also on the potential for this course to act as a catalyst for continued personal and educational development

There was a period when she wasn't [engaged in education] in the past year, year and a half she is much better like, and that could be something that hopefully someone could [inaudible] again which would be great like, and that sense the course has been great as well… … something she has gone away from (#6)

Conversely, family members were cautious about over attributing to this one initiative or in relying on the long-term impact. Some of the family members have seen temporary progress before and are cautious about the long-term impact.

… immediate aftermath very positive and enjoyed it (#6)

Children spoke about their perceptions of a different type of engagement with their parent, but often it was not fully apparent if the child knew which course their mother was enrolled on and what aspects were having the unique effect.

> *like on the phone call she would have to say a lot of things quickly but she would have to ask us about our day and we would ask about hers (#4)*

> *she is a lot more positive [in the way she speaks] now, like she used to be you know she, she used to have her problems but now she is more positive glowing kinda like now… … … she obviously did become a lot more different after a while of being in there [the Dóchas] itself but after, I'd say after the course something was different after the course as well like she was…she was a bit more…sociable like I suppose… … …she is improving like she is getting better I can see that, something good is obviously being done with her. (*Teenage child of mother in the *Dóchas*) *(#3)*

Theme 2: Centrality of the enhanced visits - "It was just normal"

A running theme throughout all of the interviews with the family members were the enhanced visits themselves. These were referenced by all the participants even by those who had little knowledge of the initiative itself. A key aspect of these visits was the length of time devoted to meeting with the parent inside. In some cases, this was the first face to face visit they had in the prison context. Indeed, family members spoke about how they were reluctant to bring children due to the logistics involved of traveling with small children as well as a concern around the context they were bringing the children into. Families spoke about how traveling to the prison for three hours on public transport there and back was not feasible for a half hour visit. Equally the nature of the traditional visit was not conducive to a positive family interaction, and so families were reluctant or unable to make the journey.

> *regular visits I feel like you should have more time on cos for us as well like we live in [NAME] like we have to travel [NAME] to Dublin every time we want to have time to go see her like and we use public transport going up so we use the bus so it is a X-hour journey and then we only get to see her for a half an hour, so it is nice to see her but then again like for half an hour for what your traveling up for its very, it is very tiring… … … so in a way it feels like it is not really worth it for the time that you get there like if it if it was longer it would be better it would be more worth it to go up… we would probably be going up more often if there was more time given"- Teenage child of mother in the Dóchas (#3)*

However, the nature and duration of the enhanced visits event meant that they were more willing and able engage in the process. For some, this was a positive experience and conducive to potential additional visits in the future.

> *I liked that we were all in one big room, no one was in handcuffs and it was a really nice atmosphere it was like you weren't even in a prison do you know it was lovely, people coming in with their kids and playing games, there was a toy area for the kids and they did little raffles and they did bingo and they did…oh it was amazing,*

absolutely amazing…and they had drinks there and refreshments and they crisps and little bits and pieces for the adults and the kids also, yea it was really, really, really nice. (#7)

I thought [the enhanced visits] were very good, how long is it 2 hours?…I found that to be good because there was activities and stuff you could do and like it was in a different area and like than the regular visiting room itself so I thought that was good as well like less eyes on you like and you were able to kinda you know say what you wanted to say and you just felt more comfortable it's a more comfortable environment on the special visit in my opinion. (Teenage child of mother in the Dóchas #3)

A unique feature of this initiative was the opportunity to use the visit as part of the learning experience and not just a standalone measure. Family members spoke about the work involved in managing expectations and experiences around this potentially emotional meeting. This was experienced before, during, and after the visit itself. For example, one family spoke about how mentors supported the parent prior to the visit, discussing potential child behaviours, as well as during the visit when there was an initial reluctance of a child to approach the parent. Family members saw the visit as positive event in managing the reunion and facilitating future engagement.

[Mentor] tried to anticipate to [NAME] that you know, like teach her that if [child] doesn't come to ya straight away don't panic don't get upset at the end of the day you have to realise that you haven't seen [child] since … … and he wouldn't particularly remember you… … ,,, and we walked in…he cuddled my shoulder and he didn't know her at the start, but she did cry she did get upset and she walked away and she said no no … …and [mentor] was just standing there and saying [NAME] its okay we talked about this, its going to be fine we spoke about this we spoke that this might happen, but then she came back over and [child] put their arms out to her … … (#7)

Visits were also seen as an opportunity to support prison officer relations, as family members spoke about alternative interaction and engagement with officers. Children of one mother spoke about how officers were just 'normal' in normal clothes and not standing watching them the whole time while a family member spoke about having positive conversations with officers on duty

I was actually chatting with one or two of them while I was in there on that visit with my sister, I was actually chatting with one or two of them that was there and they seemed really nice to actually speak to and to communicate with and then I think it was the Governor that came in at the end to give out the awards, yea he's lovely Really nice man. (7#)

awards for finishing the parenting programme and stuff like that and yea [NAME] got an reward for that she did great she passed all that so that was brilliant it was

lovely to see her getting do you know cos there was someone there to support her for when she got it yea it was really, really, really nice. (#7)

Theme 3: Families' lack of knowledge and control

While families did speak about the positives they experienced, many also indicated a lack of awareness or understanding of the content or nature of the initiative itself. In some cases, the initiative was conflated within the variety of different courses and initiatives they were enrolled in such as the Listener Scheme or the Red Cross, or different parenting courses. Families also made comparisons between the behaviour prior to incarceration rather than prior to the course itself.

Additionally, positive comments were often hedged in caution. Family members were attributing positive outcomes to the course and spoke about how this is a step in the right direction, but they also emphasised that they would like more information prior to participation and information on how to support the family member on the inside.

I don't know a huge amount of the content, ...detail I don't know ...hoping it will touch on family issues....there is a lot of rearing to do yet...(#)not aware of the content of the course or what the modules are about, I think it might be more better if the family members knew that, at least we would have a better chance of engaging with the person afterwards ... . If you knew what they were engaging on afterwards at least then you would have something to maybe to have... NAME would be quiet or wouldn't be saying a lot but if you knew that you could develop a conversation around what the modules was you know...I feel that might be beneficial in the long term. (#6)

Conversely, families spoke about how the initiative provided the opportunity to see where their family member were living, therefore giving them a greater understanding about how they were living, being cared for and their daily routine.

...the kids like they don't know where their mum is sleeping don't know what she is going on, [inaudible] at the end of the day they were able to see the room like it is not in a cage, it is not in a kennel"-Husband of woman in the Dóchas (#5)

well I found it cool that we were able to like, it was kinda like a tour we took around the Dóchas, so I didn't really know what the inside of the Dóchas looked like apart from the visiting room and stuff and the hallway you walk through to get to the visiting room the proves of going and getting into the prison...but am...the last time we were on the special visit like we got to, we walked around and we were able to see a bit more inside and all and I thought that was cool it gave piece of mind and stuff to know where my mam is and you know what she lives in everyday like (#3)

This knowledge along with the greater visibility and alternative interaction with the officers facilitated a different perspective of the prison, prison officers and their role in their family's life.

Theme 4: Continuity and consistency

A final aspect brought up by the families was the importance of consistency and continuity. While the support received was highlighted as an important feature, families were concerned that this was temporary and would leave their family member in the same place after the initiative has been completed.

> *it was good for her to have the support of [mentor name] but what happens now, she has built up a relationship with her and she can't go to the prison officers. (#6)*

Equally, families spoke about how their expectations around the course were contrary to their experiences in some respects, and that this has undermined further their trust and engagement with the system. This is particularly stark in the context of how prisons operate core aspects such as security.

> *I thought going in was a bit much, like you had to walk through a scanner and I had my sisters baby with me but like he can't walk so it went normal when we both went but then someone, someone else there said , someone that works there said that it didn't and it was showing a red light and I had to put the baby out in front of me and I had to put him into a prison buggy and then I had to walk through and I didn't like that part I thought that was a little bit extreme…yea it was a bit scary like … (#7)*

While Reach Out has no control over the prison operation, it remains a particularly challenging context within which to run a programme that is grounded in respect and communication where the prison context can directly undermine this. Family members highlighted issues such as cancelled visits, refusal of entry, inconsistent practices, a failure to provide lockers for visitors, lack of toilets for children in visiting spaces etc. These are examples of core flash points for people struggling to maintain contact and communication from the outside and who are in reality largely unsupported. Their engagement with Reach Out perhaps ironically offered first real experiences of support yet highlighted the deeply harmful nature of family's interactions with prisons.

Family members also identified several areas where they would like additional support and improvements. They expressed a need for more information about the initiative so they can better support their loved one, as well as greater opportunities to connect with other families involved in the initiative for mutual support. There were also calls for more child-friendly procedures and scheduling, particularly when entering the prison environment. In addition, families highlighted the importance of practical guidance on financial management, everyday living, and parenting. Some noted that while they had hoped for more focus on family-related issues, particularly supporting children as they grow, they could already see positive impacts, especially in strengthened parent–child relationships. For example, one parent described consistent communication and engagement with their children as a key outcome, suggesting that this connection provides motivation and focus for the future.

While not a direct matter for FusionCPL at this time, the lack of family supports as expressed by family members reinforces Ireland's failure to provide any effective

national organisation or mechanism that supports families with loved ones in prison. The Reach Out programme, in innovating an approach focused on family communication through positive engagement, addresses a real need among families impacted during familial incarceration and has impact both inside and outside the prison, with the ultimate benefit in the lives of children.

Prison Staff [officers/governors/teachers]

From the perspective of prison staff, the Reach Out programme yielded a range of valuable insights alongside practical challenges. Reach Out Staff noted that, in the initial pilot phase of the programme prior to Covid-19, the mentoring responsibilities had been assigned to some prison officers. This had not worked effectively in part because it had created an excessive workload. While they also recognised that mentors who were not prison officers were often more trusted by families and better positioned to build the relationship as well as connect with external agencies such as family support workers. This reflects FusionCPL experience and the design changes adopted post-pilot phase.

The programme was delivered in different prisons with men and women participating in discreet cohorts. The research findings above highlight that the experiences of these groups were different, despite the programme itself being largely the same. Recruitment into the programme tended to rely on a hand-picked group of participants who demonstrated commitment, although many mothers faced difficulties balancing prison work responsibilities with participation. The programme's design, particularly its emphasis on participation and engagement rather than learning and note-taking, helped address literacy barriers and foster peer rapport among participants. However, staff highlighted the ongoing challenge of balancing relationships between external family focused agencies, and social workers with the prison environment.

In terms of benefits, prison staff observed that the programme facilitated more meaningful communication between mothers and their families, in some cases enabling first-time physical visits. Caregivers were seen to offer parents a "second chance," both in maintaining relationships and in re-engaging with their parenting role. The intervention also appeared to have a broader "spillover effect," increasing general interest within the prison and contributing to the development of enhanced family-oriented initiatives, such as improved family days and even the creation of a dedicated family room within one prison complex. Positive relationships formed between mentors, officers, and mothers and fathers were central to these developments.

Prison staff also emphasised the need to better align expectations around visits, particularly ensuring that mothers are equipped with the skills to make short (e.g. 30-minute) visits positive and child-centred without placing undue pressure on families. Trust was viewed as foundational to successful family days, and differences between prison contexts were noted as influencing programme delivery.

A key strength of the Reach Out programme identified by staff was the inclusion of family members, which distinguished this intervention from others. However, officers sometimes appeared to place less importance on the value of participation of parents who currently did not have contact with children or the wider family, this despite the importance of maintaining a future-focused approach.

While overcrowding was not seen by prison staff as directly affecting the programme, staff highlighted ongoing structural and operational challenges. These challenges included staffing pressures, security demands, the need for a dedicated programme lead, adequate physical space, and continuity of provision.

Overall, the intervention was viewed as uniquely supporting the self-development of parents in custody as well as their family relationships, interestingly this was particularly noted in relation to mothers. However, its effectiveness depended on sustained resources and follow-on support. Three inter-related themes were identified within the interviews:

Themes identified through interviews with prison staff	
Theme	Theme Name
Theme 1	Positivity
Theme 2	Gendered view of parenting and facilitating visits
Theme 3	Spillover effects of Reach Out

Theme 1: Positivity

Prison staff were largely complimentary of the initiative, though there was a widespread lack of awareness of what it entailed. Getting the men and women into the school is a high priority for the staff, specifically, officers emphasised how *'it was great'* for the men and women to achieve a certificate, or the fact that they were kept occupied with the programme as opposed to praising any specific aspect of the initiative. Others however, highlighted how the uniqueness of the Reach Out programme was what they were seeking and would be keen to promote on a more permanent basis. The consistently high level of engagement and attendance in the context of the incarcerated mothers were taken as reflective of the quality of the programme

> *I have been there from the start of each of the programmes and I think it is excellent, I have seen the benefits for the mothers in custody and any of the programmes there has been nearly 100% completion rate for the women, which says it all. (#3)*

> *so to see, like I think the completion rates on a good programme like that's a 10 week programme like I think it is 2 sessions a week like for to have a 100% completion at the end that's huge like to see the women coming through it. (#4)*

Like I think the reach out programme should run here on a continuous basis like from the end of the last programme there has already been women seeing when the next programme is that, that says it all. (#3)

As the programme is developed, this has begun to change with aspects of one programme influencing recruitment for the next.

At the end of the programme at the family day, aside from Reach Out we have done family days for the women that have completed the programme… … and we have added other women into it as well and then they have done the next programme. (#3)

However, as the officers were separate from the rollout there was a misunderstanding amongst some officers about the level of contact some of the women would have with their children.

some of the women mightn't had contact, my understanding is one or two of them have built up that over the programme…and even the fact for some of the children at the end of the programme, that might have been the first physical visit with their mother …now one lady her child was 18 months he was being cared for by the sister, the sister had never come up or been to the prison on a visit and that was their first physical visit in a long time. (#4)

One of the positive aspects that was identified was the neutral perspective of having an outside agency rather than an officer interact with families:

some of the women wouldn't have contact at the start of the programme, am… it's really important I suppose as for [the mentors] am… for them contacting as they are an outside person for the families it's good to hear how well the women are doing to build up the relationship…as if a prison offer was calling it would be taken as seriously as if a prison officer called. (#4)

An additional benefit of the programme was the dedicated mentor for the participant and families. The dedicated time and focus were seen as a particular positive:

I think the relationships have built up between when the mother is in custody with the child and I suppose with the mentor, I know, I know when it started staff were to be trained as mentors.. but didn't, it didn't work out so going back to the first original programme we would have had a number of staff trained but because of the time in here, they just haven't got the time and the mentor piece fell back on [Facilitator Name] to do to make contact with the families. (#3)

However, the workload was also recognised as unsustainable for officers to engage with:

I imagine it is a huge workload for one person to do, but it is positive (#3)

A third positive was the perceived enhanced communication skills of the mothers involved.

I have heard it is a lot better since the programme, so, I've had some of the women speaking to me about it saying they find it…during the programme they learned how to speak properly to the kids. (#4)

For the family day, we would have specific activities on the table for the age group of the children, we do bingo, everybody's involved and it makes the visit so much easier, cos the women aren't focusing on how am I gonna put this time with my children and it is hard for a mother that's been so far removed from her childs life to know what or even appear to know what to talk about …the programme teaches how to interact with their children and what stages of development. (#3)

Officers identified positive effects extending to families on the outside, particularly caregivers. For many, the programme facilitated renewed trust and engagement: *"it is really good for the caregivers… to see how well the women are doing,"* In this sense, Reach Out was understood as offering parents "*a second chance… by the caregivers,"* while also strengthening wider family relationships.

The first time that all the children were here in the care of family members, so no social workers so it is really good for the care givers, the grandparents, the sisters, to see how well the women are doing whereas there hadn't been communication up to this up to then (#3)

Theme 2: Gendered view of parenting and facilitating visits

Staff reflections on the Reach Out programme reveal a strongly gendered understanding of parenting, which shapes both perceptions of participants and the implementation of family-focused supports. Officers frequently described imprisonment as having a more profound impact on mothers than fathers, emphasising that when a woman enters custody, she is more likely to lose day-to-day care of her children and experience a complete disruption of her parenting role.

I also think when a man, I know how important it is for the men, when a man goes to prison more often than not the woman's at home with the children and is caring for them when a woman goes to prison at that stage she has lost everything and she has lost the care of her children and there is no one coming looking after them they give up hope. (#7)

Bigger for the women than it is for the men…much bigger care for their children on separation, much more obvious with the women than it is with the men. (#3)

Women [on the outside] make an effort hail rain or snow whereas the dads [on the outside] don't. (#4)

Such perspectives were also reflected in assumptions about parental commitment in what could be considered a normative view of parenting. Some staff suggested that women demonstrate greater effort and consistency in maintaining family ties during imprisonment. However, this view risks overlooking the experiences of fathers engaged

in the programme, many of whom were described above as highly motivated to improve relationships with their children. The relative under-recognition of fathers' engagement may contribute to structural differences in how the programme is delivered, particularly in relation to access to family visits. Where fatherhood is perceived as less central, practical and security considerations may more easily limit supports, potentially neglecting the importance of father–child relationships.

> *I think between them they do try and agree like the day is about the children that's the most important thing, so I can imagine there is a concern security wise probably across the road (in the men's prison) (#4)*

Within this context, family visits emerge as a critical component of the Reach Out programme. For many officers, visits are seen as the primary mechanism through which the programme's benefits are realised, providing a tangible opportunity for participants to apply the communication skills and parenting strategies developed during the course.

> *Without the visits?…but the whole…It's all about building up the relationship with the child, so it is so important, (#3)*

Family days, in particular, were viewed as an effective way of facilitating meaningful engagement. Structured, child-friendly activities helped reduce pressure on parents and supported more natural interaction, especially for those who had experienced long periods of separation. However, these visits were also understood as contingent on trust and collective responsibility, with officers emphasising that "the family visit… works on trust" and that participants are aware their behaviour reflects on the group as a whole.

> *There is concerns, like the family visit it works on trust ehm, we talk to the women cos at the end of the day they have spent 10 weeks with each other and if someone messes up it's a reflection on the group (#3)*

At the same time, some prison staff highlighted that while visits are crucial, they should not be seen as a one-off endpoint. There was a clear recognition of the need for ongoing contact and follow-up, with concerns that the benefits of the programme could diminish without continued opportunities for engagement.

> *We would prefer that it wouldn't end just with the family day that maybe there was a follow-on piece (#3)*

This is particularly significant given inconsistencies across institutions, where access to family visits, especially for fathers, may be more restricted.

Theme 3: Spillover effects

While the prison officers were not the focus of the Reach Out programme, the perceived positive impact on fathers and mothers had unintended spillover effects in both the attitudes of the officers, and in the implementation of family focused supports being provided within the prison. This was particularly evident in the female prison.

To begin with, while officers indicated a positive inclination towards the programme, they also displayed a limited understanding of the specific content, often characterising it as another 'parenting programme'. However, in follow up interviews, the same officers spoke about specific positive outcomes and procedures they had identified that were unique to the Reach Out programme, as well as a clear enthusiasm for integrating the programme into the prison on a permanent basis.

> *[Reach Out] would be unique in [the self-development]… …when I heard that they got funding I was straight on to, like, looking to advocate two programmes per year I would love to see it on a rolling basis through the year you know there is a huge need (#3)*

Officers also spoke about how connection and understanding instigated through the mentoring aspect facilitated further supports being offered. It was a direct consequence of participation that the issues surrounding contact were identified and addressed during the programme but then followed up by the prison after the completion of the FusionCPL programme.

> *We had one lady who is on long term remand here that done a Reach Out programme and through getting to know her child and the situation outside we [inaudible] the family room here as an add on, am, we never had a family room so she has private visits there now and that was on the back of the Reach Out programme… … … cos we wouldn't have been aware of them particular issues for this particular mother and her child (#4)*

Equally, events conducted during the Reach Out programme demonstrated not only the importance of facilitating family days but also demonstrated the feasibility of doing so. This is seen to result in the development of a specific family room as well as enhanced family visiting days

> *From them (the family visits as part of Reach Out) we have our first ever family camp where the children were here unattended from their caregivers on the outside… … just with the mothers, so that was on the back of the programme… … so that's the first ever time in the prison that that has happened (#4)*

> *The work was done [during the official roll out of the programme] so the communication was built up…with the caregivers, and there was that trust as well from with [the mentor] that the children and everything was okay for it to happen (#3)*

Staff also identified the positive impact of the mentor aspect where they were in a better position to facilitate contact with family and particularly social workers

> *I also think like it is very difficult when the women is in here, there is a social worker involved, to make contact and having the Reach Out you have the [mentor] there that can make contact and reach out to social workers and it might take a bit of trust there for the woman to be on the programme for a number of weeks and then*

they might start the video calls or start the contact but it is great to have a [mentor] there that can make that initial contact (#3)

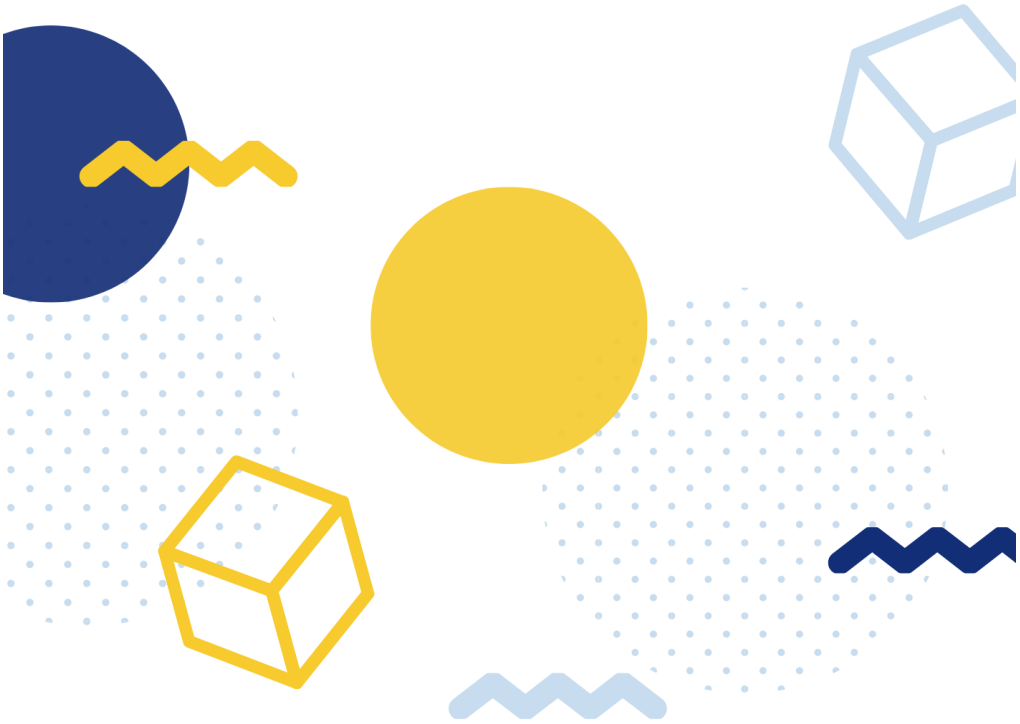
Another spillover effect was the enhanced relationship with the officers. While mothers were able to engage with their children to a greater extent, officers equally were able to engage with the mothers on positive aspects.

when I am doing Governors parade, a lot of the time they don't want to speak with you, you ask them, it gives you something to speak about and about the children and about and like I am hearing great stuff back about it so you know They love talking about their kids and that's the one thing they will speak to you about and this programme has been very successful (#4)

However, sustaining these benefits requires continuity. Officers repeatedly emphasised the need for ongoing provision and follow-up, warning against limiting the programme to discrete cycles.

We would prefer that it wouldn't end just with the family day that maybe there was a follow-on piece

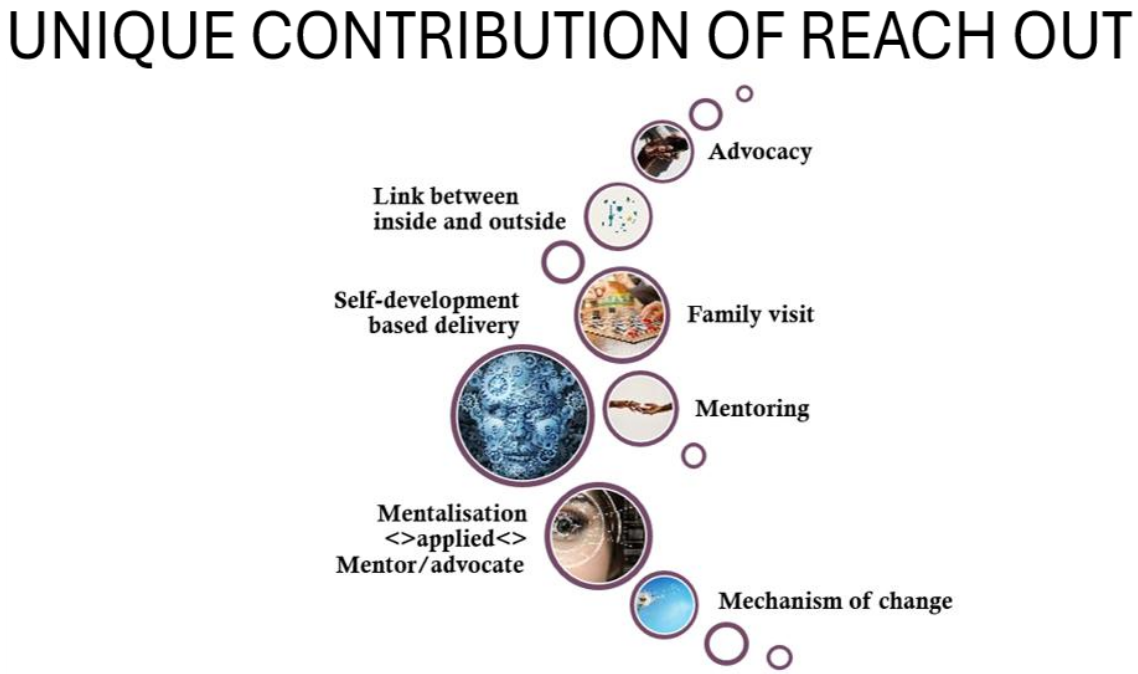
The strong demand from participants, combined with the wider institutional benefits observed, suggests to the officers that embedding Reach Out on a rolling basis would maximise its impact.



Evaluation Findings

Overall, the evaluation highlights the success of Reach Out as an intervention that is meticulously designed and implemented for its cohort – parents in prison and their children. It responds to a recognised need, developed from years of experience, and offers a positive targeted development model.

The Reach Out programme is premised on the idea that the parent-child relationship is important and can be sustained despite a parent's incarceration. This is through information-sharing, consistent contact (albeit brief within the current constraints of prison visits/contact), developmentally appropriate communications, and a parent engaging in personal development and managing the discomfort and fear that can come with parenting from prison. Where a parent does not have consistent access and/or, systemic supports, incorporating the role of the mentor may facilitate a re-establishment of access and offer a positive platform for future parenting.



Participants and stakeholders participating in this evaluation all highlighted the positive impact of the programme. The combination of education alongside self-development that engages with children and wider families has an impact far beyond the prison walls. As a 10-week programme, Reach Out appears to have impacts that are significant both for the parents living in prison and the children and families outside. The potential for a broader impact across all prisons within Ireland is clear – reaching all parents and families regardless of where they are geographically based. It does not replicate other programmes within the prison education curriculum or provided by other organisations. It is an original and much-needed tailored intervention that supports families. A national roll-out across all prisons would ensure opportunities for all, within a cohort of families that remains significantly under-supported at the national level.

Recommendations

This evaluation concludes that Reach Out is effective in supporting meaningful family communication between incarcerated parents and their children, within the current operation. FusionCPL/Archways should undertake actions to ensure not only its sustainability but that it is expanded to be included in all prisons.

Funding:

- Develop a clear funding strategy that facilitates FusionCPL achieving ongoing funding to roll out the programme across the overall prison system so that it can be delivered to all parents on a sustainable and ongoing basis.

Staff and sustainability:

- Articulate and define the clear and distinct roles for staff on Reach Out with specific descriptions of components.
- For further roll out, FusionCPL should ensure adequate funding is sourced such that sufficient suitably qualified/experienced staff are hired. This would support the high-quality nature of the programme informed by therapeutic principles, and that involves navigating complex relational and structural systems.
- Provide suitable training and ongoing Continuing Professional Development for staff to effectively equip them for working within the prison with groups experiencing marginalisation, trauma etc. This could include cultural awareness training, ethics, trauma informed practice.
- Training for staff to ensure they are equipped to effectively manage the complexities of separated parents, and work in collaboration with other relevant agencies where appropriate (One Family for example work specifically with separated parents and single parent families).
- Develop standard operating documents that establish the key actions that take place within all components of each staff role. This will ensure efficient hand over of any roles where necessary as well as streamlining onboarding of new staff to support the programme.
- Maintain the current model of mentors being drawn from qualified staff outside of the Irish Prison Service/wider prison staff and provide mentor support in both male and female prisons.

Operation:

- Develop and maintain information sharing mechanisms that are clear, in plain language, indicate to participants key elements of the programme, and are available prior to the start date of each programme cycle. This is to include how Reach Out is cognisant of the unique issues faced by mothers and fathers in the prison system. The development of co-designed information sharing materials with previous participants should be explored.
- Enhance the screening of domestic violence issues in the family beyond convictions alone. Screening enhancement can be done with the guidance of relevant services who can advise of screening for domestic violence.

- Provide similar accessible information for family members of participants. The development of co-designed information sharing materials with family members would be extremely beneficial and should be explored.
- Regular reports on participant recruitment to update FusionCPL management as to who is recruited to ensure that it is in line with the criteria set out in the Reach Out programme. FusionCPL staff should have the final say on recruitment over Irish Prison Service staff. Consideration should also be given to inviting a representative of the IPS onto the Reach Out steering group, or whatever oversight of the programme looks like going forward.
- Develop ongoing dialogue with a key manager within each prison where the programme is being rolled out to ensure smooth delivery and operation of the programme. This should be carried out by an operating staff member who is designated to undertake this role and who has oversight of the implementation within the prison.
- Adopt the stated aim that all prisons provide Family Day visiting to participants and their children. Discussions with prison management should take place with a view to achieving this outcome. While it is recognised that this may not be achievable immediately, it is recommended this should be a core goal recognising that quality family engagement is vital for mothers and fathers and their children equally. It is also a goal that will in part support successful community and family re-entry and integration.
- Explore the potential for an extension to the programme from 10 weeks to 12 weeks and the inclusion of modules on child development into later teenage and young adult age groups. This recognises the broader impact of parental imprisonment, the lifelong role of parenting, and the ongoing experience of children and young people.
- Enhance communication practices with family members about the nature of the visits and processes that may be encountered prior to each visit.
- Implement supports for the children engaged in the programme to ensure their own expectations, experiences, and feelings are appropriately managed as their parent engages with the programme.
- Clarify the referral criteria for the programme so that it is understood amongst referrers that Reach Out is accessible to parents who do and who do not have access to their children. Where there is no access arrangement, Reach Out should connect the family with relevant services and supports if they wish to seek an access agreement.

Post-programme support:

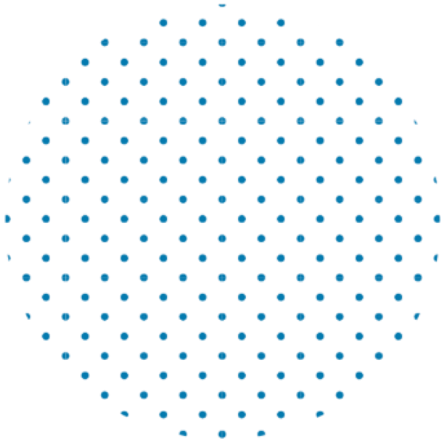
- Once Reach Out is operating on a sustainable funding basis and has been mainstreamed within prisons as an ongoing programme, FusionCPL should explore opportunities to provide participants with access to “refresher” activities. Parents who have previously completed the programme should also be permitted to repeat the training where appropriate. This recognises that parents’ support needs may evolve over time, particularly as their child enters a new

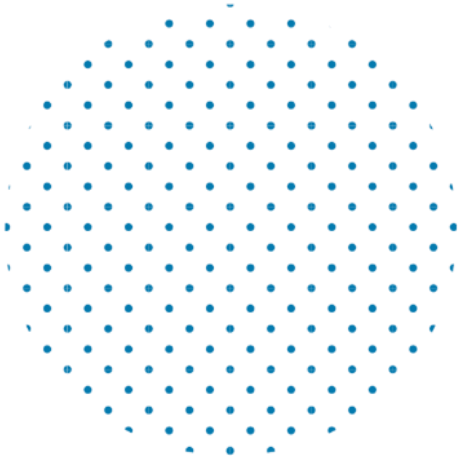
developmental stage or where changes arise in parental access or care arrangements.

- Explore with other prison-based projects the potential for developing a family mentoring role that would provide ongoing support during and after (Aftercare) the conclusion of Reach Out.
- Explore the possibility of developing a bridging programme that could run simultaneously with parent/caregiver in the community. Families and children are completely under-supported in the context of parental imprisonment in Ireland at the present time and Reach Out has the potential to provide a complimentary model of community supports.

Final researcher reflection

The research team feel privileged to have had the opportunity to engage in this evaluation. To have met commitment, passion and determination in the FusionCPL and Archways staff; to have met with the mothers and fathers whose children remain their priority despite the difficult reality of their lives in prison, and to have met prison staff who respect and value the importance of parenting relationships and strive to support them, has been a great honour. It is our conclusion that the Reach Out programme is a valuable support to the children and families of incarcerated parents, and to the incarcerated parents themselves.





Annex 1: Reach Out Programme Data

Programme Overview 2025

FusionCPL successfully delivered four Reach Out programmes across three prisons (two male, one female).

The data below indicates the number of participants starting and completing each programme cycle. In addition, data regarding specific cohort identifiers is provided, specifically

1. Membership of the Traveller community
2. Non-Irish ethnicity
3. Those linked in with probation services
4. Those experiencing addiction issues.

The Dóchas Centre, Women's Prison

Group 3 - programme completed May 2025
Participants:

- 10 participants commenced
- 8 participants completed
- 21 children
- Family day 17th May 2025 – Dóchas visiting area 2.5-hour family visit

Traveller community = 5	Non-Irish ethnicity = 2	Probation = 3	Addiction = 7

Mountjoy Male Prison (Main Prison)

Programme completed June 2025
Participants:

- 14 participants commenced
- 12 participants completed
- 51 children
- No family day – review for delivery 2026

Traveller community = 0	Non-Irish ethnicity = 0	Probation = 2	Addiction = 10

Shelton Abbey, Male Open Prison

Programme completed November 2025
Participants:

- 8 participants commenced
- 6 participants completed
- 21 children

Family day not run by Reach Out. Prison provided 2 day summer camp. Reach Out participants were supported to apply and engage with camp for their children. Certificated given and books provided to children.

Traveller community = 2	Non-Irish ethnicity = 1	Probation = 1	Addiction = 6

The Dóchas Centre, Women's Prison

Group 4, programme completed January 2026
Participants:

- 11 participants commenced
- 10 participants completed
- 31 children

Family day January 31 2026

Traveller community = 4	Non-Irish ethnicity = 1	Probation = 4	Addiction = 9

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