Reach Out
Evaluation Report
Executive Summary

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Introduction

Parental imprisonment presents significant challenges for children, parents, and family relationships. The disruption caused by incarceration can affect children's emotional wellbeing, sense of security, and long-term development, while also limiting parents' ability to remain actively involved in family life. Among the various factors associated with these challenges, the quality of parent-child communication has been identified as particularly important. When meaningful communication is reduced, relationships may become strained, emotional distance can develop, and opportunities for maintaining parental involvement are diminished.

The Reach Out Family Communication Programme was developed by FusionCPL in partnership with Archways in response to these challenges. Specifically designed for the prison context, Reach Out seeks to support meaningful parent-child relationships during incarceration through a combination of child development education, communication skills training, relationship-building activities, independent mentoring, and enhanced family engagement opportunities. The programme adopts an "inside-out" approach to parenting, recognising that parenting continues during imprisonment through ongoing communication and interaction with children in the community.

This evaluation was commissioned to examine the implementation, effectiveness, and perceived impact of the Reach Out programme. In particular, it explores how participants engage with the programme, the role of communication in supporting family relationships during imprisonment, and the extent to which the programme contributes to positive outcomes for parents, children, families, and prison communities.

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, and 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/extended 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 & Clark, 2022). In addition, ethnographic research was conducted drawing on observations and insights of the research team as they undertook repeated prison visits.

Findings

Headline Findings

Three overarching findings emerged from this evaluation.

First, Reach Out fills a significant gap in supports available to families affected by parental imprisonment in Ireland. Across all stakeholder groups, participants described an absence of comparable services that focus specifically on maintaining and strengthening meaningful parent-child relationships during incarceration.

Second, the programme's distinctive combination of communication-focused learning, child development education, family engagement and independent programme mentoring appears to be highly valued by participants and stakeholders. In particular, mentoring was consistently identified as one of the programme's most important and distinctive features, supporting participants to process and embed their learning.

Third, the evaluation found strong evidence of participant engagement, high completion rates, and sustained demand for future programme delivery. These findings provide a strong rationale for continued investment and carefully managed expansion across the Irish Prison Service.

Central Evaluation Finding

A key insight arising from this evaluation is that maintaining contact between parents and children is not, on its own, sufficient to sustain family relationships during imprisonment. Rather, the evidence suggests that the quality of communication between parents and children is critical.

Reach Out is distinctive because it focuses not only on helping parents maintain contact, but on helping them communicate more effectively, understand their children's developmental needs, and engage in meaningful, relationship-building interactions despite the limitations of imprisonment. Participants repeatedly described learning how to move beyond routine conversations and towards more responsive, age-appropriate and emotionally engaged communication with their children. Family members similarly reported perceived improvements in the quality of interactions between parents and children.

Why Reach Out Is Distinctive

The evaluation suggests that Reach Out differs from many prison-based parenting interventions in four important ways:

1. It prioritises communication and relationship quality rather than parenting knowledge alone.
2. It actively involves family members and caregivers outside prison.
3. It includes independent programme mentoring that bridges prison and community contexts.

4. It creates opportunities to apply learning through enhanced family engagement activities.

Importantly, participants who did not currently have contact with their children also reported benefits from the programme. For these individuals, Reach Out provided opportunities to reflect on parenting, prepare for future contact, and engage with mentors who could help navigate complex family circumstances and access arrangements. This suggests that the programme may have value both for maintaining existing relationships and for supporting relationship rebuilding.

Mentoring as a Distinctive Strength

Mentoring emerged as one of the most consistently valued elements of the programme.

Participants, family members and prison staff all highlighted the unique role played by mentors in providing continuity, emotional support, practical guidance in relation to their learning on the programme as well as liaison with families and external agencies. Rather than functioning simply as programme facilitators, mentors helped connect incarcerated parents, children, caregivers, social workers and prison staff.

While the evaluation cannot conclusively identify mentoring as the sole mechanism through which programme outcomes are achieved, the consistency with which stakeholders highlighted its importance suggests that it should be regarded as a defining feature of the Reach Out model. Any future expansion should therefore prioritise maintaining the independence, quality and intensity of mentoring provision.

Wider Policy Significance

The findings point beyond Reach Out itself to a broader policy issue.

Family members repeatedly described feeling unsupported while navigating imprisonment, maintaining contact with loved ones, and supporting children affected by parental incarceration. The evaluation suggests that Reach Out is operating in a context where dedicated family supports remain limited. As a result, some of the programme's positive effects appear to stem not only from the programme itself but also from its role in addressing gaps within the wider support landscape.

Consequently, this evaluation should not be interpreted solely as evidence regarding the effectiveness of Reach Out. It also highlights the continuing absence of comprehensive supports for families affected by imprisonment in Ireland and emphasises the need for a broader family-centred policy response.

Benefits for the Irish Prison Service

While Reach Out was developed primarily to support parents and families, the evaluation identified wider institutional benefits.

Prison staff reported increased awareness of parenting issues, stronger engagement with participants around family matters, and positive developments including enhanced family days and dedicated family spaces. In this regard, Reach Out appears to support

not only family wellbeing but also broader prison objectives relating to engagement, rehabilitation, family contact and reintegration.

The programme therefore demonstrates potential value both as a family-support intervention and as a mechanism for supporting more family-focused prison practice.

Immediate Priorities

1. Secure sustainable multiannual funding.
2. Maintain independent mentoring as a core component of programme delivery.
3. Expand equitable access to enhanced family visits across prison settings.
4. Protect programme fidelity through adequate staffing, training and supervision.

Medium-Term Priorities

1. Develop structured post-programme mentoring and aftercare supports.
2. Strengthen information-sharing with children, caregivers and family members.
3. Enhance supports specifically designed for children affected by parental imprisonment.
4. Continue evaluating outcomes for children and families over the longer term.

Conclusion

This evaluation indicates that Reach Out is a distinctive and evidence-informed intervention that strengthens family relationships during imprisonment and addresses a significant gap in support for children, parents and families affected by incarceration in Ireland.

The consistency of positive findings across participants, family members, programme staff and prison personnel suggests that Reach Out is making an important contribution to supporting meaningful family communication in the context of imprisonment. The programme's particular strength lies not simply in facilitating contact between parents and children, but in improving the quality of that contact through communication-focused learning, child development education, family engagement and independent mentoring.

The findings provide a strong rationale for sustainable investment and carefully managed national expansion. However, expansion should proceed in a manner that preserves the programme qualities most consistently valued by stakeholders: skilled delivery, independent mentoring, meaningful family engagement, and a focus on supporting parent-child relationships.

Most importantly, the evaluation demonstrates that imprisonment need not result in the complete loss of meaningful family relationships. With appropriate supports, parents can maintain a level of emotional engagement with their children's lives, children can better maintain important family connections, and families can be better supported through one of the most challenging experiences they face. Reach Out offers a practical and promising model for achieving those goals within the Irish prison system.

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