

Ragdoll Foundation Impact Questionnaire

Project Title

Play In Prison

Aim of your project

To work with the prison service to develop their child visits programmes using creative play opportunities and involving prisoners, their children and their families and carers, prison staff and playworkers in their development

What were the key outcome/s of the project ?

The key outcomes were:

- **Strengthening the bond between parent and child**
- **Building up prisoners confidence in their parenting and play skills**
- **Training prison staff to deliver play sessions**
- **Improved play opportunities for children visiting prison with an age range of 0 to 17 years**
- **Emotional support for children and young people through play sessions**
- **Improved physical and emotional contact between prisoners and their children on visits**
- **Removal of barriers to communication with estranged parents**
- **Involving both children and prisoners in the planning and development of child visits**
- **Change in attitude of prison staff**

How has your project made a difference to:

Children – The project has helped make children feel more relaxed about entering a prison. Little things like the staff wearing informal tee-shirts has assisted in taking away some of the fear for younger children. It has also provided them with

the reassurance that their parents are in a caring environment and has removed negative images they may have. The project has brought a little 'normality' to their lives at a very difficult and confusing time. It has also provided the older children with an opportunity to talk to their parents and discuss what is going on in their lives e.g the transition from primary to secondary school, puberty and exams. Most importantly the visits allow the children to experience a positive interaction with their parents and leave with happy memories. It also provides an opportunity for a much needed cuddle and strengthens family bonds ready for the prisoner's release.

Families – the project has enabled families to maintain the family bond and provides prisoners with the opportunity to interact with their child and once more be a 'normal' parent. This is vital for families with very young babies and children as a month can feel like a lifetime and it is all too easy to forget who mum is. Through play families can discuss important events in their lives and show their children that they still care and love them. It also provides parents with the opportunity to take responsibility for their children for a whole day.

The organisation – For the prison staff the project has been a real turning point. A number of staff initially could not see the value of the visits and had very negative attitudes. Since the programme began relationships between prisoners and prison staff has dramatically improved. This is partly due to the prison staff seeing prisoners in their role as parents and watching them develop their parenting skills. Prison staff have gained playwork skills and the project has uncovered a wealth of hidden talent in the staff e.g. a terrific face painter, and artist and a wonderful Father Christmas.

Wider community or society – the evaluation from the project has been of great interest to the wider community and Children's Links have delivered a series of training events as a result of this work. In addition to this the play team have been to Hong Kong to a play conference to speak about the value of 'Play Behind Bars'. Also we have been successful in a bid to the Big Lottery and now have a part-time Family Learning Officer

who is actively promoting play in prison and working with East Midlands prisons to develop their programmes.

What was the number of children / adults involved in the project as participants ?

The project has engaged with 131 children, 93 carers and 93 prisoners over the course of a year. Approximately 20 prison staff have participated in the programme and training.

What were the views of the participants. What they liked about the project, what they didn't like, what they think could have been better.

For many of the participants a positive point was the relax atmosphere at the visits. Prison staff are proud to be involved in the project and Morton Hall has recently won an award for the quality of their visits programme. Many of the prisoners and carers have commented on the opportunity to laugh and play. One child was quoted to say, 'This day was so fun! I loved seeing mummy and seeing all her friends here. You made me so happy and I would definitely come again!' (this was her first visit).

Comments for improvements were the food for lunch, this has now been addressed and healthy eating has become the norm. The only negative point for some families is the distance they have to travel, but the fact that the visit lasts all day has helped, as it is felt not to be worth the long journey for the shorter domestic visits.

Although we try to make the visits in the school holidays, this does not always work as some children are from out of county and so holidays vary.

What were the views of partners and agencies connected to the project. What they liked about the project, what they didn't like, what they think could have been better.

The agencies involved in the project have gained experience and knowledge through working together. The programme has continued to develop and more planning meetings are

scheduled to allow all partners involved the opportunity to assist in the development of activities.

What were the benefits to individuals, the groups involved?

The main benefits were providing families with the opportunity to experience 'normal' play activities and to remove the stigma of prison. It has also helped to develop relationships between all staff involved and families attending. Although attendees can change from visit to visit there is a real sense of community between children, parents and staff.

What areas of good practice would you like to share – what has worked well.

Often the teenagers are overlooked and one area that has worked well is engaging them in play. For many teenagers, when a parent is sentenced they can suddenly find themselves adopting the role of main carer. The visits provide them with the opportunity to shed that responsibility and become the child again. The team have worked hard to provide play activities that engage older children with the most successful being nail art, hair braiding, obstacle courses and team games.

What were the constraints (if any) – areas where the project has faced obstacles and barriers. How did you overcome them.

The main obstacles for the project was the restrictions on materials allowed into the prison. This was overcome by adapting games and activities. For instance some art and craft activities have used pre-cut materials, we have had to avoid using play dough, clay, etc, but have provided messy play using paint, water play and sand play. Scissors cannot be left on a table but a member of staff can have a pair if they are chained onto their belt with the children asking for assistance where needed.



Any other thoughts you wish to share

On a personal level this project has taken me on an amazing journey. I have worked in the world of play for 22 years but I feel that this part of my work has been the best. Watching families play together and seeing the happiness these children get from a child visit makes it all worth it. It is important that we remember it is NOT the children who have committed the offence and so they should not be punished.

Thank you for your time