

Behind Bars, But Ahead of the Game

Making Reading Memories with Parents Who Are Incarcerated

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When a parent is incarcerated, that situation brings challenges not only to the parent in jail, but also to the family left at home. A program of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension is hoping to not only reconnect families but also to bring an element of literacy to their interactions.

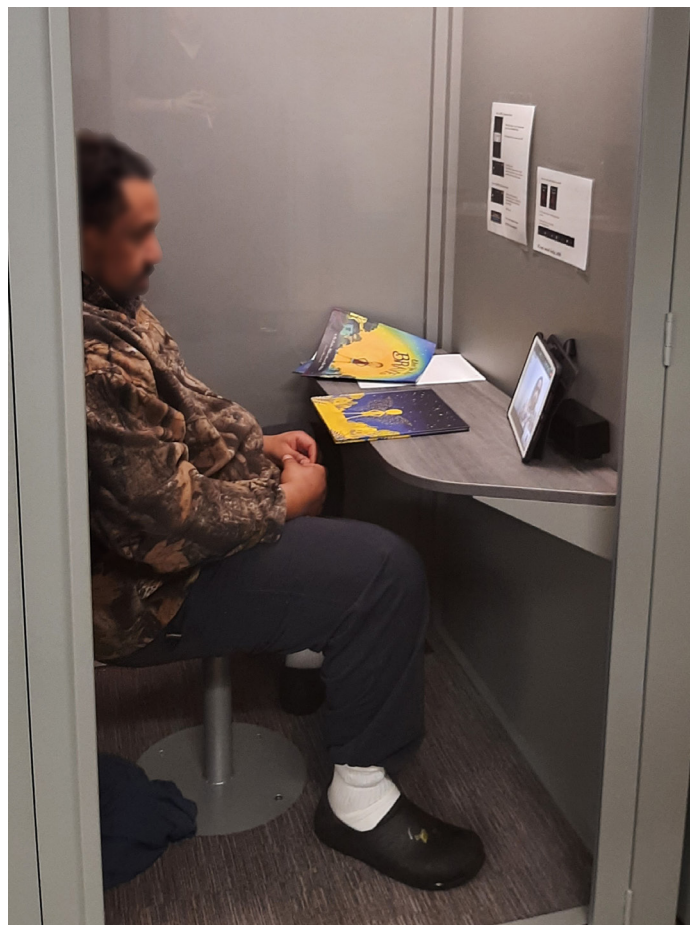
County jails in a dozen counties in Wisconsin have partnered with UW-Madison Extension to connect children and their incarcerated parent or caregiver through a literacy-rich experience called Making Reading Memories, which is one of several strategies of The Literacy Link.

To launch their program, Brown County Jail Administrator Captain Heidi J. Michel met with Brown County Library and the UW-Madison Extension about the program, which Brown County Jail launched in July 2022.

As part of the program, each parent in jail was offered the opportunity to take a workshop where they learned the benefits of creating a close bond with their children through reading. Parents learned how to make reading fun and strategies to connect with their children through books they love.

The workshop was led by the program's coordinator at UW-Madison Extension via Zoom, and four men participated. Once they completed the workshop, they chose a book and were video recorded reading the book to their child. Jail administration reviewed the videos and then sent the link and a copy of the book to the child; funding for the books and mailings was provided by a research grant from UW-Madison.

Based on a report compiled by UW-Madison Extension, parents noticed an improvement in the parent-child relationship and



Incarcerated parents can bring literacy to their children in this program.

felt like their video strengthened their bond to their child and/or family.

One participant noted, "It helped me open up as a father to really understand more about literature and more [about the] importance of reading books to them. I can do more as a father to help them learn . . . and a big part of them learning is wanting to . . . follow in my footsteps. And if they see that I think it's cool to read, they'll read also."



Sharon Verbeten is Youth Services Manager at the Manitowoc (WI) Public Library; this is her twenty-first year as editor of Children and Libraries.



Learning about the Making Reading Memories program.

Leaning into Literacy

Pajarita Charles, assistant professor in social work at UW-Madison, in partnership with UW-Madison Extension, and Julie Poehlmann, professor of human development and family studies, received a two-year grant to further evaluate and expand Making Reading Memories. Their research study includes implementation in a second location: Polk County. They intend to develop a sustainability plan to help meet the demands of the program around the state. Making Reading Memories is now implemented in fifteen counties in Wisconsin.

Charles said, “My sense is that there is growing interest in this program,” although she was unaware of similar programs around the nation.

Why doesn’t this exist elsewhere? Charles posits, “Jails and prisons in this country have limited capacity to adequately prepare parents before they are released back to their home communities. We know from research that building sustaining relationships between people who are incarcerated and family members can be helpful to both children and parents behind bars. However, evidence-based programming and significant resources are needed to deliver such services in partnership with corrections systems.”

Charles hopes her work will continue to build evidence and provide the rationale for replication in other communities.

She said, “I often convey . . . incarcerated parents are similar to most other parents—they want to be connected to their children and families.”

Since 2016, Mary Campbell Wood, founding member of the Literacy Link at the UW-Madison Extension, has worked at

Why This Matters

Parents who are incarcerated and their families may be often overlooked for many reasons; here are reasons why the Making Reading Memories program is important, based on research from UW-Madison Extension.

- Reading and looking at books together helps maintain the parent/child bond.
- Contact between parent and child may increase a successful transition back into the child’s life upon the parent’s reentry.
- A smooth reentry leads to better outcomes, including lower recidivism rates.
- Consistent contact with parents may reduce trauma for children during this stressful time.

Source: The Literacy Link, “Making Reading Memories at The Milwaukee House of Correction,” preliminary report, September 2022, <https://theliteracylink.extension.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1200/2022/08/Making-Reading-Memories-Parent-Interview-Report.pdf>.

strengthening bonds between parent and child, increasing literacy capability and opportunity, and focusing on supporting caregivers; Making Reading Memories is just one of these strategies.

“In general, in our country, children have really been overlooked; it hasn’t been paid attention to,” she said. That, she added, is because of a huge incarceration rate and an overload in systems. “Their families and children are not even second or third thought.”

This program aims to remedy that—one book and one interaction at a time. And parents behind bars are meeting the call.

One participant said, “My child was like, ‘Dad, that’s awesome. Like, I never thought they’d let you do that.’ And I just—I was speechless. I didn’t really expect my child to be as excited as he was, how happy he was, and my wife too, it was just like, I don’t know.”

“It just made me feel like even though I’m gone, everything will be OK.” &

For more information on The Literacy Link and Making Reading Memories, visit <https://theliteracylink.extension.wisc.edu/>.