

Maintaining father-child relationships using video-visitation in Australian prisons.

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Literature highlights

- Overall, prison visitation literature demonstrates a range of visitation benefits for:
 - family relationships, including improved post-release reunification
 - mental health
 - engagement and performance in school
 - reduction in prison infractions
 - improved adjustment to prison and post-release
 - recidivism
- However, visit environment, experience and support impact on visitation outcomes
- Separation is a major source of stress, and visits can be challenging (cost, travel etc)

Research background

Aim: to understand the experiences and impacts of video visits on fathers in prison, carers of their children, community and corrective services

- Funded by Australian Institute of Criminology
- Research period 2021-2023
- Seven eligible jurisdictions, six participated
- Research supported by an Aboriginal Reference Group
- Ethics approval/approval to conduct research provided by all relevant Corrective Services and AH&MRC

Research design

Stage 1

- Semi Structured interviews with 19 staff across 5 Corrective Services
- Role variety, involved in VV development, dissemination, monitoring
- Written response provided by one CS
- Deidentified visit data provided by two Corrective Services

Stage 2: NSW

- Semi structured interviews with 27 fathers in two NSW prisons
- Semi structured interviews with 17 caregivers
- Semi structured interviews with 6 support workers from two community organisations

Key findings

1. Contraband is significantly reduced

There's been a massive reduction in the introduction of contraband. That's one of the key [areas] that's been really good. People haven't been pressured and assaulted and threatened to bring stuff in with family members...there's none of that peer pressure no more (SA staff 5)

2. Staff training and interactions during visits could be improved

She's like—wouldn't even let me say goodbye to my family. She's like, 'You gotta go.' And she started to press that button to hang up ... She could have at least just been nicer and said ... 'Look, you need to say goodbye.' (Father 6)

Key findings

3. Access to the child's world via the visual affordances of video-conferencing technology is transformative for some families.

Because, I guess, the good thing about doing them on the video is that she just takes him wherever she goes. If she's finished playing with her activities, she's like, 'Okay, we're done now', and she goes on. They go on to the next thing, you know, and it's like he'll be on the trampoline with her. (Carer 11)

4. Video visits offer a more child- and family-friendly experience overall

I didn't really like them coming in, because jail, there's a lot of bad people in here. And if something happens on a visit, where it has in the past, I don't want the kids to see that because my kids had never seen me do anything, and they've never seen my bad side. (Father 23)

Key findings

5. Video visits mitigate the visit barriers experienced by some families

It would have been a six-hour drive each way for a 30-minute visit. Now, I couldn't do that to three kids. (Carer 14)

6. Technical barriers remain, and negatively impact on visit quality. Some sites are more affected than others.

The other thing is ... remoter areas have limited 3G and 4G capability. A lot of the remote areas, including here, they're still on 3G. A lot of them will be out of range and not able to do it. (WA staff 1)

Key findings

7. Being together and sharing physical affection is critical for families

I'm very thankful these video things come about, but nothing is like in-person ... hugs and getting to see him grow—you can't see how tall he gets ... the difference or energy when you can hug him and hold him is different to the video ... So it makes a difference, but contact visits will always be the best visits, I believe, for family in general. (Father 24)

8. Problematic and unsafe interactions may occur

I mentioned [earlier] people flaunting different parts of their body. When people got used to it [video visits], it didn't happen. So I was surprised how people responded to it, very quickly coming into line with how the government wanted it to operate ... Everybody decided they will follow the rules and they wanted that visit regardless. (Qld staff 4)

Summary

- Providing regular visitation opportunities for families has broad and deep benefits for corrective services, parents in prison, their families and the wider community
- Prison environment and visit process matters – child friendly environments and respectful processes and interactions maximise benefits
- In-person visits can be challenging for some families, video visits offer a valuable complementary option
- Families need support to enhance the quality of interactions. Support will extend the benefits of visitation and increase safety
- Support can be embedded into existing programs. Innovative modes of support should be trialled to generate a strong evidence base.

Key messages to fathers



Follow the child's lead:

Encourage the child to share toys and be understanding if the child needs a break.



Ask the child's other parent/carer about the child's interest:

Learn about the child's interests to keep the conversation going, asking about favourite activities and friends.



If you can, keep in contact with the child and their parent/carer:

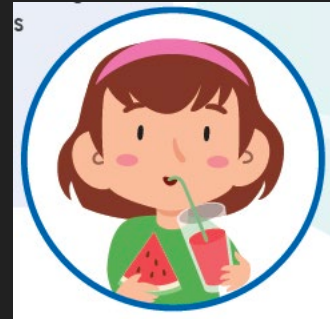
Regularly scheduled visits help fit their father into your child's routine and makes it easier to involve them in parenting decisions.

Key messages to child's other parent/carer



Prepare joint activities:

Plan for father and child to do things together they enjoy, such as reading a book together or both doing a drawing.



Bring the father into the child's world:

Schedule visits to enable the child to bring the father into events such as birthdays and prompt child to share new toys, drawings or awards.



Co-regulate before, during and after visits:

Video-visits may bring up strong feelings. Stay calm, relaxed and available to help the child process their emotional reactions and return to a state of calm.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the participation and assistance of the Department of Justice, Government of Western Australia, the Australian Capital Territory Corrective Services, Corrections Victoria, South Australia Department for Correctional Services, and Queensland Corrective Services in the conduct of stage 1 of the research, and Corrective Services New South Wales in stages 1 and 2.

In each jurisdiction several key contacts and interview participants were instrumental in making this research possible and we extend our deep appreciation to those individuals.

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Technology Enabled Prison Visiting, Special Issue of *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* available:
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