

“I’m the best dad ever, apart from being here”: An evaluation of the nurturing programme parenting intervention for fathers in a UK prison

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ABSTRACT

Parental imprisonment currently effects around 312,000 children in England and Wales, and is an adverse childhood experience associated with poorer outcomes in education and health. Parenting programmes are known to positively impact parent and child outcomes for families, however, the evidence on the impact of these within prisons is variable. This research reports on an evaluation of the Nurturing Programme for incarcerated fathers on a Family Intervention Unit in a Male UK prison. The Nurturing Programme is a 10-session parenting programme which aims to help parents and children live emotionally healthy lives, focusing on four main constructs: self-awareness, appropriate expectations, empathy, and positive discipline. The course was delivered over a five-week period (two sessions per week) for up to 12 men per course. The evaluation found that the programme had significant positive impact on the wellbeing of the fathers with strengthened family relationships and positive changes for children and partners in the home reported. Participants reported several positive outcomes from the programme including a statistically significant increase in self-reported wellbeing on the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale. Future evaluation of The Nurturing Programme should continue using the following additional measures: 1) capturing quantitative changes in parenting style and skills; 2) measuring outcomes and perceptions of the programme for children and partners of fathers in prison; and 3) capturing longer term outcomes for fathers particularly following release from prison. These outcomes would make a valuable contribution to the sparse evidence on the effectiveness of parenting interventions in UK prisons.

1. Introduction

In 2022 it was reported that there are approximately 11.5 million people in prison globally (Penal Reform International, 2022) with substantially increased rates (24 %) of incarceration worldwide since 2000 (McLaughlin et al., 2016; Penal Reform International, 2022). In England and Wales, there are approximately 87,700 adults in prison of which 96 % are male (Ministry of Justice, 2023) and it is estimated that 54 % of incarcerated adults have a child younger than 18 years (Williams et al., 2012). Parental imprisonment currently effects around 312,000 children in England and Wales (Felitti et al., 1998; Kincaid et al., 2019) and is an adverse childhood experience (ACE) associated with poorer outcomes in education and health (Felitti et al., 1998). The extant literature reports lower academic performance (Habecker, 2013; Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist et al., 2022; McLeod et al., 2019; Poehlmann, 2005), truancy and bullying (Action for Prisoners’ Families, 2003), poor mental wellbeing (Bradshaw et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2013), increased risk of antisocial

behaviour and offending in adulthood (Giordano et al., 2019; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Morgan et al., 2014; Murray & Farrington, 2008; Murray et al., 2012), and intergenerational diffusion of criminal behaviours (Besemer & Farrington, 2012) amongst children with an incarcerated parent. The effects of being in prison has a significant impact on the identity of the incarcerated father who often feels guilt and devalued as a parent (Matz et al., 2022; McCrudden et al., 2014; Purvis, 2013). Lack of contact with their child(ren) and families as a result of restrictions within prisons means a father misses important parenting opportunities such as feeding, playing, and significant dates such as birthdays; further lowering their self-esteem and self-worth as a parent (McCrudden et al., 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2016). Research suggests that maintaining family contact whilst incarcerated has positive outcomes for the individual, particularly upon release when reintegrating with their family, and reduces reoffending post-release (Williams et al., 2012).

Research suggests that a minority of prisons across Europe provide

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interventions in prisons to support incarcerated parents, their children, and families (Jones et al., 2013). A limited number of studies in Australia, Sweden, the United States, and UK have reported that prison-based parenting programmes are one type of intervention that are associated with improved parent and child outcomes for families (Allely, 2020; Barlow, 2016; Buston, 2018; Hayes et al., 2018; Langston, 2016) although, the evidence on the impact of these type of interventions within prisons is variable (Matz et al., 2022; Nilsen et al., 2015). Armstrong et al. (2018) systematically reviewed twenty-two studies on parenting interventions within US prisons. The included programmes were delivered for three-to-twelve weeks, in a group format, and with supplemental assignments and activities. The authors reported that thirteen of the reviewed studies found moderate, short-term improvements for parents in parenting skills and knowledge, parental wellbeing, and parent-child relationships; and for children, through feeling less stressed, less depressed, and having more positive parent-child relationships. In the UK, studies in prisons in England (Langston, 2016), Scotland (Buston, 2018), and Northern Ireland (Hayes et al., 2018; McCrudden et al., 2014) have reported improved parenting skills and father-child relationships, increased self-esteem, confidence, and emotional regulation. Further, these studies also underscored the importance of the programme leader's delivery style and the non-stigmatising environment created by them as being fundamental to their continued engagement and retention in the programme.

The existing evidence suggests prison-based parenting interventions are promising in improving parenting skills and relationships with growing interest in these kinds of interventions in UK prison reform policy (Farmer, 2017), but, there remains uncertainty on how these interventions can be effectively implemented and what their impact is, particularly in the UK context. In light of this, this study sought to evaluate the implementation of the Nurturing Programme for incarcerated fathers who reside on a Family Intervention Unit (sometimes referred to as 'family wing') in a Category B¹ Male UK prison. To our knowledge this is the first published evaluation of the Nurturing Programme in UK prisons.

1.1. The Nurturing programme

The Nurturing Programme is a 10-week pre-existing parenting programme which aims to nurture empathy and self-awareness and help participants become positive parents. The programme focuses on four main constructs: self-awareness, appropriate expectations, empathy, and positive discipline (Family Links, 2000, 2017, 2023). The programme was originally based on a US-developed intervention (Bavolek, 2000) and has been developed over many years for UK settings by Family Links practitioners at national charity The Centre for Emotional Health. It is designed to be delivered by trained group leaders who are employed and trained to deliver the programme by provider agencies including Local Authorities, voluntary organisations and independent consultancies. It had been widely used across local authorities in the UK since 2000 (for example, research with parents to inform outcome measures recruited participants from programmes running in 22 local authorities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Ghate, 2015)), and is predominantly delivered in community-based settings for example schools and children's centres (Ghate, 2016). Family Links have developed an adapted version of the Nurturing Programme available specifically for use in prisons in the form of the 'Prison Handbook'. This is aimed at prisoners on short sentences near to release and includes adaptations such as: specific guidelines on how to approach prisons to run the programme; how to deliver within a prison setting; and information

¹ Category B prisons are either local or training prisons. Local prisons house prisoners that are taken directly from court in the local area (sentenced or on remand). Training prisons hold long-term and high-security prisoners (<https://prisonjobs.blog.gov.uk/your-a-d-guide-on-prison-categories/>).

for trainers about how prisoners experiences might affect their learning (Family Links, 2012). This handbook is only available to those who have been trained in the 10-week Nurturing Programme (Family Links, 2000, 2017). The programme was further adapted by the course facilitator to suit the needs of the prison where it was delivered, who ran it over a 5-week period (two sessions per week) rather than over a 10-week period. This was to facilitate course retention as prisoners were mostly on remand and run the risk of being released or moved in under 10-weeks and therefore may not complete the programme.

In order to participate in the programme, the Category B Prison required men to be resident on the Family Intervention Unit within the prison. The Family Intervention Unit is a 60 bed single cell unit which aims to support prisoners in maintaining healthy positive relationships through open dialogue thus reducing conflict, family breakdown, and alienation, in line with the ambitions of the Lord Farmer review (Farmer, 2017). Men who apply to be accommodated on the Family Intervention Unit are risk assessed and must agree to actively engage in their children's lives and participate in some of the interventions delivered on the Unit. Men self-enrolled on the Nurturing Programme as part of this agreement.

The Nurturing Programme is run over a 5-week period, with men attending two sessions per week in an education room on the Unit. The course was facilitated by a trained Family Intervention Worker employed by the local authority. The specific aims of the evaluation were:

- 1) to understand the implementation of The Nurturing Programme at the Category B Prison (including barriers and facilitators, fidelity, and reach)
- 2) to explore fathers experiences and perceptions of The Nurturing Programme
- 3) to understand the intended and actual impacts of The Nurturing Programme on fathers, children, and their families.

2. Methodology

2.1. Survey measures

Monitoring data was provided by the Family Link Worker (acting as gatekeeper) on the number of men participating in the programme. Pre (n = 30) and post (n = 26) surveys with fathers undertaking The Nurturing Programme were completed at the first (week 1, session 1) and final session (week 5, session 10). The questionnaires measured demographics (age, gender, ethnicity). As recommended by Family Links, wellbeing was measured using the self-reported Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) (Tennant et al., 2007). The self-reported WEMWBS scale is a 14-item scale covering subjective wellbeing and psychological functioning. The scale is scored by summing each item answered on a 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time) Likert Scale, with a minimum score of 14 and maximum of 70. Parenting skills were measured using the Brief Parental Self-Efficacy Scale (Woolgar et al., 2023). This replaced the Family Links recommended tool which was the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) as this measure requires parents to have detailed knowledge of their children's behaviours and emotional responses. This may not be possible for fathers in prison who are not observing their children's behaviours on a regular basis. The Brief Parental Self-Efficacy is a five-item scale answered on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) Likert Scale with a total score ranging from 5 (lower levels of parental self-efficacy) to 25 (higher levels of parental self-efficacy).

2.2. Interviews

The review used the RE-AIM (Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, Maintenance) framework (Holtrop et al., 2021) to guide the evaluation by illustrating typical evaluation questions specific

to the research aims. These provided the foundation for the interview topic guides for both stakeholders and prisoners.

The Family Link worker acted as a gatekeeper and assisted with recruitment of stakeholders. Stakeholders were initially approached by the researcher (author 2) via email and provided with a participant information sheet. Written consent was taken and author 2 (JH) carried out semi-structured online interviews with stakeholders involved in the design and delivery of the programme (n = 3). The interviews took place via Microsoft Teams lasting between 30 and 60 min. Quotes from stakeholders are labelled S and participant number. The stakeholders included a Family Link worker delivering the programme who has extensive previous experience of delivering same in children's centres; head of Community Engagement at the prison; and commissioner of the programme from Merseyside VPR who was seconded from Children's Services at Local Authority and is experienced in early years provision.

The Family Link worker acted as a gatekeeper and assisted with recruitment of incarcerated men to the study. For the pre- and post-questionnaires, the gatekeeper provided men participating in the study with a participant information sheet at the first session of the programme. Completion of the questionnaire was taken as implied consent. Questionnaires were initially piloted during the first course of the calendar year (data not included in the evaluation) and men participating found the scales acceptable and comprehensible. The questionnaires were completed during the first and last Nurturing Programme session at the prison and the Family Link worker made clear to participants that they did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to. There was no financial or program incentive given for participation.

On completion of the programme, the Family Link Worker approached men on the wing who had completed the programme and asked if they would be happy to participate in an interview. The Family Link worker scheduled the interview times and informed both the men and the prison staff. Two researchers (EH, JH) visited the prison with the Family Link Worker on three occasions (after course 1 and 2, course 3 and 4 and, course 5 and 6 to ensure good recall of the programme at the interview) and semi-structured interviews (n = 25) took place face-to-face in the education room on the Family Intervention Unit with the researchers. The interviews explored their views on the intervention, areas for development and actual and anticipated impacts (see [supplementary material](#)). Quotes from fathers are labelled F and participant number.

2.3. Data Analyses

2.3.1. Quantitative analysis

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests. For wellbeing scores, using the standard WEMWBS analysis template,² a weighted average score was calculated for each person and scores were grouped into low (<43), moderate (43–60) and high (>60) wellbeing. For parental skills, statistical significance between the mean scores at the first and last session were calculated using Wilcoxon signed rank test.

2.3.2. Qualitative analysis

Qualitative interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then imported into Nvivo12 software which was used to manage the data. The data was analysed using the six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). These six steps were: 1) familiarising with the data, individually first, then in pairs to discuss early ideas; 2) assigning codes to data. This was done by author one in a systematic, logical manner using Nvivo12

software; 3) searching for themes. Using an iterative process, author one developed initial themes and subthemes; 4) reviewing themes; refining and reviewing of themes was carried out by authors EH and JH through examination of patterns across themes, reflecting on the RE-AIM framework, and the development of a thematic map; 5) defining and naming themes found was completed collectively (EH, JH) until a consensus was reached on final themes and subthemes; 6) and writing up results. Inductive thematic analysis generated data driven codes and themes through an iterative data review process (EH, JH) which included identifying and illustrating implicit and explicit themes within the data (Guest et al., 2014). Both researchers are female, educated to post-graduate or doctoral level and had no prior relationship with the men they interviewed.

2.3.3. Ethics

Ethical approval was received for this study from HM Prison and Probation Services (HMPPS) National Research Committee (Ref 2023–148) and Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 23/PHI/009).

3. Findings

Three main themes with subthemes emerged from the data analysis. These are outlined in [Fig. 1](#) and illustrative quotations are provided within the textual thematic findings below.

3.1. Reach

3.1.1. Recruitment and retention

During 2023, the Nurturing Course ran seven times at HMP Alt-course, and pre and post survey data from six courses (May – November 2023) are included in this evaluation. The first course (February/March 2023) was used to pilot the pre and post surveys for face validity with men finding the WEMWBS (5) and Brief Parental Self-Efficacy (6) scales both comprehensible (assessed through completed surveys) and acceptable (assessed through feedback to the Family Link Worker).

Thirty-seven men attended the first session of the programmes and 27 completed the final session (a retention rate of 73 %, [Table 1](#)). Pre-course questionnaires were available for 30 men, of which 26 also completed post course questionnaires. Half of men participating were aged 18–35 (50 %) and half aged 36–50 years (50 %). The majority were of white ethnicity (87 %, [Table 2](#)). The main reason for attrition was men who were on remand being released or being moved to another prison before they could complete the course.

Findings from the interviews showed good awareness and retention of the course content, with participants able to recall and describe many of the core concepts. The most frequently discussed aspects were empathy, listening skills, improving communication with their children, and discipline and praise.

“A lot of it was on a board where we interacted or... she asked us stuff and we gave answers or our thoughts. There was some written bits where we filled in booklets or pieces of paper. Also listening, but we were participating as well... Discipline, empathy, ways to improve communication... We weren't discussing just the good, the way things shouldn't be done or perhaps be done better and hopefully try and learn better ways to communicate with our children mostly, and in the family environment” (F16).

3.1.2. Engagement

Stakeholders emphasised that the course was about supporting all parents to develop their parenting skills rather than making negative judgements about their ability to parent. This was reflected in the participant interviews, where all participants spoke positively of the non-judgemental, informal delivery style of the course coordinator. This was described by participants as an important factor in their

² Guidance and templates for the analysis of WEMWBS are produced by Warwick Medical School and available at: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/using/register/resources>.

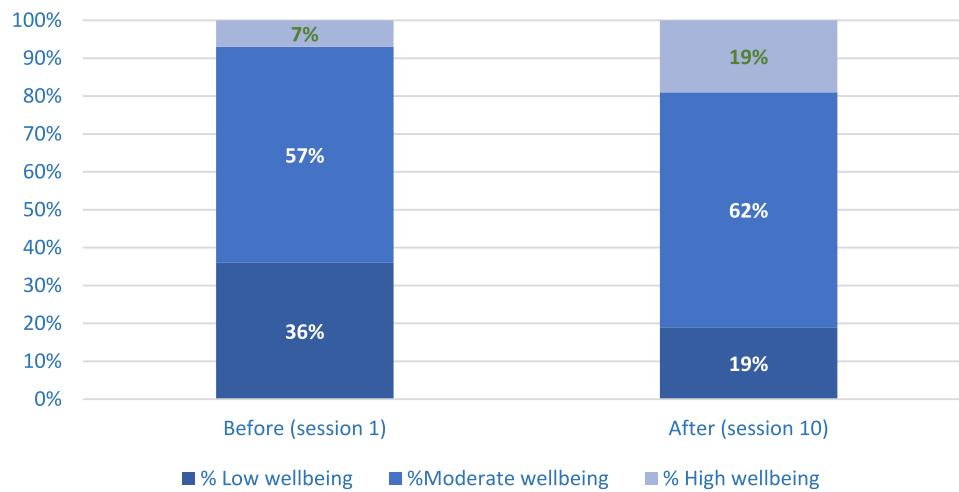


Fig. 1. Themes and subthemes.

Table 1
Recruitment and retention per course.

Course (2023)	Number who attended first session	Number who completed last session	Number completing pre-course questionnaire	Number completing post-course questionnaire
April/May	6	6	6	6
May/June	6	5	6	5
July/August	6	3	3	3
Aug/Sept	5	3	5	3
Sept/Oct	7	5	5	4
Oct/Nov	7	5	5	5
Total	37	27	30	26

Table 2
Demographic characteristics of participants completing pre-course questionnaire.

	Number of men	%
Age group		
18–25 years	4	13.3
26–35 years	11	36.7
36–50 years	15	50.0
Ethnicity		
White or White British	26	86.7
Other	4	13.3
Total	30	100

engagement in the programme. A small number of those interviewed interpreted the instructive language and tone used in The Nurturing Programme workbook as passing judgement on their parenting skills (“don’t tell me how to be a dad. I’m the best dad ever apart from me being here” F5). This was described in contrast to the non-judgemental style used by the course facilitator and participants felt comfortable to discuss this with them and provide feedback on these aspects.

“[Family Link Worker] is boss. If I’d had a teacher like her at school, I probably wouldn’t have got in any trouble. She’s amazing like honestly, I think if anyone else had taught it, like I went on a course before and the woman she treat [sic] me like a prisoner whereas [Family Link Worker] treat [sic] me like a Dad, if that makes sense” (F7).

The Nurturing Programme sessions were delivered in an informal, interactive, group setting which participants felt was a favourable delivery style which was considered by most as a safe space for sharing their experiences. Participants with literacy difficulties, neurodiversity, and mental health conditions all described initial apprehension about

the group setting but spoke positively of how the facilitator created a space where everyone could talk openly and accommodated their needs.

“I struggle being around people quite a bit when I’m on the outside I mean. It usually has always just sort of been my partner and my kids. And that’s just like, my world. I don’t really have much to do with my family. I don’t really have like a big social group, so I tend to get stuck in that bubble, do you know what I mean, and because I’ve got mild autism and stuff like that as well. So socially, like I struggle with people. Like there were times I did struggle, like coming in and sitting with a group, you know, but it was, it wasn’t difficult. It was quite relaxing” (F6).

3.2. Implementation

3.2.1. Motivation to participate in the programme

Many of the men interviewed reported their initial motivation to enrol on The Nurturing Programme was to adhere to expectation that they would engage with programmes on offer on the Family Intervention Unit: “Got told I had to do it to stay on this wing, the family wing” (F12). A number of participants described initial apprehension or reluctance before joining the programme due to a number of factors including a dislike of classroom learning and having felt judged and stigmatised when attending previous programmes. A large number of men interviewed also felt that they may not have much to learn from the programme because they were confident in their parenting skills. In the majority of cases, these participants had these fears allayed once they began the programme and reported a positive experience. Word-of-mouth from both staff and men who had previously completed the programme was also a considerable factor in increasing motivation to participate. Interestingly, most of those who were apprehensive at first reported positive outcomes on completion and had recommended the programme to others already on the wing, or those who were new to it.

"I'm on the family wing and I got told it was very good course before and I wanted to know if I could learn something from it, which I did. Bit of an eye opener compared to how we were brought up. But that's why I went on it. I'm glad I did" (F18).

Interviewees also reported broader goals and motivations centred on improving relationships with children and partners, reflecting on, and changing, their own behaviours and learning the skills required to keep a strong positive bond with their child(ren) whilst incarcerated. Some of the men said their motives were driven by their own childhood experiences of parenting including parental separation. Those who alluded to unhealthy or negative experiences with their own parents were explicitly aiming to do "the opposite" (F6) with their own children and felt that The Nurturing Programme would support this.

"It made me realise the way they parented me, by doing this course, it's quite toxic how I was brought up, you know, it was very unhealthy. And it's probably the cause of a lot of my problems in life and it's just even more sort of concrete in my head, like do you know what I mean, I'm not gonna let that happen for my kids" (F6).

3.2.2. Barriers and facilitators

Factors considered as potential barriers to participation by stakeholders included differences in approaches to parenting and age-related attitudes to parenting. For example, some discussed that fathers who were older or who had already raised a family may be less inclined to enrol on the programme compared with fathers with younger children or first-time parents. As highlighted in the fathers' motivations discussed above, stakeholders also identified literacy, and general negative perceptions of the programme prior to commencement as potential barriers.

"Sometimes that's difficult for the likes of that generation to also try and alter the way that they've been brought up and the way they've brought their children up because they see nothing wrong in that way. Times have moved on and that's from a different place" (S3).

Participating fathers described three factors which facilitated their engagement and successful completion of the course: peer support, the non-judgemental environment, and the reflective nature of the content. Participants alluded that prison wings are an environment where trust is limited, and 'male bravado' is commonplace. They described how discussions among prisoners tended to be very impersonal and discussing their family and children was not commonplace: *"I wouldn't ask people like how their kids are getting on because it's not my thing" (F25)*. However, it was reported by many men participating that the peer group style of The Nurturing Programme sessions broke down some of these barriers and encouraged sharing of personal stories. This knowledge of each other's families led to more positive relationships and discussions between men outside of the programme.

"If you share stuff then they tend to share stuff that they wouldn't share with anyone else. Because you're being humble, do you know what I mean. It's showing your vulnerabilities and things like that so it kind of breeds, do you know what I mean. Because you bottle things up a lot. It does help. You notice, when you do talk to other lads, they talk back. It's just getting that, getting over that initial thing and that was a good setting for it" (F11).

As previously discussed, the course facilitator tried to create a non-judgemental environment for the programme, and participants acknowledged that this facilitated their engagement. Participants compared this to previous stigmatising learning experiences including feeling judged for being a prisoner and for having difficulties understanding at school.

"Brilliant stuff to make you feel like you are not in jail do you know what I mean? For that little half an hour or hour, whatever the session is... at the time it just makes you feel normal again, you come in here you do this you do that, then back to reality out there" (F14).

A number of participants also discussed being diagnosed with autism, ADHD, mental health conditions and having low levels of literacy all of which have the potential to further their experiences of stigma. Being able to participate in The Nurturing Programme in a non-judgemental environment led participating men to feel they could safely engage, share, and learn from the course.

"Without her I probably wouldn't have even lasted five weeks, I never went to school, never finished school. Like, I just didn't have an interest because they just used to treat me like an idiot whereas she just sat, if you didn't understand something she'd explain it, she went out of her way to make you feel, she understands we're in jail but just because we're in jail doesn't mean we're a bad dad or bad people. Certain people's lives lead to different paths, and she made you feel included instead of just a piece of crap" (F7).

Some of the men discussed how the format of the Nurturing Programme allowed them to reflect on their own lives, childhood, and family relationships. This led to increased understanding of how they had been parented and the ways which this had impacted them growing up. This allowed them to reflect on some of the mistakes they may have made in their own parenting. For several men, this resulted in a change to their mindset; instead of looking back negatively at their parenting experiences, they were looking forward and making positive changes.

"I've been a dad since I was 17... the stuff I've learnt in here made me realise that some of the stuff I've done at home maybe isn't the right way to go about things" (F7).

Stakeholders identified a number of organisational facilitating factors to programme implementation. Receiving funding for the Family Worker through a regional Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) was essential to setting up the programme and this funding was noted as a vital factor in embedding and sustaining the programme. However, this also suggests that reduction or removal of this funding would present a significant barrier to sustaining the programme at the prison. Senior management within the prison who were supportive of interventions to improve prisoners' wellbeing were also a key cultural and practical facilitator. Practically, this facilitated prompt access to the necessary vetting and training needed by the Family Link Worker to allow the course to commence. Culturally, the course facilitator described feeling 'accepted' within the unit by both staff and incarcerated men. This was aided by being easily identifiable as non-prison staff (*"I think because I don't wear any uniform, they don't see me as a threat" S2*) and by delivering multiple interventions on the unit, which made her a familiar face.

"There's nothing financial from the prison's perspective of having this facilitated... the vetting brings a financial cost, the training brings a financial cost... but there's no... monthly or weekly financial cost or an annual contract, you know, so it's fully funded" (S3).

3.3. Impact

3.3.1. Improved wellbeing

The wellbeing of men participating in the programme was measured at the first (session 1) and last session (session 10) of the programme using the WEMWBS scale (Tennant et al., 2007). Both pre and post WEMWBS scales were fully completed by 19 men. As summarised in Table 3, among these men there was a significant positive change in men's wellbeing ($Z = -3.008, p = 0.003$) from session one ($M = 46.5, SD = 8.97$) to session 10 ($M = 52.5, SD = 10.29$). While these scores demonstrate that the programme had a positive impact on men's wellbeing during the five weeks they were participating in the programme, further follow-up would be needed to understand if these improvements in wellbeing were sustained long term.

3.3.2. Strengthened relationships

Most fathers interviewed reported positive, strengthened

Table 3
Pre and post WEMWBS scores & Parental self-efficacy scores.

Variable	Participants	pre		post		Z	P
		M	SD	M	SD		
WEMWBS	19	46.5	8.97	52.5	19.29	-3.008	0.003
Brief Parental Self Efficacy scale	22	22.7	2.38	22.8	2.80	-1.041	0.298

relationships with both partners and their children, which they attributed directly to The Nurturing Programme. As shown in the example quoted below, men reported using the skills acquired in the programme sessions to strengthen relationships with their children during telephone calls and during a family visit to the prison.

“I had the course on Wednesday it was, and I had the visit one day and me little girl was being naughty and messing around and normally I’d say, ‘stop it’ and shout at her. I never, I said, ‘what’s wrong?’ she sat on me knee and she tell [sic] me. That course probably helped me honestly” (F1).

Men felt that the listening, empathy, and negotiating skills learnt on The Nurturing Programme increased their awareness of the needs of their children and was responsible for positive changes such as improved communication with children, active listening, and giving praise.

“I never used to say to him when he was three and a half, I’m proud of you because he didn’t know what it meant. And then learning from the course now, he’s just had sports day yesterday, and I said I’m proud of you for winning the race and he says, ‘thank you daddy, thanks for being proud of me” (F5).

The qualitative interview findings with men showed that for most, The Nurturing Programme taught them how to be an active partner or co-parent whilst incarcerated. One of the recurring themes from the men was they had learned to understand what parenting difficulties their partner might be facing outside of the prison environment, and how to navigate any family or parental issues that may arise through joint decision-making without being patronising to their partner, thus reducing interpersonal conflict, and improving relationships.

“I try and listen a bit more. Try and be a bit more perhaps thoughtful to people, well to me partner and children at home, who, they’re obviously going through the situation without me so it’s a little bit different for us in here to outside... It just gives you a bit more thought on how you should probably lead your life or help other people in your life a bit more” (F16).

Some of those interviewed noted their intention to use the skills they have acquired from The Nurturing Programme upon release from prison particularly in terms of co-parenting and their relationship with their partner.

“I should hopefully be out in about five or six weeks, and I am hopefully going to put a lot of stuff into place... Just to listen more. Not to just like jump into things, to discuss things first. Cos when you jump into things, like I said before, speaking about it a couple of times, it’s about identifying ways we can go round it and coming up with the best ideas we can” (F11).

3.3.3. Confidence in parenting skills

Men’s confidence in their parenting skills were measured using the Brief Parental Self-Efficacy Scale (Woolgar et al., 2023). As illustrated in Table 3, there was only a very small change in parental confidence from the first to final session (22.2 vs 22.7) and this was not statistically significant ($Z = -1.04, p = 0.3$). There may be several contextual reasons for this lack of significant change. Firstly, fathers’ initial scores on the scale were high ($M = 22.2$, maximum possible score 25) and fathers who were resident on the family intervention unit were more likely to be in regular contact with their families to maintain an active role in family life. Secondly, as previously discussed, the qualitative findings indicate

that many fathers entered the programme not anticipating that they would have much to learn from the course (i.e. with high parental self-efficacy) but found on completion of the programme that they had learnt new skills and strategies that they had previously been unaware of. Furthermore, the qualitative findings demonstrated improved confidence in a number of parenting skills including negotiating with children, empathy and active listening skills, and better communication and understanding which are discussed below.

Through The Nurturing Programme, the participating men stated that they had learned ways to negotiate with their children in a variety of situations by changing previous parenting behaviours to result in better outcomes for both parent and children. The fathers discussed examples of implementing these negotiating skills with their children on a visit or during a telephone call, for example, how to calm an upset or angry child or allowing a child to be involved in the decision-making as illustrated below.

“As it went on like learning little things like negotiating with a 6-year-old which is difficult, but... she’s got a green coat and a black coat, so it was giving her the choice, so she weren’t having to do as she’s told, it was like ‘come on you need to put it on its cold, what one, your black one or green one’ – mad to suggest, but it works. It was funny, do you know what I mean, like to know something as simple as that can actually get you somewhere” (F22).

Participants reported improved empathy and active listening which many of the men felt they had not done effectively in the past. Many said they were surprised to realise that they had not previously understood what empathy involved and how to apply it in their parenting. It was evident in the interview findings that using these skills resulted in improved relationships with children and partners whilst in prison.

“...learned a lot about empathy which I thought I already knew, but I didn’t... just I didn’t really understand the difference between sympathy and empathy, which, now with empathy I know that you don’t have to agree with it, but you can still come down to the same level of and take on and understand a bit more” (F19).

Improved communication and understanding the needs of their children was a common thread in all conversations with the men. Learning taken from The Nurturing Programme regarding how to communicate and converse better with their children was taken on board by the men who then put it into practice on either a telephone call or when the family visit them at the prison. It was very clear that this not only improved communication and led to more engaging conversations with their children (rather than arguments or lack of dialogue); but rather positively impacted their overall wellbeing with telephone calls and visits more enjoyable than in the past.

“When we first started it was like, so obviously you phone up, I’ve got four kids... It was “good”- because I used to phone ‘how are ya?’ ‘okay’, ‘how was school?’, they’d say ‘good’. It was basically a repetitive thing and then it was sort of like I didn’t really know what more to ask or how to ask. But then it taught me like to maybe just say things like what I’ve done today and then let them try to engage with me do you know what I mean. It’s been good” (F18).

Impact on the prison

Interestingly, stakeholders noted the positive impact The Nurturing Programme had on the Family Intervention Unit as a whole. As a result

of the peer group setting, there seemed to be a reduced need to maintain bravado among men on the unit and a willingness to connect more with each other. It was suggested that this had a wider effect on all the men residing in the Family Intervention Unit which was deemed to be a calmer environment than one might expect a prison wing to be.

“Nobody wants to live in a bad environment or a hostile environment when they’re within the prison. It’s not nice and it’s not comfortable. But some of these interventions and the courses bring lads together and knowing a little bit more about each other. Because the different courses they go on, they’ll meet different guys, they won’t always be the same ones and it helps, it does help ... It opens it up a little bit more because they know a little bit more about each other, which creates that better atmosphere and makes the guys interact with each other a lot better. Interacting with each other a lot better also maintains calmness” (S3).

4. Discussion

Research demonstrates that maintaining contact with family whilst incarcerated reduces the risk of the individual reoffending, resulting in effective resettlement with family, friends, and community (Clancy & Maguire, 2017; Farmer, 2017; Losel et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2012). Overall, our study corroborates a number of findings from existing evidence on parenting programmes within UK prisons such as improved wellbeing, strengthened family and child-to-parent relationships, and confidence in parenting whilst incarcerated (Hayes et al., 2018; Langston, 2016; McCrudden et al., 2014). We also report the significance of the programme leader in recruiting, engaging, and retaining the fathers for the course duration, similar to that reported by Buston (2018) and Langston (2016). Critically, we highlight the impact of the programme facilitator on fathers who revealed a diagnosis of neurodivergence and/or mental health conditions or having low levels of literacy who felt the experience was a positive, non-stigmatising safe space for their individual needs. Research reports that neurodivergence is more prevalent within the criminal justice system than the general population due to them being disadvantaged due to their behaviour which may not be recognised by members of the criminal justice system (CJJI, 2021). Recent research and policy has highlighted the challenges of achieving long-term trauma-informed practice in UK prison settings due to the physical and psychological environment, and a risk management-focused paradigm (Senker et al., 2023). However, our findings confirm those of previous studies which suggest that trauma aware staff and programmes can create safe spaces within the prison environment and create small positive changes in relationships between prisoners and staff (Auty et al., 2023; Vaswani & Paul, 2019). Our findings suggest a positive first-step in providing recommendations for structure, programme, and policy changes within UK prisons to consider incarcerated parents specific parenting needs.

Many fathers were reluctant to engage with the Nurturing programme at first, however, on completion they reported a positive experience and improved overall wellbeing as a result of strengthened relationships with children and families. Wellbeing is correlated with owning and exercising specific human capabilities within one’s environment and relationships. Without these, an individual may feel they are not experiencing fulfilling or dignified lives resulting in poor wellbeing (Nussbaum, 2011; Seligman, 2011; Sen, 1993). The World Health Organization posit that promoting wellbeing within prisons should be a central component of prison healthcare policy (WHO, 2008). A relatively recent large-scale study looking at mental wellbeing of prisoners at three timepoints (2013, 2015, 2017) found that those incarcerated had poorer wellbeing than those who are not imprisoned. Furthermore, they also report that prisoners on remand had even poorer wellbeing scores than those who had been sentenced (Tweed et al., 2019). Armstrong et al.’s (2018) meta-analysis of parenting programmes for incarcerated fathers found that of ten studies which measured parental wellbeing, there were no significant improvements in parental

psychological wellbeing. That our quantitative findings report a statistically significant increase in prisoners self-reported wellbeing is noteworthy and underscores the value of the Nurturing Programme for incarcerated fathers.

A primary facilitating factor of The Nurturing Programme in the current study was the delivery style and non-judgemental environment provided by the programme leader. Diagnoses of autism, ADHD, mental health conditions, low levels of literacy, and differences in parenting styles were disclosed by many fathers who felt that the environment was non-stigmatising and allowed them open up and fully participate in the course discussions. Fathers in prison often feel judged (Arditti et al., 2005) however our findings indicate that participants felt that they were accommodated rather than being stigmatised for their individual needs. There is growing recognition in the UK of the importance of trauma-informed approaches, and the approach taken to delivery of The Nurturing Programme aligns well with the six key principals of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural consideration (OHID, 2022). Trauma-informed approaches include recognition of the intersectionality between trauma and biases based on characteristics such as neurodivergence and mental health conditions, and this is particularly important in UK prison populations where there is higher prevalence of these conditions (CJJI, 2021; Quigg et al., 2023). Prisoners described how this non-judgemental delivery allowed them to reflect on their own parenting as a child, understand how this impacted upon them growing up and regulate their own parenting practices accordingly. This suggests potentially positive impacts in reducing generational cycles of trauma and adversity. Stakeholders also reported positive impacts on the prison environment, with improved relationships between prisoners leading to a calmer atmosphere on the Family Intervention Unit. This has the potential to positively impact other units of the prison if the Nurturing Programme were delivered outside of the Family Intervention Unit. However, due to the uniqueness of this cultivation of vulnerability specific to the Family Intervention Unit we cannot comment on how this would translate to other prison unit cultures therefore further evaluation would need to be carried out to explore this further.

Low retention rates are an acknowledged difficulty with prison interventions (Buston, 2018) and this was reflected in our evaluation where only 73 % of men beginning the first session completed all ten sessions. This is a particular challenge in remand prisons, where the prison population is transient (Samele et al., 2016). Our findings suggest that prisons implementing a parenting programme could take programme participation in account when making arrangements to move remand prisoners to other prisons to increase opportunities for course completion. Furthermore, our study did not include any long-term follow-up measures to assess if the skills attained from the Nurturing Programme were sustained upon release. Longer term follow-up post-release is acknowledged as a particular challenge of prison research (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2015) and existing research highlights that the majority of interventions do not provide transitional support to parents during the post-release period (Armstrong et al., 2018) despite parents desiring continuity of support once they leave prison (McCrudden et al., 2014). In order to meet the ambitions of the UK Lord Farmer review (Farmer, 2017), processes for longer term follow-up are needed to establish whether parenting interventions are effective in the longer term to improve outcomes for both parents and children experiencing parental imprisonment.

Advancements to support incarcerated parents maintaining contact with their family through themed family units within UK prisons have been developed in recent years and include: family rooms; in-cell telephones so that prisoners can have daily contact with family; extended visit sessions for family; private visit spaces supervised by CCTV; and additional external support for families of an incarcerated individual (Butler & Oddy, 2024). These advancements facilitated the fathers in our study to use the skills and strategies they learned from the Nurturing Programme during regular phone calls and visits with their children and family.

5. Conclusion

The evaluation found that the Nurturing Programme had a positive impact on the wellbeing of the fathers who participated in the programme, as well as improved parenting skills, strengthened relationships with their family, increased empathy and skills in communication, and positive changes in the home for their children and partners. Whilst further evidence is required to determine if such impacts are sustainable long-term, the study suggests such programmes have potential for supporting the incarcerated individual's needs as a parent (enabling them to them to continue to parent positively), and the need needs of children and the wider family. Findings are important for informing future policy and the development and implementation of parenting programmes within prison setting, considering the complexity of the prison environment.

5.1. Limitations

Our study is not without limitations. First, the findings are limited to self-reports by incarcerated fathers. This could be improved in future research by including the opinions of children, partners, and wider families. We cannot emphasise more that we are aware the quantitative findings are limited by the small number of men participating. The use of these self-reported measures should be used with a larger sample size to be more generalisable. Furthermore we did not collect data on prisoners interpersonal relationships, numbers of children, or ages of their children therefore we were unable to explore how these relationships relate to outcomes. There is a lack of input in the current study from prison staff who would likely have a viewpoint on the impact of the Nurturing Programme. As the programme is only delivered on the Family Unit of a Category B prison, the findings are not representative of the whole prison population.

Previous systematic reviews of parenting interventions in prisons have highlighted the lack of evidence on the impacts of these interventions on children (Armstrong et al., 2018; Nilsen et al., 2015). Evidence from our study suggests that the Nurturing Programme resulted in positive changes for the children and partners of the incarcerated fathers, who reported improved communication with their children, and improved child behaviour at home and engagement at school. However, due to our inability to engage with children and partners as part of the research, we suggest that capturing these changes from the perspective of prisoners' children and partners should be prioritised in future research.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Evelyn Hearne: Investigation, Project administration, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft. **Jane Harris:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Zara Quigg:** Investigation.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Formal ethical approval was granted from Liverpool John Moores Research and Ethics Committee and the HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPSS) National Research Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all study participants before taking part and the study was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2025.108284>.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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