

Parenting 'across the wall' – Family Links

Verity Lowe

In a lively and experiential workshop, Verity Lowe introduced the Family Links nurturing programme, explained the context of the prison work Family Links has done, and next steps in the process of parenting 'across the wall'. Family Links is based in Oxford, but runs training all over the country, and works with parents and children in the community.

The nurturing programme encourages and supports good emotional health so that parents can deal with life's issues in a way that can help maintain our emotional well-being. The programme came from America and is based on four constructs – self-awareness and self-esteem, appropriate expectations of oneself and others, empathy, which is the cornerstone, and positive discipline, which includes being firm, fair, consistent and kind. Workshops are always run by two facilitators.

The Parenting Puzzle, available through Amazon, is the key resource for parents, and embodies the principles of the nurturing programme and provides a toolkit for when things go wrong in life. It is accessible for all kinds of learners, and a mini version with the key issues has been translated into Urdu.

Verity enlisted a workshop participant to engage in a roleplay between a mother and teenager to show the power of empathy, and the whole group participated in a lively warm-up activity. Verity showed examples of sessions on group rules, which she linked to family rules at home, on the importance of praise, of personal power in terms of choice, and showed us the nurturing wheel, which emphasises the importance of the need to nurture ourselves as parents.

A prison programme at HMP The Wold, Hull led to funding for two pilot programmes for mothers at HMP Styal and HMP Foston Hall, both women's prisons. These were both challenging and positive experiences, and the feedback from prisoners was encouraging. A family day at Foston Hall was held after completion of the programme. Prisoners worked towards OCN Accreditation during the course.

The facilitators found that it was necessary to make significant changes to the programme to make it work for prisoners in the prison environment. It was important to ensure that there was support available after the sessions for the prisoners, such as The Listeners, as the sessions can evoke strong emotions for the women involved. Reports of the prison programmes can be read on the Family Links website: www.familylinks.org.uk.

The vision for the future is to join up the work in prisons with the other parent or carer outside the prison by running concurrent nurturing

programmes both in and outside the prison. In conjunction with the Thames Valley Partnership Family Matters initiative, dates have been planned for a programme to run concurrently for fathers in HMP Bullingdon, Bicester, Oxon and for mothers with The Sunshine Children's Centre, Banbury and Bicester Children's Centre. Four Offender Supervisors from HMP Bullingdon will be trained to deliver the programme in the prison. This is an exciting initiative, with huge potential for family cohesion, and as a model for joined-up parenting 'across the wall'.

For those interested in training to be a parent group leader, which is a 4 day training programme, please contact Verity Lowe at Family Links.