Incarceration is not only a difficult time for those who are imprisoned but for their parents, partners and children as well. It is important to support families with a member in prison to maintain contact and to re-establish family relationships upon release. Studies have shown that prisoners who have greater contact with family during their incarceration have consistently more positive post-release outcomes than those who have little or no contact (Naser and Vigne, 2006). Indeed family and community connections are two very strong indicators for lowering recidivism. At the same time, education is one of the key criminogenic risk factors, with many prisoners having poor literacy and numeracy.

This paper describes a program which contributes to both prisoner literacy and the maintenance of family connections, with the added advantage of addressing intergenerational issues of low literacy and lack of interest in reading. The basic concept is that the inmate is recorded reading a children’s book, and the recording is made into a CD and provided to the child along with the book, thus giving the child the experience of being read to by their absent parent.

History
Many years ago, I gained such an insight into the importance of strong family ties in reducing recidivism from the media. A British documentary interviewed male and female prisoners in prison and again 7 years after release. All the men had returned to prison except for a father looking after his disabled daughter, whereas all the women with children were now ‘straight’.

When applying for my present job with Tasmanian Justice Department as a Literacy and Numeracy Educator at Risdon Prison, I was aware of the difficulties and sensitivities of teaching literacy to adults who have often had a history of academic failure. Indeed in many instances it was very low literacy levels that may have contributed to their incarceration.
In interview preparation, an internet search which included *prisons, literacy* and *children* listed Dartmoor Prison’s iconic program, *Story Book Dads*. Serendipitously, a member of the interview panel was the Adult Literacy co-ordinator for the State Library. He had been on a study tour in England and was familiar with a similar program in Lincoln Prison and also knew of the Dartmoor Prison program. Through later communications, seed funding for a similar project was provided by the Reading Together program of the Tasmanian State Library.

The program started with children’s books, a good quality digital recorder and a rapid learning curve. The first book and CD were sent home in August 2008, and there has been much refining since then. Colloquially known as “Books on CD”, the program is run by literacy and numeracy educators in the prison as part of our normal education process and averages between 5-10 recordings per week. By August 2011 over 350 inmates had participated in the scheme, with over 500 CDs produced.

This is a low-budget program. The set-up requirements were two digital recorders and a computer for audio editing software, at a cost of under $2000. The primary ongoing cost is the facilitator’s time, plus CDs and postage costs.

The program has received much support, both from the prison authorities who fund the packaging and postage, and the State library which has continued to supplement our supply of new books. Furthermore the program has received donations of quality donations of second hand books from several sources. Inmates from nearly all sections of the prison system are able to participate in the program.

**The rationale for the program**
Internationally, similar programs are already functioning in many prison environments and are invaluable on many levels:

- Many inmates in prison have children. Prisoners’ children are often the forgotten victims of crime and can suffer a great deal from the forced separation and family relationships are fragmented. In this project, despite the absence of the parent, it is possible to maintain and develop a bond. This process enables children to have the experience of an absent parent reading them a (bed time) story. Family literacy programs enable inmates to view themselves, and be seen, in roles other than that of prisoners (Kerka, 1995).
Prison populations are renowned for their low literacy levels. Literacy is enhanced by reading children’s books as this gives inmates real purpose for reading.

Inmates are often hesitant to admit to their literacy problems. Peer pressure may discourage attendance or achievement (Haigler et al. 1994). Tacitly embedded in the Reading Together is an elementary reading program which may be quite appropriate to the parent’s own reading capacities.

The program allows inmates to practise reading and gain additional comprehension and fluency as they read and re-read the text in preparation for the recording. In some cases for the prisoner this will be “a first” as far as their experiences of parenting are concerned because many prisoners were never read to as a child and have not read to their children. The book is read with an education facilitator and inmates discover that when you let down your guard and dramatise the reading, it can actually be a lot of fun.

By reading children’s books, the parent is not only improving their own literacy but also adding to their children’s education. This is an opportunity to address the problems of intergenerational low-level literacy so prevalent in the families of prison populations. According to Muth (2004), prison-based family literacy programs may provide one important way to support parents’ efforts to build and maintain close ties with their children and, at the same time, support literacy learning (for the parent) and greater school success (for the child).

Strong ties with family are important factors in lowering recidivism rates. British research indicates that fifty-eight per cent of prisoners re-offend within two years of release but this is significantly reduced if prisoners keep in touch with their family while inside. Recent Australian research (Robinson et al, 2011) has highlighted the strong interconnection between prisoners and their families. There are huge impacts on families when a member is imprisoned and there is a growing recognition of the role that families play in supporting offenders to lead crime-free lives.

Prisons are expensive. In the local Tasmanian context, the Department of Justice Annual report cites the cost per prisoner per day for 2009-2010 as $307, so a reduction in prison numbers through reducing reoffending has the potential for substantial savings. Beyond this, the benefits to the prisoners and their families and the intangible benefits to society as a whole cannot be over-emphasised.
The Process

Recordings are made in the education facilities in the various prisons. The recording is carried out on a portable high-quality digital recorder. The equipment and books can be carried around in a single clear plastic prison carry bag.

Inmates are given a choice of books appropriate to their child's age (and sometimes gender). They are given the choice of taking it back to their room for familiarisation or “having a go” at recording a practice read on the spot with the recorder.

As the facilitator, I ask if I may make background noises (dogs barking, cats meowing etc) when appropriate. This changes the process to a collaborative reading, and a lot of the strain and tension diminishes as we laugh and decide what noises would be fun or appropriate. This enables me to discuss how best to read a children’s story to maintain a child’s attention. I personally discuss my background as a kindergarten teacher and how it was absolutely imperative to be dramatic to keep their interest. However I also say that more than anything, the child / children will be just thrilled to hear their parent’s voice.

The inmate is given the option of listening to his or her reading with the playback facility of the recorder. After hearing the recording, we may consider whether they feel they could improve upon the first recording. I am loath to make any definitive suggestions here, preferring to leave the decision to the reader. They are also encouraged to add an (appropriate) personal comment at the beginning and end of the story.

Recently my editor told me that two different people had just read the same story. It was in fact the same person reading, but he had made great progress in his delivery between takes. Often the inmates comment at how surprised they were to realise that reading a ‘kid’s book’ could be such fun!

The recorded story is then downloaded onto a computer and any mistakes or background noises are edited out using the free digital audio software program Audacity. The editing is done by a trained inmate under supervision. Music, page breaks and sound effects are added and the final story is put onto a CD. Digital editing makes a big difference as this makes the stories come alive for the children. The result can be surprisingly professional and the children (and the parents) are often amazed at the results.
Any inmate can take part regardless of their reading ability. Even non-readers can participate by repeating the story one sentence at a time with a mentor. The facilitator's voice can be edited out afterwards, along with any mistakes.

The children love these stories because they can hear their parent's voice whenever they want. The feedback from inmates and their families is very positive. The parents feel that they are doing something for their children and this helps strengthen family ties. Reading Together can be a strong bond for families and plays a key role in helping to maintain the family unit during the period of separation.

As a further activity, inmates can embark on writing a story and making it into a book to send out with the audio CD. This helps prisoners with both literacy and IT skills.

An inmate who has a strong musical background has recorded a series of lullabies and nursery rhymes on the keyboard for very young children and another series of movie theme songs for older children. These are added to the end of the recording. The story on CD then becomes useful for settling children at night and the absent parent becomes an integral part of a bedtime ritual. A ten-minute story can take up to an hour to edit, but the finished product indicates it is certainly a worthwhile process.

A scan is made of the book's cover and reproduced on the disc and CD cover, giving a professional finish. The edited CD and the book are then sent to the given address (subject to security considerations, as described below). We ask for the book to be returned either by mail, to the visitor centre, or to the closest State Library. The books slowly trickle back in. Some have teeth marks on them! If the inmate feels unsure that the book will be returned, they are offered a donated book to read which their child can keep.

Security Issues

Justice Department employees administer the program and consequently are responsible for any security breaches that could occur. The recorder is carefully monitored and kept by staff unless being downloaded for editing. Editing is done in a secure area by trusted inmates with appropriate security ratings. The finished CDs are listened to for quality and security control, whilst the unburnt CDs are stored in a separate area. Their distribution is overseen by only one staff member.
Checks are run before distribution, e.g. for Family Violence Orders (FVOs). If there is any doubt, the parent/guardian of the book recipient is contacted to ask for permission for the child to receive the book. Sometimes books are sent through Child Protection Authorities, Family Court lawyers, grandparents or other family members. All addresses are privately recorded and books are mailed through the prison’s security processes.

The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with comments from the inmates’ families including:

- My daughter lies on her bed and listens and listens to it all day.

- If ever my boy is upset his mum just puts on the CD and it settles him down.

- The kids just love it and have put it onto their MP3 player so they can hear me all the time.

- Please, please read another book. I cannot stand listening to that story any more - the kids never turn it off.

- My daughter is so proud, she wants to take it to school for “show and tell”… but her mum is not so sure.

- My daughter is so much more settled now that she can hear my voice.

- My boy was a slow reader before but he can now read that whole book… he has just read and reread every word.

Feedback from inmates includes:

- I was the main story reader at home and it is so wonderful to be able to continue this from inside.

- Before, the only thing I knew to do with my kids was to give them some money and tell them to go to the shop and buy something. Now I can have fun reading to them.
• I am going to be in here for a long time, and the stories I will be reading will get harder. I have enrolled in literacy courses so I can read more difficult books as my kids get older.

• I am going to be in here for a long time. I just want my baby to know my voice.

• I am softer now and know other ways to talk to my kids.

• Phew, that was the longest book I have ever read in 28 years.

• My kids wouldn’t speak to me when I first came in here and they wouldn’t reply to my letters. The CDs made a difference though and now I’ve bought them a mobile phone and we talk every week. It’s taken two years to make a breakthrough but I’ve done it.

• It takes my head out of prison. I feel as though I am somewhere else.

Public Response
The program has been fortunate in receiving national media interest. Freelance journalist Erin O’Dwyer has been pivotal in publicising the program with her documentary “Bedtime Stories” aired on ABC Radio National in October 2009 (ABC Radio 2009) and her story “Inside Stories” published in the “The Good Weekend” magazine in the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age in February 2010.

The publicity has helped give a human face to the prison population. The community is generally unaware of the difficulties that prisoners’ families face and there is little sympathy for their situation. Indeed, as one writer stated, there is a “…sense that these families are hardly families at all, that there is little we could do to manage them as they barely exist as families to begin with” (Braman, D., 2002, p. 252).

There has been interest not only from prison educators but from members of the public wishing to help with our supply of books and the program’s sustainability. I would like to personally thank Alice Collins, a retired school teacher from Ferntree Gully, Victoria for her generous collection and donation of books. The Canberra University library has also sent a box of used but still excellent quality children’s books.
The local Red Cross has also initiated a reciprocal program, “Keeping in Touch”, allowing the children to make recordings for their incarcerated parent.

**Programs in other jurisdictions**

After hearing of the program, NSW women’s prison Emu Plains made contact with TPS. They have recently begun a program along these lines, and there is already a waiting list for participants. Expansion into other facilities is being considered. Victoria and NT are initiating similar or related programs. Western Australian private prison Acacia has independently initiated a program also based on Story Book Dads.

**Conclusion**

Books on CD is a low-cost initiative which has received an excellent response from inmates and has the potential to yield extensive benefits for the participants, their families and the wider community. The program allows inmates to develop both their own and their children’s literacy skills, while developing and maintaining pro-social links with their families.

Inquiries regarding the practicalities of the program can be made to TPS Integrated Offender Management Unit Manager, Kay Cuellar (kay.cuellar@justice.tas.gov.au; 03 6216 8119), or to the facilitator Sandra Duncan (sandra.duncan@justice.tas.gov.au; 03 6216 8128).

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