

Formative evaluation of the Activities
Centre at Christchurch Men's Prison
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Executive summary

Should children visit their incarcerated parent in prison? Do prison policies and practices impede or support the maintenance of prisoners' family ties? These questions have been the focus of research both internationally and in New Zealand. The Pillars Inc¹ research project (Gordon, 2009, 2011) which examined the situation of the children of prisoners in New Zealand, found that regulations around prison visiting had become much more stringent in recent years and few opportunities were evident for active parenting in the prison environment.

Following Gordon's research, a joint prison/Pillars committee has worked to set up a pilot Activities Centre in the low security visiting area of Christchurch Men's Prison. The Centre's aim was to facilitate father and child bonding and contribute to better family outcomes. In conjunction with this initiative, an evaluation project was undertaken between April and June 2012.

The evaluation data was gathered from a number of sources: a review of literature, paperwork, meeting minutes and materials associated with the Centre's background and development; attendance at the Centre over two days to observe, write field notes and undertake evaluative interviews with prisoners and their families; a series of stakeholder interviews.

Setting up the Activities Centre was shared, using a task-orientated action model; Pillars were responsible for stocking and staffing the Centre, and Corrections undertook the capital development and furnishings. Preparations went smoothly. Three existing rooms in the visiting centre in Christchurch Mens' Prison were furnished as Arts and Crafts, reading and DVD rooms. The outdoor area was also improved, with a series of painted panels plus the addition of a hopscotch area. High quality toys, games, books and DVDs were purchased. The dates and times of the rooms' availability were well advertised beforehand and visitors could book half hour slots in advance. Although booking was minimal, over the two days that the Activities Centre was evaluated, rooms were full with families at all times.

The evaluation visits identified some resource and management issues in accommodating the demand for rooms. Some conditions, such as not taking books, toys etc out of specified rooms, were relaxed in the interest of the families and children. The observer's notes provide a picture of the families' use of the Activities Centre and show that the initiative was highly successful, encouraging 'more normal' parental interactions with children, also providing privacy and quiet. In some cases some transformational changes in children's demeanour and behaviour were observed.

The brief survey, undertaken with fourteen families over the two days, revealed that the families clearly enjoyed the space and the only complaint was that the Activities

¹ Pillars Inc. is a charity for the families and children of prisoners.



Centre was closed too often. The most popular activities are drawing, colouring and stickers, followed by dolls and cars. Overall the satisfaction ratings for the Activities Centre were very high.

Providing adequate staffing was the most problematic issue as volunteers were hard to find. Consequently the centre was run by a Pillars social worker, who was paid for this work. This person believes that two paid staff should be employed to run the Activities Centre. This would allow the centre to open each week and volunteers could still be used as support. The advantage of paid staff is experience, adequate ongoing training, and possibly better skills. However, the need for staffing may make it less likely that other prisons might adopt a similar model.

The stakeholders interviewed, consisting of two Corrections staff, two Pillars staff and one volunteer, were strongly supportive of children visiting their parents in prison; in particular, they found value in many aspects of the Activities Centre. The comments mainly focussed on relationship issues and the opportunity for parenting in the prison environment. However, stakeholders also agreed that more needed to be done generally to improve parent/child relationships when a parent is in prison and all offered suggestions about this. Several stakeholders cautioned that the existence and relatively cheap transformation of the rooms was a bonus, but they raised issues about (a) whether this is the best model and (b) whether it is replicable. Various institutional factors were also mentioned.

The establishment of a pilot Activities Centre at Christchurch Mens' Prison facilitates father and child bonding and contributes to better family outcomes. The potential benefit of this initiative is clear and other correctional facilities in New Zealand might consider adopting a similar workable model.

The following recommendations are made:

- A way is found to resolve the Activities Centre staffing shortfall for a period of three months to ensure that all pilot problems are resolved.
- Boxes of toys, books etc are assembled and delivered to children who are unable to use the Activities Centre because it is full.
- The visiting room is reoriented slightly so that adults without children can experience a child-free visit.
- Thought is given to providing a series of safe activities in the courtyard setting.
- Stakeholders consider parents' comments about providing food and drink.
- The general role and culture of prison officers needs to change to a more family-friendly approach for visitors and especially for children.



Background

The children of prisoners are up to seven times more likely than other children to end up in prison (D Fergusson, Horwood, & Swain-Campbell, 2003; D Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, & Horwood, 2004; Gordon, 2009). There is a body of international research examining the causes of this, with most studies concluding that there are multiple causes (Hairston, 2001, 2007; J Murray & Farrington, 2008; J Murray, Farrington, & Eisner, 2009).

Between 2009 and 2011, Pillars Inc, a charity for the families and children of prisoners, contracted a large research project examining the situation of the children of prisoners in New Zealand society². Results have been published in a series of reports ((Gordon, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). The studies documented multiple issues in relation to the social and justice sectors, which may contribute to, rather than assist in resolving, the problems that these children face.

One area of national and international interest is whether children should visit their incarcerated parent in prison. In the study undertaken by Pillars, a range of views were given on this by stakeholders and by the families. Some thought that children visiting prison was a form of socialisation - that children would come to identify with the prison environment, or see it as normal. Others believed it was crucial for all parties that children maintained strong relationships with their incarcerated parent. Most views sat between those two extremes.

There is significant research evidence, especially emerging from the United States, that demonstrates multiple benefits from the maintenance of family relationships. Hairston (2001, p. 9) notes that:

Communication between prisoners and their families provides the most concrete and visible strategy that families and prisoners use to manage separation and maintain connections. Families visit their imprisoned relatives at the institutions where they are held, talk with them by phone, and exchange cards and letters as a means of staying connected. These contacts allow adults and parents and children to share family experiences and participate in family rituals, e.g. birthday celebrations, religious observances, etc. and help them to remain emotionally attached. They help assure incarcerated parents that their children have not forgotten them and children that their parents love and care about them. They allow prisoners to see themselves, and to function, in socially acceptable roles rather than as prison numbers and institutionalized dependents.

Despite these benefits being widely acknowledged, at least in theory, in correctional jurisdictions in the United States, Hairston noted that practice varied significantly from the ideal of ongoing parenting in the prison environment. She concluded:

² The project was funded by the NZ Lotteries Community Sector Research Fund.



The correctional policies and practices that govern contact between prisoners and their families often impede, rather than support, the maintenance of family ties (2001 p. 9).

In the community sector, recent attention has been paid to this question. The Bill of Children's Rights created in 2008 by the San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents (SFPIP)³ included the following 'right':

I have the right to speak with, see and touch my parent.

In September 2011, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child held a day of general discussion on children of incarcerated parents. This has led to a number of outcomes, most particularly a series of resolutions⁴ to national states from the Human Rights Council. One of these resolutions reads:

To provide children of persons accused or convicted of offences with access to their incarcerated parents or parental caregivers throughout judicial proceedings and the period of detention, including regular and private meetings with the prisoners, and wherever possible contact visits for younger children, subject to the best interests of the child, taking into account the need to ensure the administration of justice.

Prison visiting in New Zealand

The Operations Manual used in New Zealand prisons⁵ is silent on policies and practices around visits by children to their parents in prison. In practice, children can only visit a parent when taken by either a private visitor (approved family member or other) or a specified visitor (for example, Prisoners' Aid volunteers in many areas will take children to see a parent in prison).

The Invisible Children report (Gordon, 2009) found that the regulations around prison visiting had become much more stringent in recent years. Children are required to be screened at the gatehouse, and may actually be searched. While children may give their prisoner parent a hug, ongoing contact is not generally allowed. All food and drink is prohibited except for one bottle for a baby. In most prisons there are now no toys to play with. With nothing to do, children often find it hard to communicate with their parent. The adults may have a range of matters to discuss, at the same time as having to supervise bored children. As reported in that study, the visiting situation in prisons is far from ideal.

The main reason given by stakeholders for the increasing stringency at visiting time was the need to stop prohibited items being brought into the prisons. There have been cases where children have been used to transport such goods into the prison

³ <http://www.fcnetwork.org/Bill%20of%20Rights/billofrights.pdf>

⁴ Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/19/L.31

⁵ <http://www.corrections.govt.nz/policy-and-legislation/ps-operations-manual.html>



environment, and the increased security measures have been introduced in response to this. Unfortunately, the blanket conditions require the treatment of all private visitors as if they were, in fact, carrying in illicit goods. As one family member noted:

You do feel like you are doing something wrong. They need to be not so arrogant. They say the words that they have to say. They need to not class everyone as if they are doing something wrong (quoted in Gordon, 2009 p.34).

The concern with security does not necessarily explain the removal of toys and food and drink dispensers from the visiting rooms. The toy issue may have more to do with health and safety concerns, whereas dispensers appear to be seen as a security risk, possibly related to the use of money in the visiting environment.

While many of the children in the Pillars study really enjoyed visiting their incarcerated parent, often this seemed to be about gaining reassurance about the parent's welfare rather than having excellent interaction. Children interviewed in the 2009 study were well aware of the high security measures, some speaking of the 'stone face' of the prison staff.

There are few opportunities for active parenting in the prison environment. Children are not permitted to bring their schoolwork into the prison to show their parent. They cannot usually draw pictures, eat with their parent, read books or undertake the many other tasks that constitute normal interaction between child and parent in New Zealand society. The visiting environment limits interaction to within a very narrow band that is often excruciating for parent and child alike, in such a stressful or alien context.

Some examples of different practice were found in the Invisible Children report, including one story of a mother of four who was in prison for a lengthy period. Later in her sentence, her children were allowed to visit her on a weekday afternoon once a week, to have a meal with her. This was reported as having a significant effect on the parent/child relationship.

The Pillars research has been a factor in some recent reconsideration of visiting options, and other changes evident in Corrections policy and practice have also contributed. The decision to increase the age limit for children living with their parent in prison from 9 months to two years, for example, has led to scrutiny of policies around parenting that has implications for all parents in prison (in principle rather than practice, at this stage).

Stakeholders refer to a context in which change is likely, although few details are yet available. It is within that context that the Activities Centre pilot study, and this evaluation report, took place.



Methodology of this evaluation

This formative evaluation was undertaken between April and June 2012. Funding for the programme and the evaluation was received from the Department of Corrections, as part of a package of innovative funding which also included funding for the re-integration project noted above, which is being evaluated separately.

Application was made to the Department of Corrections for permission to undertake the research associated with the evaluation. The permission granted included a security clearance, access to the prison and approval of all documentation. Out of this application a contract for service was developed.

The report was produced for Pillars, but also to provide a progress and issues report for the joint prison/Pillars management committee. The evaluation also potentially has a wider audience. A specific requirement of the evaluation was to include key information that would allow the project to be replicated in other prison sites, where possible.

Evaluative tasks included as part of this evaluation were:

- Review of literature, paperwork, meeting minutes and materials associated with the background and development of the Centre.
- Attendance at the Centre over two days to observe, write field notes and undertake evaluative interviews with prisoners and their families.
- A series of stakeholder interviews with members of the working group, including Pillars staff, Corrections staff at Christchurch Men's Prison, the Regional Manager of Prisons (Ian Bourke) and staff from Corrections HO.
- Analysis of data collected.
- Writing of a report, including recommendations where appropriate.

The evaluation was carried out by Liz Gordon. Liz attended a meeting of the joint prison/Pillars management committee in April 2012, interviewed stakeholder in May and June and attended two sessions of visiting when the Activities Centre was open, on Saturday 12 May and Sunday 27 May 2012. During the field visits, interviews were carried out with volunteers and with 14 prisoners and children that used the Activities Centre.

An information sheet and consent form were produced and these are attached at Appendix 1. The interview questions for stakeholders and families are attached at Appendixes 2 and 3.

In June, the remainder of the stakeholder interviews were carried out and written up, and this report was completed and submitted in early July.



The Activities Centre pilot project

The Activities Centre at the low security visiting area at Christchurch Men's Prison is one of a number of small pilot projects being promoted by Pillars, as it seeks to implement practical projects arising from the research findings of its major study.

Two other Pillars projects are also currently underway. The first is a collaboration between two Auckland Schools, Pillars and Edmund Rice Justice. The Together Programme links students from St Peter's College, Epsom, with some children of prisoners from Rongomai Primary School, Otara, in a mentoring relationship. The first-stage evaluation of this programme is available on the Pillars website.

The second additional project aims to facilitate an effective family reintegration programme. The Close to Home pilot programme is a two stage process that will first develop a programme, using a range of international resources; then test it over a three month period with a small number of participants.

The aim of the Activities Centre project is outlined in a press release from early 2012:

Pillars... is working in partnership with prison staff at Christchurch Men's prison to establish a Fathers and Children's Activities Centre area for low security prisoner parents and their children. The Centre's aim is to facilitate father and child bonding and contribute to better family outcomes.

Pillars and a group of prison staff began working on this project in June 2011. The genesis of the project was an approach by Pillars to the Acting Regional Manager, South Island Prisons, Ian Bourke, who was enthusiastic about the proposal. A committee of 4 Corrections staff and two Pillars staff met throughout the remainder of 2011 and early 2012, and made progress on a number of elements:

The development of the facilities out of existing rooms in the Visitor's Centre; the development of an outdoor area including hopscotch and artworks drawn by the prisoners; the supply of furniture for the rooms by Corrections; the supply of toys and games for the rooms by Pillars; the recruitment and training of volunteers to run the Centre, and an advertising process.

The committee adopted a task-oriented action model from the start, to identify what was to be done, how it was to be achieved and who was to do it. The minutes noted the progress of each task and what remained to be achieved.

LOW SECURITY VISITS AREA
Coming Saturday 17th March 2012
CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES AREA

Volunteers from PILLARS will be providing activities for children.

ARTS & CRAFTS
EDUCATIONAL DVD'S
READING ROOM

Fathers will be able to interact with their children during visits in a fun environment.

To book the use of the centre phone Pillars
(Bookings must be made before Thursday 5pm for the upcoming weekend)
0508 PILLARS (0508 745527)

Providing a wonderful opportunity for fathers to connect and maintain good relationships with their children while serving their prison sentence.

Pillars
at Christchurch Men's Prison



The Activities Centre was launched on the planned date of Saturday 17 March 2012. The poster (on the previous page) shows that three rooms would be operating from the first session, including a reading room, arts and crafts room and a video room:

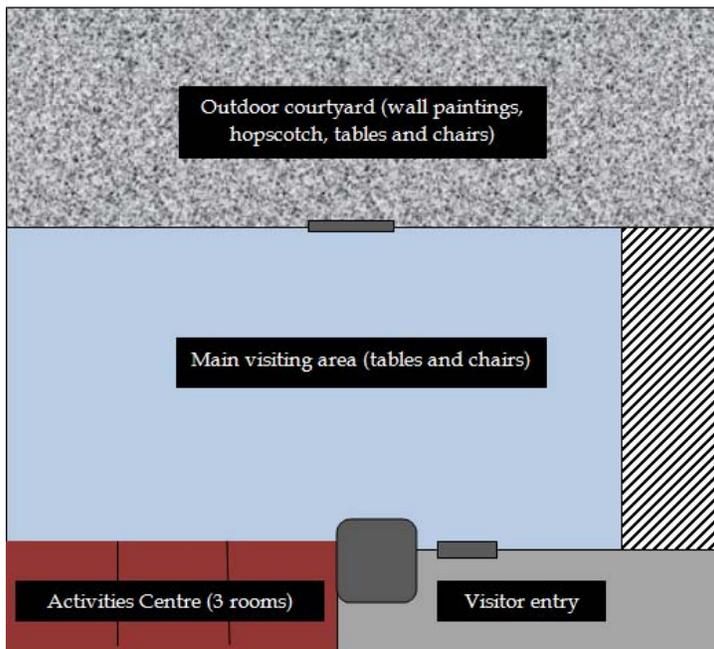
“Fathers will be able to interact with their children during visits in a fun environment”.

Despite the Activities Centre constituting a significant change in visiting practice at the prison (at least in the low-security area), the minutes reveal a clear, purposeful and relatively uncomplicated process from first meeting to implementation. There was a lot of work to be done in making the Centre ready and child-friendly, stocking it with appropriate toys, ensuring prison protocols were met and putting in place the personnel needed to run the Centre. Only in this final task were any sustained difficulties experienced: despite extensive advertising, no appropriate volunteers were found by the date of opening.

A clear division of labour was developed for the project, with Pillars responsible for stocking and staffing the Centre, and Corrections undertaking the capital development and furnishings. Corrections staff also had to undertake and negotiate policy and administrative issues arising from the development of the Activities Centre.

The physical space and visiting rules

The low security visiting room at Christchurch Men’s Prison is a modern, stand-alone building with main visiting room, a number of smaller side rooms, a prisoner



reception area, a hallway and check-in post for visitors (including toilets) and an outdoor area. A plan, not to scale, of the low security visiting area including the Activities Centre and outdoor areas is outlined here.

The main visiting area is filled with table and chair units – a stool for the prisoner and between one and three chairs for visitors, clustered around a small metal table. The units are fixed – chairs cannot be

moved closer to each other and the whole unit is anchored to the ground.



Prior to the development of the Activities Centre the three rooms it now occupies existed but were largely unused. One did not have a door. A successful bid by the management committee to the prison for capital expenditure led to the addition of the door and internal windows, and provided a cupboard and furniture for the three rooms. A TV and DVD were also provided by the prison.

The outdoor area was also improved, with a series of panels created and painted by talented prisoners, plus the addition of a hopscotch area. Pillars received a grant that enabled the purchase of very high quality toys and games, providing the opportunity for the Pillars volunteer to select age- and gender-appropriate materials for each child.

The three rooms were furnished as an Arts and Crafts room, a reading room and a DVD room, although from the start it was acknowledged that flexibility would be required.

Prisoners and their visitors come empty-handed to the room. Prisoners wear orange jumpsuits donned explicitly for visiting, which are tied at the neck with plastic tags so that drugs or other items cannot easily be dropped into the jumpsuits. They are searched going into the room and searched coming out. Visitors must leave all their goods in their cars or in lockers, and their car keys are held at the gatehouse. The only items allowed are a bottle and a nappy for each baby. There are no items at all in the visiting room. There is a water fountain in the outdoor area, but no water cooler, no food or drinks, no books or magazines and no toys allowed outside of the AC rooms.

The evaluation visits

Two visits were made to the low security visiting area on days when the Activities Centre was open, to observe the Centre and undertake a range of evaluative tasks. It was originally intended that the Centre would be open for each session of visiting (two per day) on every Saturday and Sunday. The difficulty in getting suitable volunteers made that impossible, and at the time of the evaluation the Centre was only open for one day (rotating between a Saturday and a Sunday) every second weekend. This situation had some particular effects that will be outlined below.

Pillars was operating a booking system, where families could book half hour periods (later modified to an hour) in the Activities Centre. At the time of this evaluation, only a small number of families were using the booking system.

The Pillars worker said the initial intention was to leave the third room free for children to watch DVDs with their parent, but the demand from family groupings was such over these two days that this was not possible. All of the rooms were full, each with a family, at all times.



The following account is a summary of field notes taken over the two days by the evaluator. The aim is to provide a picture or pattern of use of the Activities Centre by families.

The first evaluation visit was on a Saturday. In the morning session, there were three families wanting to use the spaces, so there was enough room for them to stay in the rooms throughout visiting.

The afternoon session was busier. Three families are booked. The first family group to arrive for a visit was four visitors – the prisoner’s parents, his partner and their adolescent daughter. They had not booked the Activities Centre and did not ask to use it. The daughter was clingy and sullen, hanging around her mother’s neck and having no contact with her father. No-one took much notice of her. There was not a seat for her at the table, as adults took all four seats.

A family that had booked (mother and young child) arrive and take the video room with the father. They are soon playing with the hand puppets and soft toys, father with daughter.

The Pillars worker invites another large group, who have since arrived, into the end room– three adult visitors and twin boys. The prisoner is the uncle of the boys. The boys are soon on the floor with the cars and the adults chat among themselves.

There is another family with a boy aged about 8, who is the younger brother of the prisoner. Over in the far corner away from the Activities Centre, the boy and prisoner have a play-fight, obviously enjoying themselves. They would not be allowed to do so in the Centre, because of the limited visibility of the rooms.

It was by then half an hour into visiting and two families who booked had not shown up. The Pillars worker invites the family with the adolescent girl into the room. On the way in, the girl tries to hold her father’s hand but he shakes her off. Once inside, however, the two establish themselves on either side of a small desk and start drawing pictures and using stickers. The transformation is remarkable. Instead of being the uncomfortable appendage, the girl is now the centre of activity, and the father is actively engaged in parenting tasks. The young girl, who had been exhibiting quite difficult behaviour, now started having fun. At the end of the session, when her parent asked her if she would like to rank the Centre on a scale of 1-5, she smiled and said it was a 5 (the best score), while the adults had rated it a 4.

After an hour, the Pillars worker asked the family in the end room to move out, and she moved in another family with a two year old. The child’s family had used the Centre before and she came running up with a big grin on her face. The worker suggests to them that they book in future.

Finally, another family goes outside and the worker invites in the family with the prisoner’s brother, who stay about an hour.



It is evident from the day of observation that the children love the Activities Centre. The fathers also seem pleased to be in a position to play with their children. One parent of a young girl noted that he had never seen her eat food until the previous week's family day, and that this was the first time he had been able to play with her for an extended period. He said that felt really good.

The second day two weeks later was a Sunday, with a different group of prisoners using the low security visiting (different parts of the prison have different visiting days).

A prisoner's father flew in from another city with his granddaughter to see the prisoner, and they attended both visiting sessions. In the morning, they were able to have a room for the whole period. In the afternoon, there was no space for them in the Activities Centre. The Pillars worker packed up some books, colouring materials and Barbie dolls into a box and sat them at a table near the Activities Centre in the corner, and they talked and played quietly.

A volunteer played with an active toddler in the middle room in the morning session. The parents plus a baby had some issues to discuss outside, and this was allowed because there was room and because there was a willing volunteer in attendance. This was outside the guidelines for the Activities Centre, but appeared to meet everyone's needs. There is a need for flexibility in how the centre is used, although also a danger in setting up certain expectations for the future.

In the third room there were two grandparents, a prisoner and partner plus 12 year old girl. They really enjoyed being in the room. The young girl got a strip of cut out people and coloured them all in as the parents, grandparents and her. Dad was in his orange jumpsuit.



The afternoon session on the Sunday was the busiest one the Activities Centre had faced since it opened, and raised a number of resource and management issues.

The first visitors to arrive were a mother and a six year old boy. Not stopping at the door, the boy made a beeline for the Activities Centre and had claimed the middle room and a large green truck within about 30 seconds of entering. It was very amusing to watch! The Pillars worker moved him and his truck into the end room, which is bigger.

A much younger boy and his mother arrived. The boy also raced to the Centre with a big smile on his face. Both these families had used the Centre before but only this family had booked it. As two other families had booked, there was now not enough room, in principle, for the demand. The out-of-town family arrived and set up in the corner (see description above).



A further family arrive and are given the end room (video room). It is a lovely afternoon and they go for a walk in the courtyard. It is getting very hot in all the rooms, as the winter sun streamed through the windows, which are unable to be opened.

Another family arrive and there is no room for them. The Pillars worker sits them down at a table for two in the corner by the end room, brings out a chair for the girl and a box of materials to play with. They play quite happily. There are now two families with boxes of toys outside the Activities Centre, breaking the agreement that no toys would leave the rooms. In addition, families are seeking relief from the heat by going out into the courtyard (there is also a water fountain out there and the hot rooms were making some of the children thirsty), and some of the children carry a book with them.

Another family arrive – a prisoner, his adult son and twin grandchildren. They want a room but none is available. The prisoner gets quite upset and the Pillars worker remains firm. The family in the video room hear what is going on and offer to give up their room. The Pillars worker was quite dismayed by the stand-over tactics used against her, (and it appears the visitor was also unhappy about it). However, the twin boys enjoyed the video room.

It was a hot and challenging day at the Activities Centre. There were other children who did not seek to use the Centre, who might have been invited in had there been space. The children enjoyed the toys and games but everyone got very hot. This may have contributed to the large amount of movement from the rooms to the courtyard. The shape of the space is such that moving from the Activities Centre to the courtyard means walking right through the middle of the indoor visiting room. While there was no evidence of actual disruption, the continual traffic across the room was potentially disruptive to other visitors.

How the families view the Centre

A brief (five minute) survey was undertaken with fourteen families over the two days of observation at the Centre. Four of the families had used the Activities Centre in the past, and several others had seen it advertised. Six families had booked the Centre by telephone.

One father noted the benefit to himself of the Centre:

I want the opportunity to play with my son in a comfortable way, to lie down with him on the floor and get to know him again. I am away for a couple of years.

Two families talked about their children getting bored in the main visiting area, and another said it was “choice for the kids”.



The parents report that the children who have used the Centre before love it: “Our son was straight in here, a big smile on his face”. The parents report that the children really like the space and especially the toys.

Drawing pictures was the first activity chosen by half of the families. Others played cards, read books and played with cars and dolls. One family had a big game of snakes and ladders.

The second wave of activities included reading books, watching videos, using sticker books and more drawing. Often the prisoner and the children drew pictures together. There was a lot of interaction between the adults and the children in the rooms.

A number of the families liked features of the rooms. They enjoyed the privacy, the ability to get down and play with the children away from the public gaze, the quiet of the rooms and the toys. While the Pillars worker moved families on after an hour or so, all stated they would have stayed longer if possible. On the other hand, they were happy to give up the rooms to others.

Most of the respondents were very impressed with the quality of the toys. The only wish list item (and it was tongue-in-cheek) was for an X-Box.

The most commonly requested item was a water cooler, as children have to leave the rooms and go outside to use the water fountain. This request escalated on the second day, which was warm and sunny. Several adults said tea or coffee would be nice, and one noted that such facilities existed at Rolleston prison. A mother suggested that the mums chip in to purchase biscuits that can be held by the Pillars worker, as the children start to get hungry towards the end of long visits. Another family suggested that vending machines be brought back.

Many commented on how much easier visiting is in the Activities Centre:

There is nothing for the children to do in the visiting room. The father gets to see his child do things in the Activities Centre. And it is great for the kids. They get bored easily out there. It is easier in here where there is something to do (father).

It was really quite depressing before. Fathers were not allowed to move from their seats, kids running around bored, whinging about wanting to go home. We now dread coming here in the weeks when the Activities Centre is locked up. A couple of weeks ago we paid to have someone look after the kids ‘cos the Activities Centre was closed. HUGE difference (mother).

It helps me interact with the kids and be close to them. My son has recently started school and can now show me what he has learnt. They draw pictures and the volunteers take them out to the gatehouse for us. The kids look



forward to coming: "Daddy, toys!" It makes them feel better about me being here (father).

He loves it. When it is closed he moans, wants to go home, and is hungry and very fidgety. He is quite a handful and the room helps (mother).

Every week that it is not open my Dad has to take my son out to the car park. Here, he stays the whole time. It would be good if it was every week, 'cos my son was so young when I came to jail and I have missed out on all those things. I feel more like a father now. It would be cool if we could buy a pack of lollies, say from Pillars. I like watching him eat - that's new to me (father).

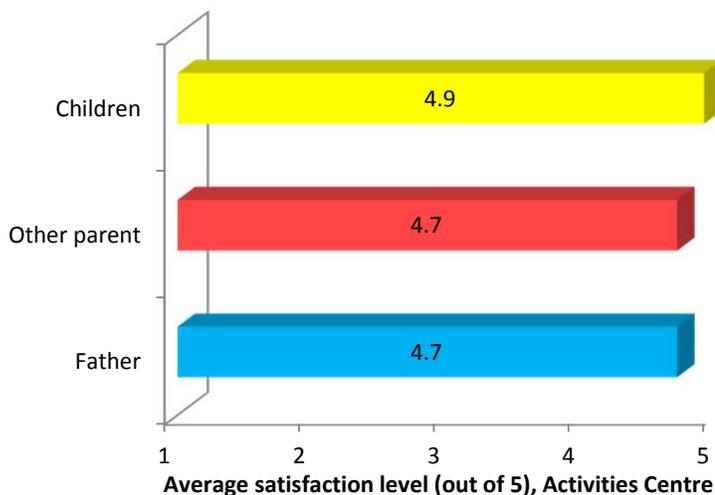
The only complaint about the Activities Centre is that it is closed too often:

It needs to be every week not every four weeks. When it is closed he looks in screaming and crying and trying to get to the toys. He sees the toys but can't get them. Before the Activities Centre, he got bored, tired and hungry.

We were upset that it was never open when we wanted it.

The rooms encourage the children to play, either alone or with their parent. They provide a medium for interaction and keep the children happy. They change the nature of visits and, in more than half of the cases, foster significant interaction between child and prisoner. The most popular things to do are drawing, colouring and stickers, followed by dolls and cars. On the two days the Activities Centre was observed, the videos were not used very often, or if they were on, were not watched.

The satisfaction ratings for the Activities Centre were very high. Adults were asked to rate the Centre on a scale from 1 to 5, one being 'dreadful' and five being 'wonderful'. We did not ask the children directly, but got the parents to ask their child and recorded the results. The rating for fathers, other caregivers and children are summarised in the figure below.



Staffing issues

From the beginning of the project, providing adequate staffing has been the most problematic issue. It has always been the intention that the Activities Centre would be staffed by volunteers. There is, at this point, no funding available that would allow the Centre to be staffed by paid people.

In the early planning sessions, it was felt that there should be three volunteers at every session. A number of attempts have been made through community, church, earthquake-related and other networks to attract volunteers to the role, without any success. The main reasons appear to be a lack of available volunteers in the post-quake Christchurch and the fact that the work is on Saturday and Sunday.

Due to the problem in enrolling volunteers, in practice the whole Centre has been run by Karen, a Pillars social worker and supervisor, who has been paid for this work. A prison volunteer, Anne, attended one day's session in late May, and intends to return.

Karen is of the view that the original idea of having three volunteers is excessive and unnecessary. This would be like having a supervisor for each room, and would constitute too invasive a scrutiny. What needs supervising is the allocation of rooms, the distribution of appropriate toys and the timing of different groups. One properly skilled and experienced person can easily undertake all such tasks, plus the set-up and clean-up roles.

She is now of the view that two paid staff should be employed to run the Activities Centre. One would attend on a Saturday and one on a Sunday, and they would provide back-up for each other in the event of sickness or inability to attend. This would allow the Centre to open each week.

Volunteers could still be used on a regular basis to support the worker and the families.

The advantage of paid staff is experience, adequate ongoing training, and possibly better skills. The stand-over issues noted above demonstrates that superior interpersonal skills are needed in the role. Paid staff could also oversee the maintenance and purchase of the Activities Centre toys and equipment.

Even if funding could be found to staff this pilot project, however, the need for staffing may make it less likely that other prisons might adopt a similar model.



Stakeholder views

The views of five stakeholders were collected for this study: two Corrections staff, two Pillars staff and one volunteer.

Parenting

All the stakeholders were strongly supportive of children visiting their parents in prison. Concepts such as attachment and bonding were mentioned by several as important elements of the parent/child relationship.

One stakeholder explained:

Parenting is an enduring natural bond and it is important for prisoners to maintain their parenting role. It is also good stewardship on the part of the prison to help prisoners be good parents.

One stakeholder talked of the need for a culture-change in prisons, so that prisoners are valued as fathers and have the opportunity to be good parents. Two stakeholders also noted that it is not the fault of the child that the parent is in prison.

All of the stakeholders noted that playtime, education and development tasks are important for interaction between prisoner/parents and children. The “sterile visiting” model makes it very difficult to undertake these parenting tasks. Interactive play, having special, or private, or quiet time together and regular contact were all cited as important. One stakeholder dreamed of going much further, by requiring prisoners to continue to act as responsible parents throughout their sentences:

Regular contact by videophone, telephone, Skype, face to face.. whatever the approach, prisoners need to be taught parental responsibility - to be there for the child. Prisons should bend over backwards to ensure this... Possibilities include assessing the parent role at the start of the sentence, a specialist parenting wing, and parents should be working at the prison and raising a salary to support the family.

This stakeholder noted there was no way for prisoners to act as normal parents. They cannot be around to offer advice and support when something goes wrong, for example. She believes there is much more that prisons can do to foster good parenting.

Stakeholders were asked whether more needed to be done to improve parent/child relationships when a parent is in prison. The response was universally ‘yes’. One respondent noted that the shift to a prisoner-centric approach, where every prisoner gets a case manager and a plan, provides a way for the prison to assist prisoners with parenting. Another noted:



It needs to be looked at more, keeping the family together. As soon as the prisoner is assessed, there is a need to work on maintaining and improving relationships.

Ideas seen in other jurisdictions were given as examples: partners having meals together and private time to work through issues, 72 hour leaves, video conferencing and other options.

Stakeholders identified a range of other programmes that seek to foster good family relationships: Storybook Dads, family days, parenting courses, living skills, Mahi Tahi and the Serco model of Activities Centre.

How else could better family relations be fostered? Stakeholders mentioned better communications, breaking down barriers, better models of reintegration and a wider range of services. One person noted: "Every day should be a family day". It is interesting that all respondents identified the current will for change and for better services.

The Activities Centre

The stakeholders found value in many aspects of the Activities Centre. Some saw it as good for the children, as it 'normalises' the environment for the child, helps overcome "the scariness of the prison environment and allows children to constructively occupy themselves".

Others focused on the benefits to the adults, children and family unit:

For the children in terms of attachment, for the families and also for the prison. It is about self-esteem and building aspirations. For the caregiver, supports them in their role as a parent - care for husband and for children. For prisoners, the father is still involved with the child.

Having children occupied in good quality activities is a bonus in itself, even without parental interaction. The play prevents the children getting bored and restless.

One stakeholder felt that the Activities Centre had limited value:

I have photos of one Canadian prison that shows a family friendly visiting lounge. Prison should look on this kind of visiting as a programme to equip prisoners to be good parents. Visiting=reintegration.

Stakeholders were mainly happy with the range of activities available in the Centre. They liked the books and reading activities, games, drawing, card-making and similar activities. One person noted that the Centre should provide activities for



children age one to adolescence, and focus (in this prison) on things a man would normally do with his children.

A stakeholder wanted a much wider set of activities available, including swings and slides, basketball hoops, kicking balls around on grass and other outdoor activities.

Barriers to good child visits include security requirements, staff, facilities and other constraints. One person referred to the recent “breath of fresh air” due to a new management approach within Corrections. Indeed, both Corrections stakeholders in this study noted that security regimes need to be re-examined, and visitor spaces be ‘respected’:

Security requirements require strict enforcement of rules and regulations, having said this there is a need to look at further development and enhancement of visits in prisons for families in all prisons by providing family friendly activities.

Stakeholders were asked what value they thought prisoners might get from an Activities Centre. The comments mainly focussed on the relationship issues and the opportunity for parenting in the prison environment. Some examples of comments follow:

- It will give them the opportunity to be normal with their children.
- It gives them the opportunity to go back to the rest of the week thinking about the visit and the child they have seen, read a story to.
- Strengthen their relationship with their children, watch them grow, play with them.
- Prisoners need to take on their parental responsibilities- building connections. Remind prisoners that they are part of a family.
- A sense of pride in being able to teach and show children how to play together.

The final question asked of stakeholders was whether the Activities Centre model could be replicated in other prisons. This question evoked a wide range of responses. One person noted:

Small steps are needed when working in the prisons. I see the first step as getting the Activities Centre to work.

One barrier noted by several people was the physical space and facilities for an Activities Centre. The existence and relatively cheap transformation of the rooms was a bonus, but raised issues about (a) whether this is the best model and (b) whether it is replicable. This is discussed in the next section. Comments included:

Rooms like this don't exist in a lot of places. You need the right set-up. Here there is one family in each room, but also a video room for children. Serco



[running the Auckland remand prison] has one big room but will have lots of toys.

Current Activities Centre model cannot work. The whole visiting room needs to be activities centre room.

Role and culture of prison officers

A number of different aspects of this issue were discussed. Most thought that the role and approach of prison officers needed to change to accommodate a more family-friendly approach. This would involve a change in focus, and would involve a continued concern that the Centre provided an “opportunity to manipulate and use the Centre for nefarious means”, and one respondent put it. Issues include that prison officers do not see their role as providing activities for children:

But staff don't like to clear up, and there have been issues. The issue here was a toy was pulled apart and had dangerous bits in it, and that was the end of the toys here.

Institutional issues

Various institutional factors were also mentioned, including the focus on security, health and safety issues, questions around staffing and supervision and similar issues. One person noted:

The culture of prisons is not family friendly, but punitive. Barriers include the distance of prisons from home, reception at the gatehouse (not so much the searching but the need for at least a friendly face), and the evident lack of concern for a positive visiting experience for children.

However, this pilot has shown that such barriers are not insurmountable and, in fact, alternative models can be rolled out within the prison environment.



Findings and recommendations

The Activities Centre at Christchurch Mens' Prison arose from an idea that Pillars brought to the prison and regional management in mid-2011. While the idea came from the community sector, prison authorities have invested significant resources, time, management experience and enthusiasm into moving from planning to implementation.

Management committee

This constitutes an excellent example of a prison and a community organisation working together for a common goal. The fact that the pilot project was launched on the planned date and with all elements complete (except ongoing staff, which is discussed below), is a credit to the whole management team. The planning phase was highly successful and relatively efficient. A small capital works component was able to be funded and resources found to furnish the rooms.

The Centre

The Activities Centre was built around three rooms which were available within the low-security visiting complex. The three-room model has been generally successful, except when demand exceeded supply and a number of people were waiting to use the rooms.

Families enjoyed the relative privacy and quiet of the rooms compared to the overall visiting room. Several fathers noted they were able to get down on the floor and play with their children. The high-quality toys, games and activities were enjoyed by both children and adults.

The Centre fostered good adult-child interaction and gave children a range of things to do. There is no doubt that children love the Centre. They scored the Centre overall a 4.9 out of 5. This is very positive but has also caused some issues.

A major problem has emerged with the growing popularity of the Centre. With the booking system, children can see other children interacting with their parents and the toys and games in an attractive involvement, while they are stuck outside in the sterile visiting area with no toys. This is setting up a 'haves' and 'have-nots' division within the visiting area. Young children, in particular, do not understand the concept of shared space. They can see through the glass window that other children are getting resources that they are denied.

Staffing the Centre

The difficulties noted above in getting a rota of volunteers to staff the Activities Centre has been the over-riding problem for the pilot. The Centre needs to be open



and available every day that visiting occurs. Parents told of children desperate to get to the toys and games, and children being sent to a sitter on days that the Centre was not open.

The current thinking is that paid staff need to run the Centre, in order to ensure continuity of service that is required. There are other reasons why qualified paid staff may be more effective. Staff need the authority and confidence to place families in the Centre rooms and to ask them to leave, and to resist pressure from prisoners or family groups to allocate (or not) rooms and resources.

There is plenty of scope for volunteers to work alongside staff in a range of roles, but it is important to avoid overstaffing as well as under-staffing.

The outdoor area

The outdoor area with the beautiful wall paintings and hopscotch is a useful space. On the second of the two observed days, which was warm, families with children tended to move between the indoor and outdoor areas. The placement of the doors to the exterior area is unfortunate, as families have to walk through the middle of the visiting area to move from the Activities Centre to the courtyard. As no toys are allowed in this area, it is a little boring for the children.

Limiting the distribution of activities

The agreement of the management committee is that toys, books and games cannot be removed from the Activities Centre. This is recorded in the minutes of 18 January 2012: 'No books or other equipment is to be removed from activity rooms'. As the Centre has become more popular, this rule has become increasingly problematic.

The evaluator observed a small number of books and other items being taken by children from the Centre to the outdoor area. More seriously, limiting the distribution of resource to those occupying the Activities Centre rooms sets up a kind of winner takes all environment.

This became clear during the second observational session, when Karen distributed two boxes of play materials to children who were outside of the Activities Centre. In each case the children sat quietly at the table with their families and played, drew pictures or read.

Karen's actions in distributing these boxes of toys broke the agreement of the management committee. From her perspective, there was simply no choice but to provide some toys for the waiting families in a controlled environment, to avoid tensions mounting over who got the resources and who did not.

There is a very basic kind of injustice in providing a full range of resources to one group of children and none to another group. Having observed the situation



carefully, it is hard to imagine how Karen could have enforced the management committee's rules in this instance. A fairer and more equitable rule needs to be developed and applied.

Advancing human rights

The Activity Centre model provides one way for New Zealand to meet the international obligation to provide for a good visiting environment between prisoner/parents and children. It provides a relatively easy and cheap method to achieve private visits and to foster high quality interaction.

Recommendations

It is recommended that other correctional facilities in New Zealand note the pilot project to provide an Activities Centre in Christchurch Mens' Prison, and consider adopting a similar workable model.

The staffing/ volunteer situation during the pilot project has made it difficult to fully examine the Centre's operation, and the stop-start nature of the facility is confusing and difficult for family members and children. It is recommended that a way be found to resolve the staffing shortfall for a period of three months, to keep the Centre operating through all visiting periods, to ensure that all pilot problems are resolved.

That boxes of toys, books and games be assembled and delivered to children in the larger visiting room who wish to use the Centre but are unable to because it is full. This will extend the co-ordinator's role to promoting play and interaction in the wider area, rather than just in the Activities Centre.

That the visiting room be reoriented slightly so that adults without children can experience a child-free visit, while family groups can play without fear of upsetting other visitors.

The courtyard area is attractive but very sparse in terms of activities. Thought should be given to providing a series of safe activities in that setting.

That comments made by parents (mainly mothers) relating to the provision of food and drink be noted by stakeholders.

That the role and culture of prison officers needs to change to a more family-friendly approach for visitors and especially for children.



Appendix 1. Information sheet and consent form

Activities Centre evaluation Information Sheet for evaluation tasks

Pillars Inc is a community organisation that works with the families and children of prisoners. Pillars is involved in a range of research-led programmes in Christchurch and Auckland. Research has found that prison visiting had become increasingly difficult, uncomfortable and stressful as a result of increased security measures in New Zealand prisons. This project is about improving the experience of prison visiting for children and their parents.

Pillars is currently running a pilot Activities Centre at Christchurch Men's prison. The goal of the Centre is to make visiting better and more pleasant for children, and to give children and their fathers the opportunity to play and interact with their children in a well-equipped environment. The Centre currently includes and Art/activities room and a reading room.

Evaluation of the Centre will proceed between mid-April and the end of June 2012.

The evaluation includes:

Examining background and set-up data;

Attending meetings of the management group;

Interviewing stakeholders at the prison and in the community, including volunteers;

A survey of prisoners and adults accompanying children on the use and effectiveness of the centre;

Writing a report on the pilot, including recommendations.

Confidentiality of all individuals participating in the process will be maintained throughout the project. The evaluation report will be available on the Pillars website when complete.

**For further information contact: Dr Liz Gordon, Pūkeko Research Ltd, P.O. Box 2031, Christchurch,
Ph 0800 787875**



Activities centre consent form

- I have been told that I am not required to participate in this evaluation study – participation is voluntary.
- The researcher has explained to me the purpose of the evaluation, and my right to not answer any question I don't like, or to stop the interview, without having to explain why.
- I understand that all information will be kept confidential by the researchers, and will be used only for research purposes.
- I understand that my name will not be used in any reports, and that nothing printed in the report will indicate who I am.
- I agree to be interviewed for this evaluation.

An evaluation report will be available in July 2012. This will be available online.

- I would like a summary of the evaluation, on completion. Please send to:

NAME	DATE
SIGNATURE	



For further information contact:
Dr Liz Gordon, Pūkeko Research Ltd
P.O. Box 2031, Christchurch, Ph 0800 787875



Appendix 2. Questions for stakeholders

Should children visit their parents in prison? (If so, how often)

If yes, what kind of interaction should they have with their parent?

Do you see value in a dedicated activities centre? (define if necessary)

What kind of activities should children and their parent be able to do in such a centre?

What barriers exist to improving facilities for children in prisons?

What barriers exist to running an activities centre in all prisons?

What value might prisoners gain from such a centre?

What risks exist in such a centre?

Might there be a spin-off for other groups/services working with prisoners?

Do you think more needs to be done to improve parent/child relationships when the parent is in prison?

Apart from good visiting practices, what other things could help achieve this goal?

Do you know of other programmes or services, apart from the activities centre, that aim to foster good, active parenting skills in prison?



Appendix 3. Short survey for parents

Why did you use the Activities Centre today?

Whose idea was it – yours or your child's (or other)?

What did you do first?

What else did you do?

How long did you stay in the Centre?

What, if anything, else would you have liked to do, if it had been available?

Please rate the centre on a scale of 1-5, 1 being dreadful and five being wonderful...

Parent's rating:

How do you think your child/ren liked it (rate 1-5)?:



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