

Australian first at Acacia Prison

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In an Australian first, Acacia Prison has introduced the award-winning Storybook Dads programme. 16 prisoners are already participating in the programme that aims to improve relationships between prisoners and their children.

Acacia Prison Director, Andy Beck said, "At Acacia we're always looking for innovative ways to improve education and rehabilitation programmes for prisoners, while offering staff new training opportunities."

Acacia Prison, Western Australia's only privately run prison is operated by Serco. "At Serco we bring service to life and Storybook Dads is an example of this," Mr Beck said.

Prisoners participating in Acacia's parenting programmes are able to record a CD of their child's favorite bedtime story with a personal message, sound effects and a personalised CD cover. The CD is then mailed to the child to play at home.

For one prisoner, a father of six, the impact on his children of the Storybook CD was immediate. "My oldest daughter plays it whenever she can't get to sleep," he said. With 11 months of a six-year sentence to serve, he was worried about reconnecting with his children until undertaking the parenting course. "Through these programmes I know I can be part of their lives."

Other graduates of the parenting course agreed that they would be better parents with the skills they were taught.

"A lot of offending behaviour is due to problems from childhood – this is a cycle we can break and our kids don't have to go through it," one father said. "All of us as kids got a smack – we're realising there are other options for behavioural issues than punishment."

Acacia Prison Officer Mark Nicholl studied the Storybook Dads project in the UK, where it originated, before introducing it at Acacia. He said the recording process could bring all families together as it was suitable for any level of literacy.

“Some Dads may never have read their child a story before, so this CD allows the child to understand that their Dad does care and wants to be part of their life,” Mr Nicholl said.

“The families of some prisoners live in the far north of Western Australia so regular visits are virtually impossible. The Storybook Dads programme will help break the cycle of reoffending by closing the distance between a father and his children; fathers will feel increasingly empowered and children will feel loved.

“I also think the programme could be good for Indigenous prisoners with a culture of oral, not written, history. Stories are passed from generation to generation and Storybook Dads will encourage that to continue.”

Research shows six out of every ten children of prisoners or ex-prisoners become involved in crime and go to prison. “These appalling odds can be changed and we hope Storybook Dads will help break this cycle. If we can stop one child following in their father’s footsteps this programme will have paid for itself,” said Anni Hoddinnott, Acacia Prison’s Education and Training Manager.

“Storybook Dads opens up a range of educational opportunities for the prisoners – everything from the creative process of writing their own story to learning the computer skills necessary to edit and produce the CDs.”

Sharon Berry, the founder and CEO of Storybook Dads, said “We were pleased to be a part of implementing the initiative at Acacia Prison. I am sure it will be as successful over there as it has been in the UK. It has enormous benefits for the prisoners, their families and, ultimately, society in general as maintaining family ties helps to reduce re-offending.”

Many others prisons operated by Serco also provide similar Storybook programmes for prisoners and their children. Mr Ron Patterson, a Skills for Life Tutor at HMP Lowdham Grange, was a Butler Trust award winner for the Storytime Dads programme implemented at Lowdham Grange in 2008. More than 300 storytime recordings have since been made at Lowdham, putting the support from the Butler Trust to good use.

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Editor's notes

About Storybook Dads

From its humble beginnings at Dartmoor Prison in 2004, where it operated out of one cell, Storybook Dads has grown to three fully-equipped editing suites, seven staff, three volunteers and 10 prisoner/editors. Now 80 prisons in the UK run the Storybook programme.

Sharon Berry, the founder and CEO of Storybook Dads, featured in a chapter of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's book 'Britain's Everyday Heroes' and the organisation was named the United Kingdom's Charity of the Year in 2007.

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