



Re-Configuring Fatherhood: Evaluating the Impact of a Prison-Based Fathering Intervention

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Abstract

Children may experience multiple adverse outcomes when a parent is incarcerated, and many incarcerated fathers experience parental stress. High parental stress negatively impacts wellbeing, parenting quality and prison adjustment. Despite evidence that maintaining parent-child relationships and fostering positive fathering identities can support desistance, understanding of these mechanisms remains limited, and more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions which address these challenges in prison settings. This mixed-methods study aimed to evaluate *Fathers Inside*, a program aimed at developing positive fathering roles in prison. Twenty-seven fathers took part in the program, delivered in a UK prison. Their parental stress, wellbeing, judgmental attitudes, personal growth, locus of control, and self-esteem were measured before and after program participation. Pre- and post-program scores, and the Reliable Change Index were used to examine differences. While post-program scores showed no significant difference for any measures, on an individual level, several participants showed reliable change and clinical improvements using Reliable Change Index. Additionally, between 45 and 85% of participants' scores were already comparable to the general population before commencement. Emerging themes in interviews included the reconfiguration of fatherhood roles from prison, allowing fathers to adapt to parenting at a distance, reframing fathering roles, accepting past mistakes, developing honesty as a value, and improving authentic communication with their children. The *Fathers Inside* program has the potential to help individuals reconstrue their fathering role in prison, reduce parental stress, thereby increasing adjustment to prison, and improve the parent-child relationship through authentic communication.

Keywords Parental stress · Incarcerated fathers · Mixed methods · Adaptation of fathering role · Communication with children

Highlights

- This is an evaluation of a fathering program to reduce parental stress in incarcerated fathers.
- Most participants were within functional ranges (the expected range for a non-clinical population) for all measures prior to program commencement and remained within functional ranges post-program.
- Participants adapted to fathering at a distance and developed more agency in the fathering role.
- Participants improved their skills for authentic communication with their children.

The impact of parental incarceration on children is well documented (Adams, 2018). Children may have multiple adverse outcomes when a parent goes to prison. The most notable effect is the change this separation brings to the parent-child relationship (Kautz, 2017). This separation may

impact multiple behavioral and emotional outcomes for children with a parent in prison, the reported severity of which differs from study to study (Sharratt, 2014). Nevertheless, the consensus within the literature is that parental incarceration significantly impacts both parents and children, with some studies reporting impact severity in line with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Gualtieri et al., 2020).

Parental stress is a major factor influencing both children and incarcerated parents. Parental stress occurs when a parent finds it difficult to cope with their parenting role and the demands of raising children (Berry & Jones, 1995).

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Parental stress is related to poorer mental and general wellbeing and suffering of various mental health conditions such as depression (Dargis & Mitchell-Somoza, 2021). Further, parental stress and poor wellbeing are associated with poorer parent-child relationships and reduced parenting quality (Pluess & Belsky, 2010). This impact highlights the need to mitigate parental stress, as this stress not only contributes to emotional challenges within families (Pluess & Belsky, 2010) but also plays a pivotal role in influencing the adjustment of incarcerated fathers to prison life (Loper, 2006). In prison environments, parenting stress is also associated with increased risk of breaking rules and regulations, and those who experience parental stress find it more challenging to adjust to prison (Loper, 2006). Therefore, reducing parental stress is essential in improving the emotional wellbeing of fathers and their adjustment to being in prison.

Parental stress may be exacerbated by external circumstances such as a relationship breakdown. Many fathers in prison lose contact with their children's mothers, making it very difficult to locate their children, or have someone on the outside to facilitate contact (Magaletta & Herbst, 2001). Clarke et al. (2005) found that fathers in prison had higher levels of parental stress as they had heightened concern due to little contact with both the child and the child's primary caregiver. However, there is also evidence that the very act of prison visitation is also a major cause of parental stress (Boppre et al., 2022) and could be a threat to maintaining familial connections (de Claire et al., 2020). It is important, therefore, to consider ways to maintain relationships without increasing distress.

Current research demonstrates that interventions designed to improve parenting skills can reduce parental stress and make other positive changes. For example, Block et al. (2014) found that the *InsideOut Dad* program, a parenting program in the USA, had a positive impact on confidence, knowledge, and parenting attitudes of fathers in prison. The same program was also evaluated with a sample of minority fathers in prison in the USA. Although the effect size was small, there was a significant reduction in psychological distress after program completion (Turner et al., 2020a). In another study, Turner et al. (2020b) found that fathers experienced significant improvements in perception of social support. Although these studies did not investigate the program's impact on recidivism, social support is essential for reintegration, and may reduce the probability of recidivism (Fox, 2022). However, there is still a paucity of research considering the importance of maintaining active parent-child relationships and the impact this may have on the desistance process. The separation from their child and the removal of 'father' as a core aspect of one's identity is linked to the concept of parental stress (Dyer, 2005). A key factor in desistance is the development

of positive identities. Enabling positive fathering identities, providing mechanisms that enable incarcerated fathers to enact those roles, and maintaining parent-child relationships can be 'hooks for change' or turning points (Meek, 2011). Relatedly, important protective factors are having active family ties, belonging to a group, and having hope. Hope is important for fathers in prison, as this can allow for aspired, hoped-for, possible fathering selves (Meek, 2007).

Adams (2018) highlights a significant gap in the literature regarding how fathers in prison construe fatherhood and the mechanisms by which paternal incarceration disrupts relationships and the wider family network. The Fathers Inside program is an intensive course designed to improve the parenting, life, and social skills of fathers inside prison (Ministry of Justice, 2016). Using a humanistic approach, the program aims to improve the parenting, life, and social skills of fathers inside prison by supporting individuals with practical skills, while enhancing their confidence and self-esteem in parenting their children and relationships with partners. This research evaluation aims to address the gap in understanding incarcerated fathers' views on parenting and their parenting identity, and the lack of existing evaluations on fathering interventions in correctional settings (Loper & Tuerk, 2011).

The present research is a mixed-methods study that aims to qualitatively and quantitatively evaluate the *Fathers Inside* program and its impact on the service users. The quantitative phase of the research aims to evaluate whether there are any pre/post-course changes in parental stress, wellbeing, judgmental attitudes, personal growth, locus of control, and self-esteem. These measures are essential in evaluating whether the program impacts positive fathering, given the relationship between parenting stress and poor wellbeing with poorer parent-child relationships and reduced parenting quality. The qualitative phase of the evaluation aims to understand participants' views of fathering, explore their fathering identity, and the impact the course had on the parent-child relationship while in prison.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through the *Fathers Inside* program at an HMP (His Majesty's Prison) site in England. The reasons for their current incarceration ranged widely, including offenses against the person, property offenses, and drug-related offenses. Correspondingly, they had sentences of varying lengths, ranging from four to eleven years. All participants in the sample had previous convictions. Individuals were eligible to participate if they were the parent or guardian of a child. Facilitators of the course

advertised opportunities to participate in both quantitative and qualitative research for the project, and individuals could either let the facilitator know that they wished to take part or contact the researchers via the psychology department at the prison. Twenty-seven males (21–55 years old) with a mean age of 35.22 ($SD = 9.25$) participated in the quantitative research. Of these, twenty males also participated in the qualitative research. Toward the end of the program, facilitators for *Fathers Inside* advertised the research and the purposes of the interviews. Those interested informed the facilitators, who then notified a member of the research team. Consent was obtained prior to interviews and questionnaires, and debrief was given upon completion. Participation in the quantitative phase of the evaluation was not compulsory, and choosing not to participate had no negative consequences for participants.

Procedure

Access to participants was approved by the HMP Prison site in England, following ethical approval by His Majesty's Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS) and Nottingham Trent University. The evaluation used a self-report questionnaire consisting of multiple-choice questions to assess male prisoners' perceptions of their parenting, wellbeing, self-esteem and personal views of themselves. The questionnaires were designed to explore changes in these areas and were administered by a facilitator trained in delivering prison programs. Participants completed the questionnaire one week before the *Fathers Inside* program, and again one week after completing it, to determine whether the program was beneficial. The facilitator reviewed the consent form and the pre- and post-program pack with each participant individually. Participants then read the debrief after completion of the measures. After completing the program, participants were also interviewed about their experiences of *Fathers Inside*, and the differences in their parenting relationships as a result of participation. The data was collected from the prison and sent back to Nottingham Trent University for analysis. Qualitative interviews took place in a purpose-built interview room in the education department at the HM Prison site in England. A member of the research team conducted each interview. Interviews ranged from 45–90 min. Interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone and were transcribed by the research team. The transcripts were then analyzed for emerging themes.

Intervention

The Fathers Inside programme is an intervention for male prisoners, which aims to improve their parental responsibilities through roleplay, skills training and group discussion. The program focuses on participants' early childhood

development, participants' experiences of being a child, and the importance of engagement in their child's schooling and education. Other activities included journaling, discussions, and writing letters. The participants were able to have an extended family visit at the end of the program. The programme allows a better understanding of participants' role as a father, while challenging attitudes, developing skills essential to successful resettlement, and contributing to desistance from crime (Justice Data Lab, 2016). The program was delivered over the course of four weeks, and consisted of 32 sessions, each 2.5 h long. The program used a group therapy framework and was delivered by a third-sector organization in the UK. The course was facilitated by two full-time tutors (usually prison education staff or officers) and a part-time family support worker, all of whom were experienced in delivering prison programs. To ensure fidelity, all sessions were videoed, and a supervisor monitored at least 50% of sessions to ensure that content was being delivered as intended. Facilitators all had close clinical supervision, and peer debriefs after each session. Early evaluation work suggests that the program has a significant impact on recidivism. The proven reoffending (a conviction or other formal outcome for an offence committed within a year of release from a custodial sentence; Ministry of Justice, 2024) within 1 year for intervention completers was 24 vs 41% in the control group (Justice Data Lab, 2016).

Measures

Participants were given a self-report questionnaire containing a battery of demographic questions and measures, which they completed one week before commencing the program and one week after completion. The measures used in the evaluation were as follows:

Parental Stress Scale

The Parental Stress Scale (Berry & Jones, 1995) consists of 18 items scored on a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from one (*strongly disagree*) to five (*strongly agree*). An example item is "Having children leaves little time and flexibility in my life." Eight items are reverse-scored. Scores ranged from 18–90; higher scores indicate higher levels of parental stress. Cronbach's alpha for this sample was acceptable at $\alpha = 0.87$.

Warwick Edinburgh Mental Health Wellbeing Scale

The Warwick Edinburgh Mental Health Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS; Tennant et al., 2007) measures mental wellbeing. It comprises 14 items scored on a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from one (*none of the time*) to five (*all of the time*). An example item is "I've been feeling

good about myself.” Scores range from a minimum of 14 and a maximum of 70, with a higher score indicating a higher level of mental wellbeing. Cronbach’s alpha for this sample was found to be acceptable at 0.95.

Judgmental Parental Attitudes Scale

The Judgmental Parental Attitudes Scale (Blagden, 2018) was developed for this study and comprises seven questions to assess participants’ parental judgments and attitudes. The statements challenge stereotypical and judgmental beliefs. An example item is “I’d be angry and upset if my child was gay/lesbian.” Items are rated on a six-point Likert scale, from one (*strongly agree*) to six (*strongly disagree*). Three items are reverse-scored. Total scores range from a minimum of 6 and a maximum of 42. Lower scores suggest the participant holds judgmental beliefs about their child. Cronbach’s alpha for the current sample was slightly below recommended acceptable values at 0.69. However, values as low as 0.60 are acceptable for exploratory studies (Hair et al., 2010).

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) measures self-esteem. It consists of 10 statements scored on a four-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from one (*strongly agree*) to four (*strongly disagree*). An example item is “I take a positive attitude towards myself.” Scores range from a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 40; a higher score indicates higher self-esteem. Cronbach’s alpha for this sample was acceptable at 0.89.

Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II

The Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II (Robitschek et al., 2012) measures personal growth across four domains; readiness for change, planfulness, using resources, and intentional behavior. It consists of 16 items, scored on a 6-point Likert scale from 0 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). A sample item is “I know how to make a realistic plan in order to change myself.” Items in each subscale are added to calculate subscale scores, and the total score is calculated by adding all items; total scores range from 0–80, and subscale scores range from 0–20. Higher scores indicate greater intentional personal growth. The total score and the Readiness to Change subscale were calculated for this study. Given the higher prevalence of intellectual disabilities in prison populations, the scale was adapted for easier readability, although participants were not tested for such disabilities as part of this research. Consent to simplify the statements was obtained from Robitschek. Cronbach’s alpha for the current sample showed a reliability of 0.94.

Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale

The Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (1973) measures individuals’ external locus of control. It consists of 40 statements with *yes* or *no* responses. The score is obtained by counting the ‘correct’ answers, as outlined in Nowicki and Strickland (1973). The correct answers indicate that the individual has an internal locus of control, and correct scores are added to obtain an overall score. Scores range from 0–40, with lower scores indicating an internal locus of control and higher scores indicating an external locus of control. The current sample demonstrated good reliability with a Kuder-Richardson-20 score of 0.84. Kuder-Richardson-20 is used to measure the internal consistency of measures with dichotomous options, and values are comparable to Cronbach’s alpha (Thompson, 2015).

Qualitative Data Collection

The interviews explored the content of the course, how participants experienced and learned from this content, and how it impacted on their construing of fathering and the role of the father. They also focused on how participants might embed and use learning from the course going forward. All interviews in this research were semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to discuss issues of central concern to both themselves and the research topic. This interviewing style is flexible and naturally enables participants to elaborate on issues important to them. In order to facilitate discussion, all questions were kept open (Knight, Wykes & Hayward, 2003).

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

Sociodemographic data for the sample were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Sample adequacy was tested using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), and paired sample *t* tests were used to compare differences over time in the quantitative measures at a group level. Due to the small sample size, differences at an individual level were also calculated.

Calculating Clinically Significant Changes: Assessment Of Clinical Significance (CS) and a Reliability of Change Index (RCI)

Individual level statistics were investigated using the RCI. The Jacobson-Truax (1992) method for calculating the RCI was used in this study. The RCI represents the level of change necessary to be confident that the difference in scores across time points is not due to chance or error but instead reflects an actual change (Anderson et al., 2014;

$$RC = \frac{x_2 - x_1}{S_{diff}}$$

Fig. 1 Original RCI Formula by Jacobson and Truax

Jacobson & Truax, 1992). The RCI allows an assessment of whether changes in scores on a measure indicate 1) statistically reliable change and 2) clinical change. Reliable change is whether the difference in an individual's score (e.g., pre- and post-intervention) is statistically significant or not, based on the reliability of the measure. Clinical change or clinically significant change (CS) is when the individual moves from the dysfunctional to the functional range on a measure during the intervention. The RCI was calculated using Jacobson and Truax's (1992) original formula (see Fig. 1). While there have been modifications to this formula, research suggests that they result in few differences in classification (Anderson et al., 2014).

In this formula, x_2 is the participant's post-treatment score on a given measure, x_1 is their pre-treatment score on the same measure, and S_{diff} is the standard error of the difference between x_2 and x_1 . Clinical significance addresses whether the client reached some target level of functioning during treatment and whether the improvement observed was greater than expected by chance alone (Nunes et al., 2011). Jacobson and Truax (1992) identified that an improvement of two standard deviations away from the mean is one method for determining whether change is clinically significant. Following the criteria proposed by Jacobson, Roberts, Berns, and McGlinchey (1999) and cut-offs recommended by Wise (2004), the study utilized Clinical Significance (CS) and Reliable Change Index (RCI) calculations to categorize individuals post-treatment into four groups—deteriorated, unchanged, improved but below normal functioning, and recovered, as outlined by Nunes et al. (2011). In an additional refinement, participants underwent further stratification based on their pre-program scores being functional or dysfunctional, as per Barnett et al. (2013). This approach differentiates cases where individuals do not show improvement because they are already functioning at satisfactory levels before the program commences. This nuanced categorization enriches the analysis, providing a more precise understanding of treatment outcomes by considering baseline functioning when evaluating therapeutic interventions.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns and themes within a data set. Thematic analysis aims to capture rich

detail and represent the range and diversity of experience within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It has been described as a 'contextualist method,' sitting between the two poles of constructionism and realism. This position thus acknowledges the ways individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways in which the broader social context impinges on those meanings. As such, thematic analyses reflect 'reality' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis adhered to the phases of qualitative thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), consisting of familiarization and detailed readings of the data collected, progressing to initial and systematic coding of the data, and then generating initial themes from the coded data. The final phases included reviewing themes, ensuring that they were consistent with the coding, and that they were grounded in the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Smith, 2015). The final themes were representative of the sample. A form of intercoder agreement was used as a verification procedure to check coding of qualitative data (see de Wet & Erasmus, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In qualitative research, this occurs when two or more researchers code the same data independently and check for consistency across coders (de Wet & Erasmus, 2005). The research team in this study independently analyzed transcripts, as did an independent researcher. They then shared coding and themes in data analysis sessions with all authors present, and discussed emerging themes and codes from the data, as well as both similarities and differences in data analysis. No significant discrepancies existed between the authors; however, the authors did discuss the different interpretations of the data to come to a consensus regarding the interpretation of the data. As de Wet and Erasmus (2005) argue, this dialogical process can help to produce safeguards against bias, and in this study it assisted the researchers toward intercoder agreement.

Results

Data was collected in the form of a paper questionnaire one week before the program began and again one week after the program ended, spanning from January 2019 to January 2020. There was missing data from one participant who chose not to complete the post-program measures.

Quantitative Results

Paired sample *t*-tests were conducted to evaluate the impact of the *Fathers Inside* intervention on the measures relating to parental stress, wellbeing, self-esteem, judgmental parental beliefs, and personal growth. Using guidance from Stevens (1996), which recommends using a less conservative alpha when researching with small samples, a less

Table 1 Paired sample *t*-tests for pre- and post-program results of key variables

	<i>N</i>	Pre-intervention		Post-intervention		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Parental Stress	26	32.00	10.17	30.16	6.82	1.207	0.240	0.246
Wellbeing	25	49.68	12.64	50.72	9.41	−0.363	0.720	−0.073
Self-esteem	26	20.69	4.20	20.73	3.86	0.040	0.968	0.008
Judgments	26	34.15	5.32	33.85	4.85	0.245	0.808	0.048
Personal Growth	26	60.88	14.01	60.58	14.57	0.106	0.917	0.021
Readiness	26	16.85	3.30	16.12	4.05	0.802	0.430	0.157
Locus of Control	26	13.88	6.66	13.04	5.30	0.812	0.424	0.159

Wellbeing warwick edinburgh mental wellbeing scale, *Self-Esteem* rosenberg self-esteem scale, *Personal Growth* personal growth initiative scale II, *Readiness* PGIS-II readiness subscale, *Judgments* parental judgmental attitudes, *Parental Stress* parental stress scale

conservative alpha was set (in this case, set at 0.1) for detecting pre/post-program change.

The results of paired sample *t*-tests are presented in Table 1. The mean score for parental stress decreased post-program, but this difference was not significant. Scores for wellbeing did not show any significant difference over time, but were already within the functional range. Self-esteem scores did not significantly change as a result of the program. Scores for parental judgments also showed no significant changes over time. There were no significant differences over time for personal growth scores. The average readiness score decreased slightly post-program, but this difference was not significant. Finally, scores for locus of control did not show a significant difference over time.

The Reliable Change Index was also used to assess individual progress. RCI scores for key variables are presented in Table 2. The majority of participants were already within the functioning range for all measures except Judgments, where most participants were dysfunctional pre-program and remained unchanged.

A violin plot of individual parental stress scores (Fig. 2) further elucidates parental stress results. With one exception, individuals with high parental stress pre-program show lower post-program scores. Also, with one exception, individuals with lower pre-program scores show increased parental stress after the program ends.

Qualitative Results

The thematic analysis of data revealed two superordinate themes, each encompassing a number of subordinate themes, as detailed in Table 3.

The first superordinate theme details how participants were 're-configuring fatherhood'; that is, how they were adapting to fathering at a distance and the impact it was having on them and their family. Participants here struggled to understand how they could reimagine fathering from prison. The *Fathers Inside* program was helping men

reconstrue the role of the father and how they may 'do' or 'perform' the fathering role from prison. This theme considers the ways in which the course helped participants with their identity as fathers and reflecting on their role as a father. The second superordinate theme 'parental reflection through intervention', reflects the more practical and psychological ways in which participants were able to be fathers. One of the key aspects emerging from the data was the way in which the *Fathers Inside* program assisted participants in building relationships with their children, the mothers of their children, and the wider family. The analysis will broadly unpack the two superordinate themes and cover the main analytical points from the sub-themes.

Superordinate Theme 1: Re-Configuring Fatherhood

The 're-configuring fatherhood' theme encompasses the challenges that prison presents to participants' sense of their fathering identity and the implications of prison restrictions on the roles they associate with the father identity. A common theme amongst the men is how disempowered, distant, and restricted they felt. This negatively affected men due to their inability to adapt to the limitations of prison on their fathering role.

Extract 1

"I can't say I'm fathering to be honest. To be real, I can't say, you can't be much of a father from in here. Ok I have my phone calls and visits and stuff and I put my stresses across on what I believe she should and shouldn't be doing but you know I can't really enforce anything. I can't really take my part, my role is currently, it's, it's, there's not one there at the moment, let's be honest about it. I can still keep updated with phone calls and visits and stuff but my role is, it's kind of, well there's an empty seat there."

Table 2 Reliable change index for changes in key variables for participants with either dysfunctional pre-program scores or functional pre-program scores

Measure	n	RCI	Dysfunctional pre-program				Functional pre-program	
			Deteriorated n (%)	Unchanged n (%)	Improved n (%)	Recovered (CSC) n (%)	Deteriorated n (%)	Already Functional n (%)
Parental Stress	26	11.67	0 (0.0%)	8 (30.8%)	3 (11.5%)	2 (7.7%)	2 (7.7%)	13 (50%)
Wellbeing	25	11.62	0 (0.0%)	4 (16%)	5 (20.0%)	5 (20.0%)	0 (0.0%)	16 (64.0%)
Self-Esteem	26	4.51	2 (7.7%)	6 (23.1)	4 (15.4%)	1 (3.8%)	2 (7.7%)	12 (46.2%)
Judgments	26	5.87	4 (15.4%)	21 (80.8%)	1 (3.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Personal Growth	26	9.51	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.8%)	1 (3.8%)	1 (3.8%)	2 (7.7%)	22 (84.6%)
Readiness	26	4.08	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.8%)	1 (3.8%)	2 (7.7%)	22 (84.6%)
Locus of Control	26	7.38	0 (0.0%)	8 (30.8%)	3 (11.5%)	2 (7.7%)	2 (7.7%)	13 (50%)

Dysfunctional pre-program: Deteriorated - reliable change but in the undesired direction; Unchanged - no reliable change for individuals with dysfunctional pre-program scores; Improved - reliable change in the desired direction, but not within the range of normal functioning post-program; and Recovered - reliable change in the desired direction into the range of normal functioning post-program (clinically significant change). Individuals who have both improved and recovered are counted in both columns. Functional pre-program: Deteriorated - reliable change moving from functional to dysfunctional score; Already functional - functional scores both pre- and post-program.

Parental Stress Scores Pre- and Post-Program

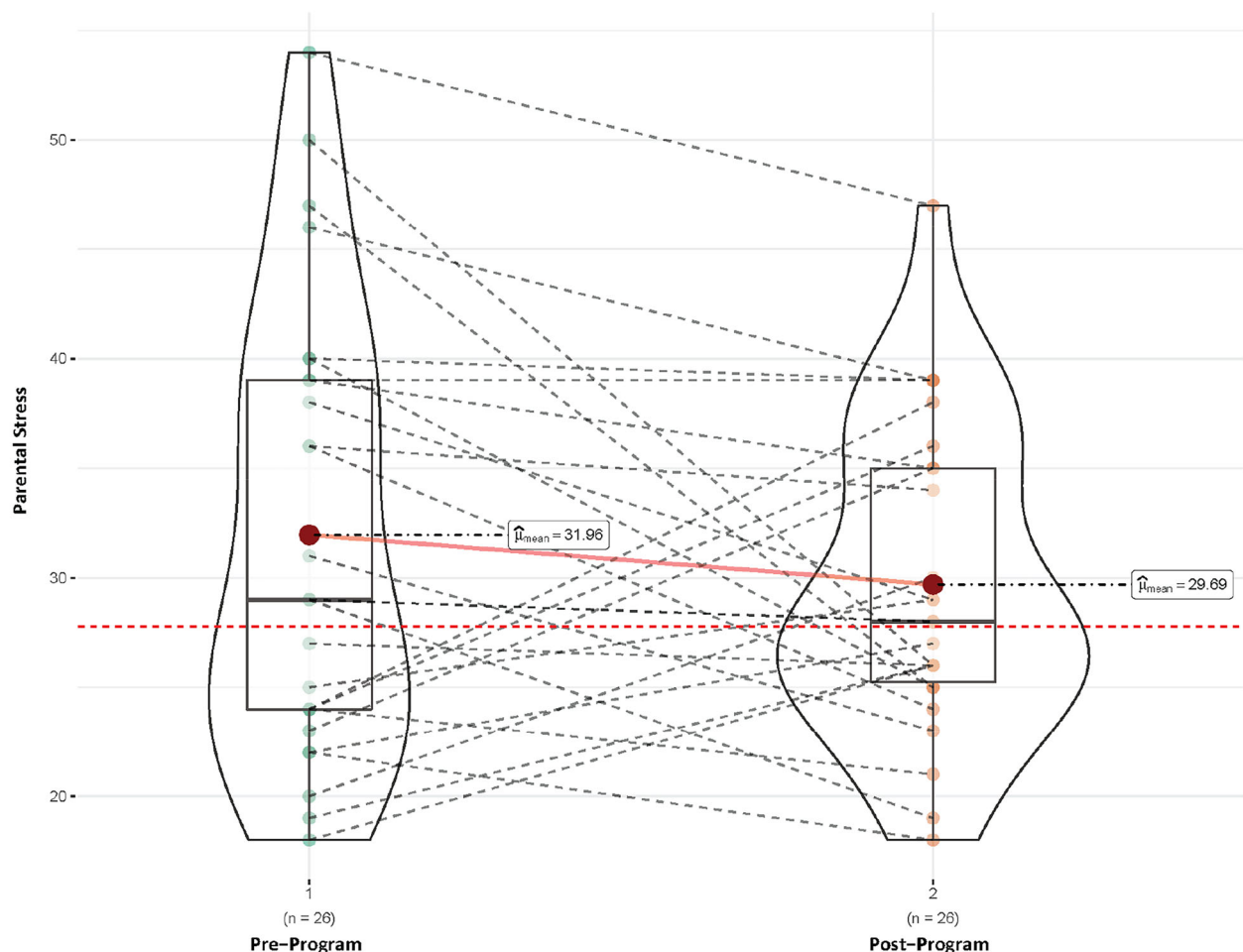
**Fig. 2** Parental Stress Scores Pre- and Post-Program

Table 3 Superordinate and Subordinate themes

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
<i>Re-configuring Fatherhood</i>	• Reflection on role as a father • Adapting to fathering at a distance and enacting the fathering role • Accepting past mistakes and familial impact
<i>Parental Reflections through Intervention</i>	• Facilitating 'doing' fathering • Learning ways to communicate • Reimagining fatherhood • Honesty

There was a sense from participants that they were not or could not perform the fathering role, and so consequently felt they were not being 'real' fathers. There was a theme of a loss of role in the data and that their role no longer had any importance. Extract 1 indicates a struggle to adapt to the changes and limitations of the fathering role in prison. This is exemplified in the use of the metaphor 'empty seat' to represent his place within the family unit as being unfilled. This feeling of role loss and struggling with fathering identity in prison highlights the need for constructive intervention with this group to allow for softer discourses on the fathering role and its adaptation within prison (Buston, 2018). Not allowing for constructive discussions on the fathering role in prison could lead men to feel that their father identity has been suspended (Muth & Walker, 2013). However, the course allowed participants to consider and enact ways in which they can still perform the fathering role and still be actively present in their children's lives.

Extract 2

"the course got me thinking that a good dad is someone that's there for the children that makes the children smile that makes the children laugh, even if you can't see them, you know, that you can still be a father...support them with school stuff like my daughter's been learning about what the school calls 'mini beasts' but for me when I was at school, that was called learning about insects. So what I'll then do is I'll go to the library in prison once I've found out. My partner says, "oh she's learning about this or she's learning about that." And I'll go to the library, and I'll get a book about that subject that she's learning about so then I'll draw pictures or maybe write the names of the things underneath so then she can copy the names on a different piece of paper, so she learns how to write the names."

Extract 2 demonstrates how the course is helping men enact and reconsider their fathering role; the extract

highlights what the participant views as being a 'good dad' and goes on to describe how he attempts to fulfill the identity of a 'good' father. There is a theme of wanting to be involved with their child and play an active role in their daily lives, albeit at a distance. Extract 2 demonstrates how the participant attempts to mirror what his daughter is doing and learning in her daily life, enabling them to feel close and involved. Prison undermines active fathering due to the inevitable physical separation and, further, it undermines re-entry into the family due to the distance that prison has created (Clarke et al., 2005). However, allowing fathers in prison to enact fathering roles, through learning new relationship and communication skills in taught programs, can help maintain family bonds and re-entry into the family as a father (Dyer, 2005).

For some participants, adjusting to the change in the fathering role, and fathering from within prison was causing them to reflect on the positives of their parent-child relationships, and helping them to realize the importance of that relationship for them.

Extract 3

"I think it's made it stronger cos I didn't realize how good I was with them. Cos when I speak to them, they're like 'dad, you're the best dad in the world. Can't wait for you to come home'. So yeah."

This extract illustrates how, for some participants, reflecting on their relationship with their children previously and the positives of that relationship aided their adaptation to being a distant father. Dyer (2005) explain that in addressing the process of identity verification, a positive link has been drawn between fathers' self-reports of seeing themselves as being a good father, and their ability to maintain frequent contact with their children while in prison. The positive appraisal as a father in Extract 3 can therefore be seen as a potential predictor for adapting to a more proactive role as a father and, additionally, for a stronger father-child relationship both while in prison and upon release.

Extract 4

"I wanted to learn how I can carry on being a good dad from inside prison, as prison was a new thing for me, and I was a very good dad on the outside. Sometimes you see a lot of people in prison don't really care about their children. I'm in here now, there's nothing I can do about it, but how can I carry on being a good dad."

Extract 4 highlights a theme from those who had completed the *Fathers Inside* course in that they wanted to continue to be a good dad, as opposed to learning to become a good dad. He is therefore approaching his role as a father from a position of relatively high esteem, enabling him to engage less in negative thought patterns of ‘not being important enough’ and therefore be more engaged in positivity.

Superordinate Theme 2: Parental Reflections through Intervention

A powerful theme within the ‘parental reflections’ theme was learning to better communicate with their children while in prison. For many of the fathers, as with many parents, it was noted that conversations were often restrictive and were becoming very challenging to achieve. However, all participants of the *Fathers Inside* course who participated in this research discussed how learning new ways of communicating had enabled them to learn new ways to engage with their children and families.

Extract 5

“You learn how to get a conversation out of them instead of just yes and no answers and things like that you know. A better understanding of your children and that... Cos normally you ask them what you been doing at school or what you been doing and they just say yeah I’ve been alright or they just give you a yeah and no but just to be able to get more out of them on the phone and write letters to them and yeah.”

Extract 6

“It’s really helpful for our communication skills, we role-play a conversation and you practice skills to get them to talk more, instead of yes, no, what you done at school? Can’t remember. It helps you dig a bit deeper and makes you feel like err you’re more involved... it’s not just the kids either, the missus as well, I’m using the skills talking to her too...makes you feel more connected.”

The crux of Extracts 5 and 6 is about how improvements in communication and listening skills had a positive impact by helping to facilitate more meaningful relationships. As highlighted in Extracts 5 and 6, a conversation now replaces “yes and no answers”, and this has not only aided the parent-child relationship, but has

also extended beyond that to facilitate positive relationships with partners and family. According to Dallaire, Ciccone & Wilson (2010), it is crucial for children to feel they can still have contact with their father when he goes to prison. They add that their study found that more letters between children and parents in prison reduced depression and somatic disorders in children. Good and meaningful contact (frequent phone calls, letters, and visits) during imprisonment also positively impacts father-child relationships after release from prison (Poehlmann et al., 2010). The *Fathers Inside* course included teaching participants effective ways to engage with their children over the phone, how to ask open questions, and how to write letters to their children and partners.

Extract 7

“It’s like letters as well. I write letters to my girlfriend and then my son was like where’s my letter? So I started writing to them both. My daughter writes back but my son doesn’t. He’s always on his computer. But he just wanted to get one, to know he had one coming through the post so...”

Extract 7 highlights how letter writing for the participants involved the whole family in communicating and connecting with each other. Letter-writing seems to help facilitate a more personal and meaningful encounter, even if one step removed. Participants spoke of the ‘joy’ of writing and receiving such letters and that the process was reciprocal in that children experienced it similarly. Extract 7 highlights the anticipation of children receiving a letter and disappointment when they do not.

Extract 8

“And on that it actually learnt you to sit and read a book to your children. Not use an iPad or a computer or anything else. So there was even those things in there and you know how to read the stories in the right way to a child depending on what age they were and what age the books were... I’d never ever done it.”

For some, the improvements in relating to their children were more basic, though ostensibly equally important. For example, in Extract 8, the improvement in communication skills extended to learning how to read children’s story books, which for some participants appeared to be a great source of empowerment to learn a new skill and enact a fathering role that had previously been undiscovered.

One of the most salient themes within this subordinate theme was the concept of honesty. Almost all of the men who participated in the interviews felt that the most meaningful thing they had taken away from the *Fathers Inside* program was the importance of honesty and how to tell their children the truth about their offending behavior and being in prison. This was not simply about honest communication, but also about being honest and authentic to oneself, taking responsibility for one's actions, and making honest intentions for life post-release.

Extract 9

“But I think the best thing that came out of that *Fathers Inside* course for me was the fact that my partner was scared to tell school that I was in prison... but with the help of the facilitators... X [facilitator] she was speaking to my partner, and she kind of gave a few of her opinions about telling the school, and straight away my partner said “yeah, we’ll tell them.”

Extract 10

“In the *Fathers Inside*, there were many in there who were undecided about being honest, and thankfully, because I’d just been through it, I was able to share with them exactly how it was. It was nice to be able to tell some of the lads that were worried about it, how it was for me. I got positive benefits from it, and I can see the benefits from it when I see my daughter. There’s no need to perpetuate the lie.”

Extract 11

“And when I first came to prison, I thought I wasn’t gonna tell my kids I’m in jail, but obviously that was selfish.”

All participants spoke of finding it difficult to tell their children about incarceration and were having issues with their partners for being too afraid to tell the truth. The course allowed participants to work through the struggle of not wanting to be honest with their children, enabling the development of more genuine relationships. Extract 9 highlights how facilitators on the course assisted families where appropriate; facilitators’ support was vital in helping the participant’s partner disclose to the school and access the support she needed.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to quantitatively and qualitatively evaluate the impact of the *Fathers Inside* program on service users, measuring parental stress, wellbeing, self-esteem, judgmental parental attitudes, personal growth, change readiness, and locus of control, before and after participation. Changes in these constructs were examined using pre- and post-program scores and RCI, to explore how these changes relate to positive attitudes towards fathering and the development of fathering skills. It also sought to understand participants’ views of fathering, explore their fathering identity, and the impact the program had on the parent-child relationship while in prison. While the primary objectives of reducing parental stress, enhancing wellbeing, and other targeted outcomes were not achieved based on the group analysis, improvements to the point of clinical recovery were observed in certain individuals, as evidenced by the Reliable Change Index results. The non-significance of some RCI results for certain variables can be attributed, in part, to individuals already possessing scores within the functional range at the study’s outset, signifying that no further change was needed or reported for those specific variables. The program also appeared to have some impact based on qualitative results.

Parental Stress

There were no significant quantitative changes in parental stress at a group level after completion of the program. However, RCI results showed that several individuals reliably and clinically improved as a result of the program. Although some people’s parental stress scores deteriorated over time, their pre-program scores had been the highest in the sample. This suggests that the post-program scores may be due to participants having a better understanding of the parental stresses they face. The qualitative data showed that the program helped participants adapt to a different fathering role in prison, potentially reducing parental stress. Broadly, there is evidence that strengths-based and positive psychology approaches reduce stress in prison populations (Bouw et al., 2019). However, parental stress may occur when incarcerated fathers perceive that they do not have the necessary resources to be a good father (Charles et al., 2019). The program may have provided participants with access to those resources, thereby reducing parental stress. Accepting past mistakes may also reduce parental stress; it informs individuals’ decisions about the future, allowing them to reframe their mistakes as lessons for their children. Charles et al. (2019) found that such reflections can open up communication about positive behaviors with their children, and deepen the parent-child relationship. This increased presence in the parent-child relationship may also be related

to decreased parenting stress (Gouveia et al., 2016). Further, the reduction in parental stress may decrease intergenerational harm, and help incarcerated fathers to define, and bring them closer to achieving, their possible, hoped-for self.

Wellbeing

While wellbeing did not appear to change significantly over time, mean scores on the WEMWBS were within functional ranges both before and after the program. RCI scores for wellbeing showed that those with the highest pre-intervention scores were the ones who showed significant deterioration post-intervention, and, conversely, the greatest improvements were made by those scoring lowest pre-intervention, as some participants' pre-intervention scores were at, or close to, the highest possible scores for wellbeing. This could suggest that participants attempted to engage in impression management or had a poor understanding of the meaning of wellbeing. Serin and Kennedy (1997) found that treatment readiness correlates with socially desirable responding, which here may suggest the urge to appear in a more positive light in an attempt to realize the hoped-for self. Alternatively, the high pre-program scores may indicate that participants were already experiencing wellbeing comparable to community norms. Post-intervention scores may indicate that, instead of a decline in wellbeing due to participation, participants gained greater insight or a more balanced sense of wellbeing through participation in the program. Although a link between the program and improvements in wellbeing is not discernible in the quantitative results, the transcripts suggest that the program does have a positive impact on wellbeing. Wellbeing occurs through numerous positive emotions and experiences, which participants experienced during the intervention, and discussed in their interviews. For example, one participant spoke of joy through communication with his children. The development and maintenance of social ties and membership of a group are associated with wellbeing in prisoners, as they satisfy psychological needs such as connectedness, self-worth, and agency (Kyprianides & Easterbrook, 2020). Individuals also discussed being honest about their situation, particularly to their children, which, while challenging, brought positive benefits. Honesty contributes to wellbeing, as individuals' honest behavior promotes meaning, strengthens personal values, and helps to develop and maintain positive social relationships (Le et al., 2022). Hansen (2018) found that many parents choose not to tell the truth or to tell their children very little about a parent's incarceration, which can lead to insecurity and unrest in children. They add that this lack of information can make things somewhat worse for children who are 'kept in the dark' as they find it difficult to relate to the events

unfolding around them. Children often suffer much change and instability following the imprisonment of a parent and may experience a range of adversities (Hansen, 2018). Furthermore, the concealment of truth from the child can be a relational impediment that can act as a barrier to more meaningful and constructive parent-child relationships. Although limited and dated, research suggests that being honest with children about a parent going to prison is more beneficial as it maintains trust, allows the child to grieve or cope in the correct way, allows access to support, and aids a more successful reintegration of the father into the family unit (Hannon et al., 1984). Similarly, this study showed that the program encouraged fathers to foster honest communication in their interactions with their children, despite the discomfort and challenges that it brought. Participants reported that this approach helped to foster stronger authentic bonds and supported emotional growth for both participants and children. More broadly, the use of strengths-based and positive psychology approaches has been found to increase wellbeing in prison populations (Fazia et al., 2021), which may also have contributed to the reduction in parental stress.

Self-Esteem

Quantitative results showed that self-esteem did not change significantly over time, although, similarly to the wellbeing scores, the lowest pre-intervention scores showed the most improvement and vice versa. However, this effect was less extreme than those for wellbeing scores. Many pre-intervention scores for self-esteem were in a range that Bagley and Mallick (2019) describe as "devastated." However, Yacker (2020) suggests that an individual's past actions relate to their moral self-image. Since participants were incarcerated and experiencing the consequences of their past actions, this may explain their lower self-esteem scores. Morley and Fulton (2020) found that a sample of incarcerated men in the USA scored 21.71 on average, which may indicate that for prison, at least, lower RSE scores are the norm. Despite the largely static RSE scores, this study found qualitative evidence that participants experienced elevated self-esteem through positive appraisals, the rebuilding and maintenance of family bonds, developing skills, and realizing that they already possessed skills as parents. The disparity between self-reported self-esteem statistics and the qualitative evidence suggests that participants may not link their experienced self-esteem to their self-reports in the measure. The mixed results for this study, and in the literature, suggest that future studies of self-esteem should control for the effect of incarceration to more accurately capture differences between enduring self-esteem and self-esteem related to life in prison.

Judgmental Attitudes

There were no significant changes in judgmental attitudes from pre- to post-program. However, the qualitative data suggest that participants gained a deeper understanding of their children's lives through meaningful conversation, and therefore improved judgmental attitudes towards their children. Children with incarcerated parents are more at risk of becoming involved in crime themselves (Giordano et al., 2019), so improving parental attitudes may have a positive effect on the experiences of children with incarcerated parents and could be an essential factor in reducing the intergenerational harm of incarceration. Research into incarcerated fathers' judgmental attitudes is still very limited, although parenting programs improve parental attitudes towards "appropriate parenting skills" (Harrison, 1997). Robbers (2005) found that a parenting intervention significantly improved incarcerated fathers' attitudes toward fatherhood, and incarcerated mothers demonstrated improved parental attitudes toward their children after a parenting program. However, the authors noted that this effect could be temporary (Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017). While not measuring parental attitudes per se, Purvis (2013) found evidence that programs for incarcerated parents can increase bonding and empathy towards the child, which may decrease negative judgments. However, direct comparison is difficult, due to the disparate measures in use, and a more accurate understanding of parental judgmental attitudes will only be possible with further research.

Personal Growth

Scores for personal growth and readiness to change were already within functional range at baseline and, on average, did not change throughout the intervention. Two of the people whose personal growth scores significantly deteriorated moved from unusually high scores to within one standard deviation of the community mean. This suggests that regardless of participation in the program, the desire for growth may already be present for incarcerated fathers. Charles et al. (2019) found that fathers used time in prison to reflect on their past behaviors and consider how their futures beyond prison can successfully incorporate fatherhood. The themes emergent in the qualitative data suggest that participants were eager to implement the changes and skills that they learned in the program. Further, the subtheme of honesty illustrates that despite the worry and discomfort of disclosing their situation to their children, fathers upheld values of honesty and authenticity, creating more meaningful bonds with them. The ability to develop reflective functioning, particularly in determining and upholding one's values, is a critical factor for personal growth (Kealy et al., 2021),

and may motivate individuals toward their goal of achieving their possible self.

Locus of Control

While group results for locus of control did not show significant improvement over time, some individuals showed significant improvements in the RCI. The qualitative data reiterated this, showing that fathers felt powerless and too restricted to perform the fathering role as they knew it, echoing Purvis's (2013) finding that fathers experience disempowerment in prison. Participants reported that being separated from their children meant they could not be present in their children's lives. Through the program, they developed an increased sense of connectedness with their children, despite not being physically present. Strengths-based interventions which increase personal agency have been found to reorient individuals' locus of control (Tyler et al., 2020). By improving their own skills through the program, particularly around communication, the participants increased their confidence in their abilities to communicate with their children, which may, in turn, have reoriented their locus of control.

Limitations

There are some limitations to the present research. First, the study was only carried out on a small group of people in a single prison, and the sample was almost entirely made up of white males, which may mean that results are not generalizable to the wider prison estate, and neither are they generalizable to race or ethnicity. Significant results were only present at an individual level, and may have been skewed because of some participants' unusually high pre-intervention scores, which may indicate either impression management or a lack of self-awareness around those constructs. While the interpretations drawn from the findings highlight the potential impact of the Fathers Inside program on individual participants, it is also essential to acknowledge that these conclusions are not generalized to the entire sample due to the non-significant group-level findings observed in the study. Further, results may be affected by the self-selection of participants, which means that the results may only be generalizable to incarcerated fathers who want to participate in such a program.

Further research should pool a greater number of participants across multiple prison locations. Sentence length should also be investigated; while the program is intended to build parenting skills inside prison and prepare individuals for positive parenting identities upon release, this may not be as effective in building parent-child relationships where sentence lengths are longer. Additional data should

be collected to assist in explaining the unusually high pre-intervention scores that were present in this study. Adding an impression management measure would help identify socially desirable responses. Further, third-party reports may mitigate self-report bias or skewed self-perception to produce more robust data. Finally, longitudinal studies with post-release follow-up could help to determine how long the treatment effects last, and whether further support is necessary.

Implications

Little research currently addresses the issue of parental stress in incarcerated male parents, and the need to reduce stress, increase wellbeing, and reduce recidivism. The *Fathers Inside* program yields promising results as a program that assists with adjustment to prison, developing and maintaining the parent-child relationship, and reducing parental stress. Further, Chui (2016) asserts the importance of avoiding stereotypes when working with incarcerated parents and not assuming they are all 'bad fathers', suffer from low self-esteem, or are unwilling to learn. This aligns with the current findings, as many participants demonstrated functional scores prior to beginning the program and exhibited strengths in their parenting roles. Programs such as *Fathers Inside* should build on these existing competencies while addressing areas for further development. The program also helped men reconstrue their fathering role and engage in ways of doing active fathering. According to Dallaire, Ciccone, and Wilson (2010), it is crucial for children to feel they can still have contact with their father when he goes to prison. They add that their study found that more letters between children and parents in prison reduced depression and somatic disorders in children. Good and meaningful contact (frequent phone calls, letters, and visits) during imprisonment also positively impacts father-child relationships after release from prison (Poehlmann et al., 2010). By emphasizing authentic communication, fathers were not able only to redefine their fathering role but to maintain meaningful connections with their children, which had long-term positive effects on the parent-child bond, and reinforced the importance of maintaining contact. This included improving the parent-child relationship through more effective communication. There are approximately 45,000 male prisoners in the UK who have children under 18 upon entry to prison (calculated from data published in Williams et al., 2012), and this has the potential to benefit not only those incarcerated fathers, but also their children and their children's caregivers. Furthermore, reducing parental stress can improve the emotional wellbeing of fathers, which has the potential to lead to smoother adjustment and better compliance with prison rules (Martin & Phaneuf, 2018).

Conclusion

The conclusions are limited due to the small sample size. However, the results here have implications on wider prison adjustment, e.g., settling in prison, prisoner wellbeing, and hopeful possible fathering selves, all of which could be important for developing a pro-social identity, which is important for the desistance process (Maruna, 2001; Meek, 2007). If parenting interventions can improve prisoners' wellbeing and reduce recidivism, they may also have a positive effect on the children of incarcerated parents, lessening their future risk and improving their wellbeing and prospects.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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