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How Can We Help Children Stay Connected To Their Imprisoned Fathers?

Feature by Former Lead Research Officer Denise Liu



Studies show that inmates who have more frequent contact with their family members have better outcomes, including a higher chance of being reunified with their families after they are released from prison.

About the Study

In 2017, we conducted a practice research study to inform our work with inmates and their families.

We interviewed caregivers and children to find out how families experienced different types of contact with the inmate.



8 Children
(11-14 years old)



11 Caregivers
(e.g., mothers, aunts)

We found that it may not be the frequency of contact that matters the most, but how families use these opportunities. To encourage inmates to improve communication with their families, our caseworkers have been conducting **Project Relate**, a parenting and visit-coaching programme for inmates and their families, since 2014.

Although families have benefited from the programme, our data showed that many families still did not communicate with the inmate as much as they were allowed to.

How Can We Help Children Stay Connected To Their Imprisoned Fathers?

Finding I

Caregivers become communication gatekeepers who decide how, and to some extent, what children communicate with their fathers. They become gatekeepers for different reasons.

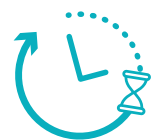


1 Practical Reasons

- As the number of visits and the number of visitors are limited, caregivers have to negotiate and coordinate visits.
- As visitation time is limited, caregivers decide on the content of visits, using visits for family bonding instead of discussing their personal issues with the inmate.

[It's] either the aunties or the kids. We have to coordinate, like "this one I go, the next one you go"

- Begum*, inmate's sister, 41 years old



During the bonding, [I] let him talk to kids, let him get to know their soul... Because previous[ly] there is less communication.. That's why I don't want to talk about the matters I am handling out here. I want to use the time for the bonding.

- Afiqah*, inmate's wife, 45 years old

2 Expansion of Role

As inmates are unable to support their families or perform their parental role from prison, caregivers end up fulfilling the role of both parents, the breadwinner of the household and sometimes even to advocate on behalf of the incarcerated spouse. This transformed familial role gives the caregiver more power to influence and shape the type of communication between the inmate and his family.



- Restricting some types of communication.
- Using certain forms of communication over others to punish the inmate.

I don't allow my son to visit him at Changi prison.. because I don't want them to know where the prison is.

- Eliza*, inmate's ex-wife, 43 years old



Because postcard I will just say "Hi we are doing fine". It's like I want to make him get the signal.. Just want him to feel that we stop sending him letters and updating him, he will find a loss there so that he might "wake up and change".

- Diyah*, inmate's wife, 43 years old

Implications

For policy

- Redesigning visiting policies - Visiting policies can be redesigned to make prison visits more accessible for children. For example, larger families can be allowed to have longer visits, and weekend slots can be prioritised for families with children.
- Introducing more communication methods - Communication barriers may be overcome through the use of other communication methods like emails and voice messaging.

Finding II

Caregivers play a crucial role in influencing their children's relationships with their fathers.

- Caregivers' views of the inmates can determine the quality of the father-child relationship. Some caregivers believe that the inmate is a good person who made mistakes.

I just tell them about our stories, make them reminded, and I will tell them he may be bad outside, but at home, you know how good your father is to you. Actually as a normal person, as a father he is very nice and responsible. The only thing he's weak in is drugs.

- Caliana*, inmate's wife, 46 years old

Actually he is not a bad person. Maybe because of the influence of that thing [drugs].. If don't take then he is not stable.

- Afiqah*, inmate's wife, 45 years old

Although he takes drugs or what, he is still our father.

- Akmal*, Afiqah's son, 12 years old

- Caregivers also play an important role in encouraging their children to stay in touch with their fathers. They do so by reminding them of their responsibility to maintain their relationship with their father.

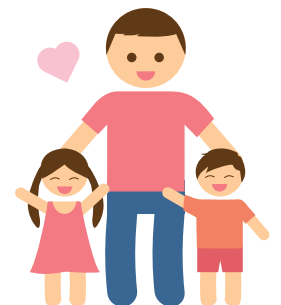
[The children] spend more time outside than visiting their parents. So that's why I always force them.. sometimes they say "Oh, I got something on". I say "No, although you have something on, you must have space for your parents".

- Begum*, inmate's sister, 41 years old

Even though we are divorce(d), [I tell my children] you need to visit your father. Anyway he is your father. I don't want them to hate (him).. I want them to be close to their father. Because without a father also they are not in this world.

- Eliza*, inmate's ex-wife, 43 years old

* Names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants



For intervention

- Caregivers are an important target for intervention. Intervention programmes that help families maintain contact should also attend to the circumstances faced by the family as a whole, such as the multiple burdens the caregiver has to shoulder.
- Interventions on contact and communication should also focus on rebuilding relationships between inmates and their families. Facilitators can guide inmates to identify goals and develop skills or strategies to deal with difficult issues.

In this new section, we will be answering practitioners' questions related to their work with children, youth, and families.

Feature by Research Officer Lui Zhi Jing



What does research say about this?

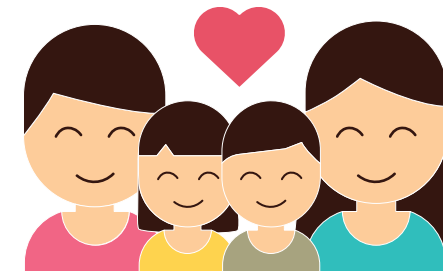
How Can Parents Raise a Kind and Helpful Child?



We summarised findings from peer-reviewed journal articles on prosocial behaviours. Prosocial behaviours are typically defined as behaviours that are voluntary and beneficial to another person or group, such as caring, showing compassion, and respecting others.

Research has shown that children who share, help, and respect others typically do better in school and are more well-liked by their peers. But how do children learn these values? In this issue, we examine the role parents play in raising a kind and helpful child.

Be warm and nurturing

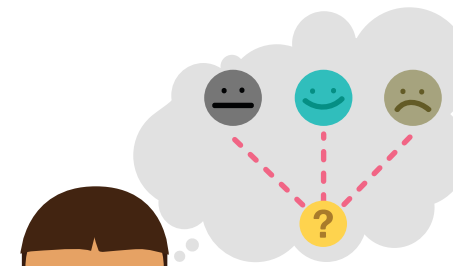


When parents are supportive, affectionate, and understanding towards their child's feelings, their child shows more concern for others.

As parents, we can...

- Use warm and friendly language when communicating with children.
- Listen and be understanding to children's feelings.
- Be sensitive and responsive to children's needs.

Encourage perspective-taking

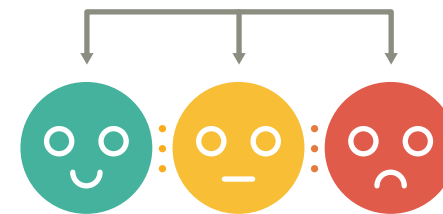


Children who are encouraged by parents to put themselves in others' shoes are better at understanding others' feelings and thoughts.

As parents, we can...

- Encourage children to talk about their feelings, and to acknowledge and respect their friends' feelings.

Manage your own emotions

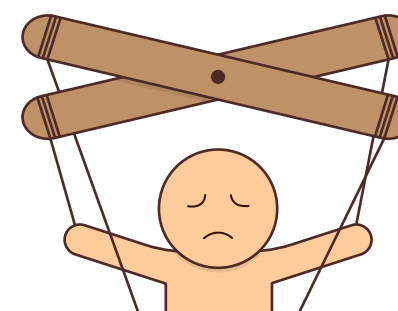


Parents who tend to lose their temper frequently tend to have children who struggle to manage their emotions. These children are less likely to be helpful and kind towards others later in life.

As parents, we can...

- Be a positive role model to children by being mindful of our emotions.
- Avoid unintentionally showing children how not to behave.

Respect your child's autonomy



Parents who try to change their children and tell them what to do all the time have a poorer relationship with their children. These children with poorer relationship with parents are also less likely to be helpful and kind to others.

As parents, we can...

- Show concern by getting to know your children's friends, interests, and whereabouts.
- Respect children's personal opinions and boundaries.

Does the Mother-Baby Bond Affect Early Childhood Development?

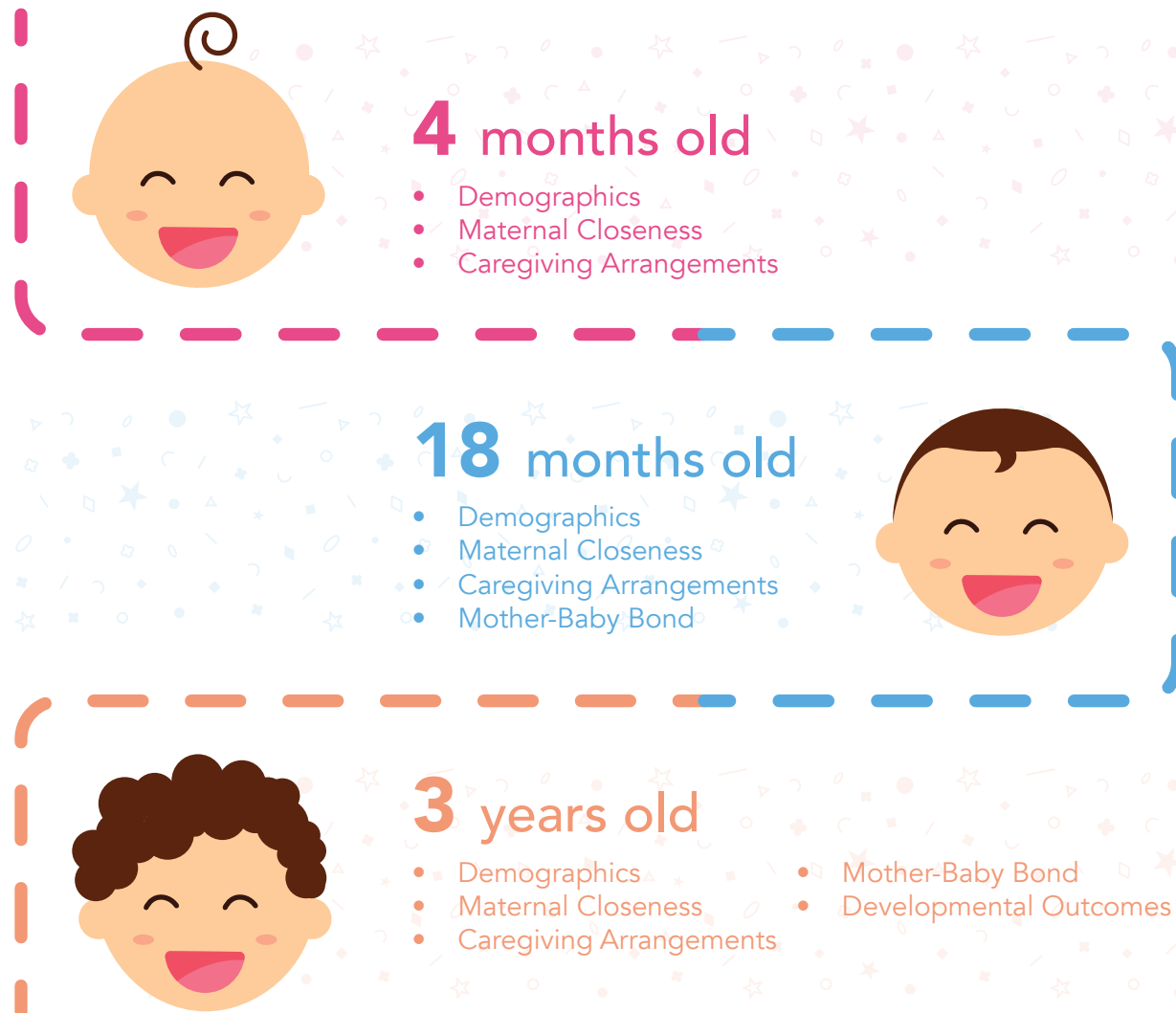
Feature by Senior Research Officer Chan Qing Rong

We conducted a research study together with KK Women's and Children's Hospital from 2007 to 2014. Part of the findings are presented here. Earlier findings can be found in Research Bites Issue 1 and 2, as well as the newsletter (<http://tinyurl.com/infant-newsletter>).

439
first-time mothers
took part in the study

Mothers often wonder "What can affect my baby's development?". Early development in babies, such as closer mother-baby bond, is linked to better health, well-being, and academic achievement in middle childhood.

We interviewed them at the following time points and measured the following:



We measured the developmental skills of children in the following areas at 3 years old.



Fine Motor
Hand and finger movements



Gross Motor
Arm, leg, and body coordination



Personal-Social
Doing daily routines by themselves

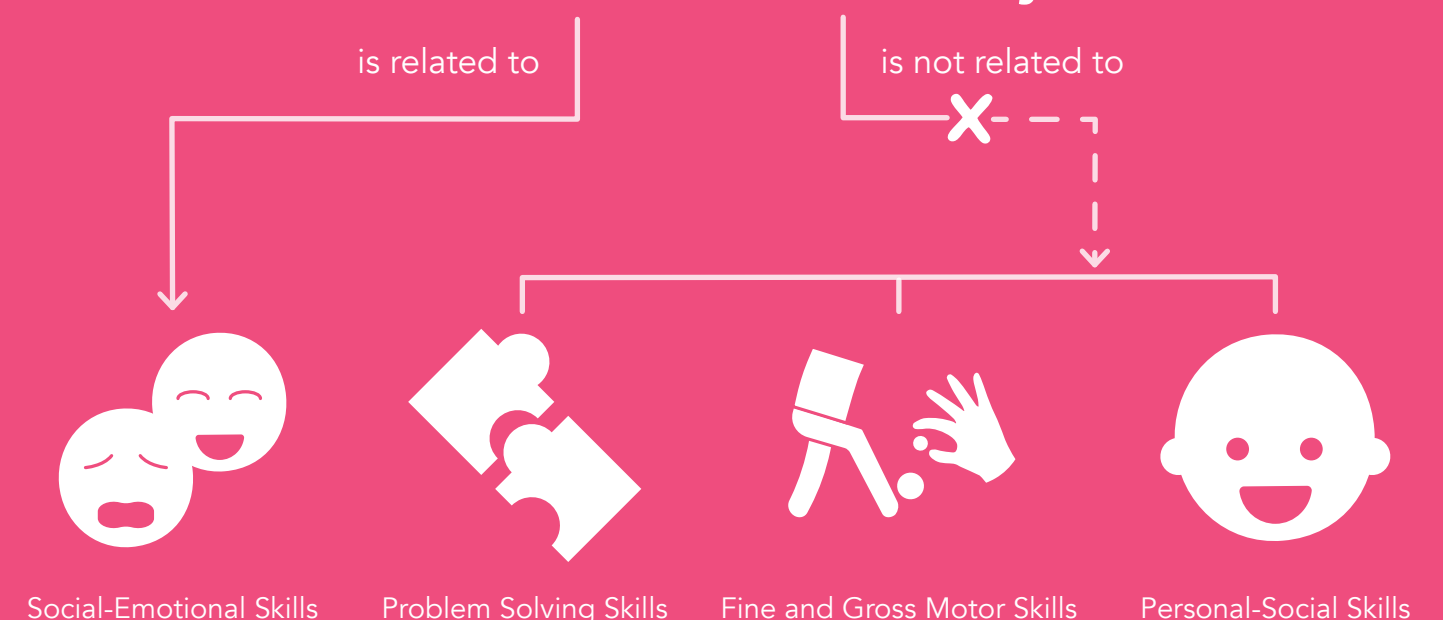


Problem Solving
Ability to solve problems



Social-Emotional
Managing feelings and having positive relationships with others

We found that the mother-baby bond...



Babies with a closer bond with their mothers tend to manage their feelings better and have better social-emotional skills.

Does the Mother–Baby Bond Affect Early Childhood Development?



Conclusion

In our study, we found that a stronger emotional bond between mothers and their babies was beneficial to children's social-emotional development at 3 years old.

One way mothers can enhance their bond with their baby is by responding more sensitively to the needs of their babies.

More information on the study findings can be found in the infant newsletter (<https://tinyurl.com/infant-newsletter>).



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