

# **Safe Ground – Father Figures Programme: Final Report**

**Professor Rosie Meek and Hannah Baumer**

**Royal Holloway University of London**

## **Contents**

Summary .....	2
Background .....	3
Specific aims of the programme.....	3
Model of delivery.....	4
Evaluation approach.....	4
Participant perceptions of the programme .....	5
Quantitative outcomes.....	5
Interview data.....	5
Parenting behaviours .....	5
Reflection on own skills, values and beliefs.....	6
Through the gate support.....	7
Positive outcomes .....	8
Group dynamics.....	9
Programme delivery logistics .....	9
Key recommendations .....	10

## Summary

The Safe Ground Father Figures Programme is an effective programme which provides young fathers or expectant fathers with a unique opportunity to express themselves as parents and not merely as young offenders. Through one-to-one sessions and group based work participants are supported to learn valuable skills for interacting with their children, developing and maintaining positive family ties, providing alternative strategies for challenging situations both inside and outside of prison, and promoting empathy through an understanding of the impact of their actions on others. The programme is not designed to tell these young men how to be fathers, which can be an initial concern of those taking part, rather it promotes an environment in which diverse individuals can come to their own conclusions around what it means to be a father.

It is important to recognise that the strong, supportive relationships which the programme promotes between the group and with the facilitators was identified as not only unusual in prison-based programmes but especially welcomed by the programme participants. Prior to their experience of this Safe Ground initiative many of the young fathers felt they had nowhere to go for family-specific advice, which is a concern both for them and their families but also to the practitioners acutely aware of the increased level of need for this vulnerable client group.

The programme works with young men in custody and their partners to strengthen family bonds and has been directly involved in the repair of previously broken down relationships. Further positive outcomes include self-reported increase in empathy, self-esteem and confidence, reduced aggression, development of coping strategies and improved communication skills. Uniquely and yet critically, the Father Figures Programme also provides through the gate support which can reassure these young fathers and their families that the good work achieved through the programme can continue, increasing the chances of a positive transformation and promoting desistance from crime.

## Background

The Safe Ground Father Figures Programme is a ‘through the gate’ family support programme for young fathers or expectant fathers at HMYOI Brinsford. Operated as a partnership between Safe Ground, the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) and Staffordshire’s Troubled Families team, the programme works with young men in custody through a combination of arts-based group work sessions and intensive one-to-one support for each participant and their families, both pre and post release.

### *Specific aims of the programme*

- To reduce the conflict felt in close relationships, promote positive relationships, increase empathy, and develop an enhanced warmth and caring for others;
- Encourage participants to recognise and reflect on their own strengths, values and beliefs;
- Create strong and supportive family ties to improve relationships between family members and intimate others;
- Instil confident and responsible parenting behaviours;
- Provide ‘through the gate’ support for prisoners upon and after release;
- Ultimately, reduce reoffending by forming strong and positive relationships with participants and their families in the community to provide a sense of belonging and purpose

## **Model of delivery**

The entirety of an individual's involvement in the programme would vary depending on the sentence length and age of the participant. A primary facilitator was employed to address the core elements of the programme through one-to-one sessions with the young fathers, and after five to six of these sessions the group-based element of the programme commenced, with the individual sessions continuing throughout the programme on an ad hoc basis. The group sessions were designed to allow for communication and exploration of one another's concerns and positive attributes as fathers.

The programme was delivered through varied methods of delivery, using worksheets, group discussion, tasks and role-plays in both the one-to-ones and group sessions to cover a range of topics including what it means to be a father, influences on fathers, triggers for aggression, being assertive, being a role model, body language and communication, and power.

## **Evaluation approach**

This evaluative research seeks to assess the perceived impact of the programme on participants' family relationships, parenting confidence and emotional maturity. During phase one (2014-2015) the external evaluator carried out an observation of sessions at the prison, discussions with delivery staff and prison staff, and semi-structured one-to-one interviews with five participants post-participation (four of these interviews were carried out in prison, and one in the community). An additional interview was carried out with one partner of a participant. Evaluation of phase two (2015-2016) included interviews with four participants inside the prison, leading to a total of nine participant interviews. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim, generating a rich qualitative dataset from which to draw on in the evaluation.

The final stage of the evaluation included consideration of comments made on questionnaires by all participants, both post-participation. To allow for any significant changes in participants' attitudes or feelings to be identified an analysis of further questionnaire data completed by participants both pre and post-participation was also carried out.

## Participant perceptions of the programme

### *Quantitative outcomes*

The programme questionnaires were designed and implemented by Safe Ground. Project delivery staff facilitated the distribution of the questionnaires and then passed completed responses to the evaluator for analysis.

Two different questionnaires were employed as part of the evaluation. The post-programme questionnaire comprised five questions regarding the perceived impact of the programme on the participant. The participants responded to the questions on a scale from 1 to 5 with a score of 1 corresponding to ‘strongly disagree’ and a score of 5 corresponding to ‘strongly agree’. Respondents reported a strong agreement with the statement that the programme had helped them understand what their family was going through ( $M = 4.2, SD = .66$ ) and they reported feeling more confident as a father ( $M = 4.2, SD = .44$ ), as well as feeling empowered to be an influential part of their children’s life from prison ( $M = 4.0, SD = .75$ ), and generally feeling closer to their family ( $M = 4.1, SD = .92$ ). Whether their parenting skills had improved received a rather mixed response ( $M = 3.9, SD = 1.45$ ).

A comparison of scores on the pre- and post-programme questionnaires did not reveal any significant differences in the outcomes, which may be due to the low numbers of paired questionnaires submitted for analysis. However, although not statistically significant there were some notable increases in some scores for some items, including overall life satisfaction ( $t(6)=2.06, p=.084$ ), an increase in ability to communicate feelings ( $t(7)=2.0, p=.086$ ), and an increase in feeling that the things participants do in life are worthwhile ( $t(6)=1.73, p=.134$ ).

### *Interview data*

A number of prominent themes emerged from the interview data which support the aims of the programme; these are discussed in turn below, accompanied by illustrative quotes extracted from the interview transcripts.

### **Parenting behaviours**

The post-programme interviews and questionnaires make it clear how important it was to the young and expectant fathers in the programme that the programme was designed not explicitly to instruct participants on how to be parents, rather, they clearly appreciated the opportunity to be empowered to explore these issues within the group:

*“The programme wasn’t saying ‘you’ve gotta do this, this and this’, it was more about finding ourselves rather than them telling us who we’re meant to be and how to bring our children up it was about finding ourselves and how to make the right choices and decisions ourselves” (participant 3).*

Many of the participants reflected on how the programme had enabled them to develop a good understanding of their child’s needs and the ability to respond to them appropriately. As young fathers they had experienced feelings of guilt and confusion associated with disciplining their children. The programme evidently equipped the participants with better skills with which to understand and appreciate the importance of setting boundaries, and how best to approach difficult situations. Specifically, resolving conflict by giving their child a choice rather than dictating to them, or sitting down with them to talk about why particular actions are wrong instead of reacting with smacking. Participants had also recognised what the long-term implications of poor discipline might be on their children, and were keen for them not to follow in their footsteps by ending up in trouble in later life:

*“I’m too soft with my son (smiling) so like she’s (facilitator) taught me, she’s shown me things you know, how to discipline him without looking like a bad person and that... the way I was bringing him up he’ll end up doing what he wants d’ya know what I mean, like I’m too soft with him” (participant 4)*

Of further importance, and a key theme, were the interactive games which the fathers had learnt to play with their children. They all recalled them clearly in interview and were very keen to use them to engage and stimulate their children, rather than leaving them to watch television or use an iPad, they appreciated the value of interactive play in a child’s development, attributing that increased understanding to the programme.

### **Reflection on own skills, values and beliefs**

The opportunity to reflect on past experiences and use these to become stronger as individuals and as fathers was clearly a valuable aspect of the programme. One participant in particular explained how he previously would never have looked at his own childhood as an example, but could now reflect on his past in order to help his own child on their journey. The change in attitude and perspectives within the group was also apparent, with a reported reduction in aggression, the development of more effective coping strategies, a noticeable increase in their ability to view things in a different way and to be more empathetic, as well

as holding improved communication skills and knowing when things are important enough to warrant discussion, rather than bottling feelings up. Importantly, participant testimonies suggest that there appears to have been a shift in attitude towards accepting support, an especially encouraging findings for this population:

*“Before when I was released I weren’t really able to like access support like, I thought it was like being a weak person but now I know it’s not and like help is good do you know what I mean like, it don’t mean you’re a weak person if you accept help so I know I can do that and I know where to go” (participant 2).*

An important feature of the development of these skills was their reported sustainability, with some of the young parents noting in their post-release interviews that they had been able to draw on these newly developed skills after their release from custody in order to help them to get out of situations of conflict.

### **Through the gate support**

Arguably the most imperative aspect of a successful intervention in prisons is the ability to include ‘through the gate’ support where necessary and appropriate. One of the strongest themes emerging from the interview and questionnaire data was the recognition that the young fathers now knew who to turn to for support inside the prison, as well as after release. They felt fortunate to have this level of support available to them, and all of those interviewed felt they could easily speak with the facilitator whilst inside the prison, testimony to the rapport developed between her and the group members. The reliability and accessibility of this figure was clearly very important to the young men, who reported that prior to the programme there was no support of this kind available:

*“Before this I was struggling for a little while to make contact with my family, with my daughter especially. I didn’t know who to go to and I asked some of the staff and they said ‘well it’s not really something in this age group that we deal with’” (participant 3).*

The helpfulness, understanding and kindness of the facilitator was striking in the interviews as something which the majority of the participants noted and valued. When describing the most useful part of the programme, one young father mentioned his one to one sessions, commenting, *“I never found a kinder and more helpful person than Sally-Ann”*.

In terms of what the support post-release would entail, in practice this appeared to vary between participants, partly as a necessary response to managing limited resource available to allocate to this more time-consuming element of the programme.

### **Positive outcomes**

Participants were able to identify and articulate a range of positive outcomes that they attributed to the programme. For example, as a direct result of the programme, one of the participants had regained contact with his son's mother:

*“I've started speaking to my son's mum a bit more. I've tried speaking to her in the past but obviously I've not got through or anything, but after I've done this, speaking with Sally-Ann and Dan has made me go about things in a different way. So, I'm not being so aggressive if, if um, if she doesn't wanna bring my son to visit me then I'm not being aggressive about it, I'm accepting of it and I can just get on with things.” (Participant 2).*

As further endorsement the participants felt it was a worthwhile programme which could be offered to a diverse range of fathers, not just young fathers:

*“I don't think there should be an age range on it, I don't think like age matters to be honest with you, I think everyone could use it as a helpful course.” (Participant 1).*

The interviews confirmed that for the young men, their parenthood status was not something they felt they could freely discuss within the prison, despite the challenges and frustrations of parenting behind bars. As a result, the opportunity to talk about being a parent within the programme was welcomed enormously. In addition, the young men reported an increased sense of self-esteem, confidence and heightened mood associated with the feeling of being spoken to as a parent, and not just as a young offender.

*“It was nice and I found it very helpful like it grounded me a bit just to know that people still do look at me as someone who can achieve things and not just someone who is locked up” (participant 2).*

Demonstrable outcomes as a result of the programme include a new training qualification and provision of dyslexia support; a commitment to not using recreational drugs as a result of

feeling able to achieve new things; and two unsolicited suggestions from those returned to the community of returning to participate or having ongoing input into the programme.

A unique element of this programme was the manner in which it sought to engage with the family members of the young men participating in the prison-based programme. A mother of one of the participants wrote an emotive letter to the facilitators of the programme, thanking them for all their help and support, and reporting that her son had benefited enormously from the programme, which in turn had helped her to cope with his imprisonment. This demonstrates how far-reaching an initiative such as the Father Figures programme can be, providing positive benefits not just for the participants, but also their families.

### **Group dynamics**

The participants approved of the size of the groups and pace of the sessions, confirming that the arrangements allowed for participants to engage in activities which they may otherwise have felt embarrassed to do, and as a result they surprised themselves at what they had achieved. The young fathers enjoyed a chance to develop rapport with others in the group and became close to those who they may otherwise not have spoken to. They had a sense of control over what they were asked to do and felt that they were not forced to do anything if they did not want to. Hearing others' experiences, relating to them and realising that they were not alone was clearly an important aspect of the group dynamics. In general, participants found the group-based sessions just as useful as the one-to-ones, highlighting the benefits of learning from others, as well as the opportunity to speak frankly and get individualised advice.

### **Programme delivery logistics**

Although the problems with room allocations were highlighted by a small number of the participants, they also recognised that this programme remains in its infancy and there were inevitable initial logistical challenges, believing they would not be an issue for future cohorts as the programme develops. The general consensus around individual session length, numbers in the groups and frequency of the individual sessions was positive. However, many did say that they would have liked the group work to last longer, beyond the concentrated one week of delivery.

## Key recommendations

- Maintain current group sizes and length of sessions
- Consider extending the course of the group-based sessions or facilitating some form of group discussions for participants to join following the programme
- Maintain the close and supportive relationship established between facilitators and participants. The continued support was a significant factor in the young fathers' positive outcomes
- Provide clear guidance and boundaries regarding post-release support and what this will entail, in order to manage expectations. Previous participants' stories and how they have been supported in prison and well as in the transition from custody to community could be used to this end
- Work with the prison to avoid disruption and restricted sessions due to room allocation problems
- Have separate and dedicated family visits for those who are involved in the programme, with alternative enhanced activities for those currently not receiving visits
- Consider using co-facilitators who have been through the programme and can offer support as peer supporters