"I'm learning to be a better dad to my kids and I'm learning to see things from their side"

Father in drug and alcohol stabilisation unit in HMP Woodhill, Milton Keynes

Westminster Drug Project is a charity committed to helping those affected by drug and alcohol use in London and the South East. The service partnered with national charity Family Links in 2013 and 26 drug and alcohol practitioners have been trained to lead groups for parents overcoming addiction. The groups are being facilitated in residential units, in-patient services, stabilisation units and prisons.

Caroline Roberts is a Drug and Alcohol Recovery practitioner and Parent Group Leader who works at HMP Woodhill, an all-male prison in Milton Keynes. HMP Woodhill is a high security prison holding Category A prisoners as well as those on remand and Caroline works on a specialist treatment wing for offenders with drug and alcohol misuse issues. She recently ran a Nurturing Programme parent group for six fathers on the wing and was delighted when all the parents completed the programme.

The Nurturing Programme parent group was the only group the men actively wanted to attend and Caroline explained that the parents would start preparing for the group in advance and bring what items they could to help contribute to the sessions:

“To have them turning up for two sessions a week is a real achievement and I think that’s the nature of the programme - it didn’t just give them nurturing skills, they felt nurtured as well and you don’t feel that in prison at all. It’s very different to what we normally do. They were really sad to see it end.” - Caroline Roberts

200,000 children have a parent sent to prison each year. That's more than the number of children affected by divorce.
Parents model strategies in the group that they will later use with their children and Caroline was amazed by how well the men responded to these activities:

“It completely surprised me... They just listened, you could hear a pin drop and that doesn't happen in prison. It was like they were the children... A fair few of them have suffered violence, abuse and even sexual abuse. Some of them have not had a childhood. Because this allowed them to feel like a child, they could completely relate that to how their behaviour and drug use is having an impact on their children.” - Caroline Roberts

“I’m learning about how to read children's feelings”
- father at HMP Woodhill

The wing can be extremely chaotic and there is a high turnover of inmates. “They may still be in a drug-seeking mentality or there are those that are detoxing and need a lot of support.” Despite this Caroline felt that the unique structure of the supportive parent group allowed its members to let their guard down, share experiences and support each other:

60% of the UK prison population has a dependent child.

Stronger family relationships reduce the likelihood of prisoners re-offending upon release.

“They really gelled as a group, they started trusting each other and caring for each other. If one of the men couldn't think of something positive to say about themselves someone else would give an example for them. It was really amazing... It was really nice to see them think about other people rather than themselves... drug users can be really quite selfish.” - Caroline Roberts

“I’m beginning to be more thoughtful”
- father at HMP Woodhill

Caroline was very aware of the challenges of running the group with parents who were forcibly separated from their children and she tried to deal with this sensitively and suggested ways the parents might contact their children or demonstrate they were thinking about them.

“My family can see my change from my letters”
- father at HMP Woodhill

The prisoners impressed Caroline by finding practical ways of putting the new strategies they had learnt into practice. They used parenting strategies on the wing to resolve disagreements or challenging situations. They also reflected on their own behaviour and made important links between the choices they had made and why, as a result, they were in prison.
The programme helped the men to better understand their behaviour and the feelings that drive it and then start applying this to their children:

“I’m thinking more about how to be a better parent” - father at HMP Woodhill

Westminster Drug Project have found that the Nurturing Programme is effective because it enables parents to look at their behaviour as substance misusers and consider how this might feel for their children. While this is extremely painful and the recognition of their absence as a parent needs to be carefully managed, this also motivates parents to acknowledge and change their destructive patterns of behaviour.

Following the programme there have been significant changes in the parents' behaviour and many of the prisoners have moved on from the stabilisation wing. One father has had a new baby and is significantly more engaged with his children. “He tells me about his excitement in seeing his baby grow and move around.” explained Caroline. Another father made the life-changing decision to go to rehab where he's stayed for six months and is continuing to make progress:

“What he got from the Parenting Puzzle and thinking about his family gave him the motivation to go to rehab.” - Caroline Roberts

Before attending the parent groups this father was at risk of losing contact with his family and Caroline was pleased to have received a letter from him reporting that he'd recently enjoyed visits from his family.

Westminster Drug Project aims to run parent groups in as many of their services as possible in the next year. HMP Woodhill are planning to roll the programme out beyond the stabilisation wing with parents overcoming drug and alcohol misuse throughout the prison.

“The groups give parents such an incentive to reach out to their children”
- Lily Baker, Children and Family Development Coordinator at WDP

“It was amazing to see the change in them.” - Caroline Roberts

If you would like to find out more about Family Links' work with parents please get in touch:
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