



# THE LITERACY LINK Preliminary Findings

The Literacy Link is a program of the **University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension**. Led by University Extension educators, the goals of The Literacy Link are to:

- **Promote literacy skills** in children by creating literacy-rich experiences in justice settings and,
- **Foster healthy family interactions** between children and their justice-involved parents and caregivers.

The Literacy Link is comprised of **4 strategies designed for children 8 years old and younger**. Select preliminary evaluation findings from each strategy are described below.

## 1

### MAKING READING MEMORIES

Recorded book reading as literacy connection between parents in jail and their young children

From January 2019 to March 2020,

- **123 parents across 5 counties** were recorded reading storybooks to their children
- **204 children** were sent recorded videos and books

4 weeks following the receipt of their first video, children's caregivers were surveyed to determine the impact of the Making Reading Memories videos. 58 caregivers completed surveys about 88 children.

**Nearly all caregivers (90%) agreed that Making Reading Memories helped maintain the connection between their children and the parent in jail.**

Caregivers were also asked what effect, if any, the program had on the children. For most children (84%), Making Reading Memories had a positive effect. For example, caregivers noticed changes in children's mood, behavior or literacy habits.

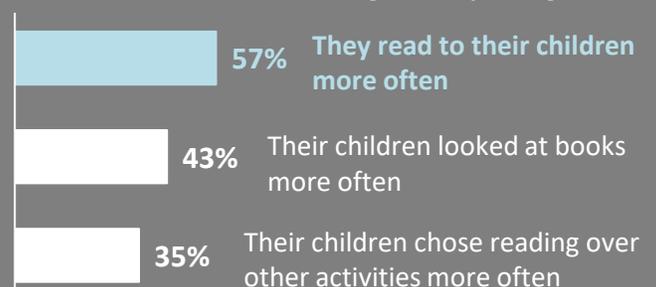
**57% of caregivers read to their children more often after receiving the video.** Some caregivers reported children looked at books more often and even chose reading over other activities more often.

90%  
of caregivers agreed  
Making Reading  
Memories helped  
maintain the parent-  
child connection



### Most caregivers read more often to their children after Making Reading Memories

% of caregivers reporting:



## PHYSICAL SPACE CHANGES IN JUSTICE SETTINGS

Transformed jail and justice spaces into literacy-rich experiences

In several counties throughout Wisconsin, Extension educators have reimagined waiting and visitation areas in jails, courts and other justice spaces to offer literacy-rich experiences for children visiting their parents involved in the justice system. We use the Safe and Secure, Family-friendly Toolkit created by the University of Minnesota to document changes to the correctional facility environment. Below is an example of physical space changes in the **Dane County Public Safety Building Jail** and the **Bayfield County Jail**.



Dane County Jail Visitation Before Spatial Changes



Dane County Jail Visitation After Spatial Changes

### Examples of changes made to the Dane County Public Safety Building Jail:

- Learning activities at Plexiglass and video visitation stations
- Engaging wall games with magnetic letter box, black board, and alphabet trees
- Book vending machine with free tokens for children



Bayfield County Jail Visitation Before Spatial Changes



Bayfield County Jail Visitation After Spatial Changes

### Examples of changes made to the Bayfield County Jail:

- Child-friendly activity tables with learning games
- Wall art and books that reflect diverse cultures, including posters with Ojibwe and English words and books by indigenous authors
- A cozy reading nook where children can wait comfortably while adults visit

## Distributing books to children visiting Wisconsin justice spaces

In early 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Extension educators distributed over 2,000 high-quality books to justice spaces across Wisconsin.

- ✓ Brand new books free for families
- ✓ Age-appropriate for young children
- ✓ Feature diverse characters with content relevant to local cultures and traditions



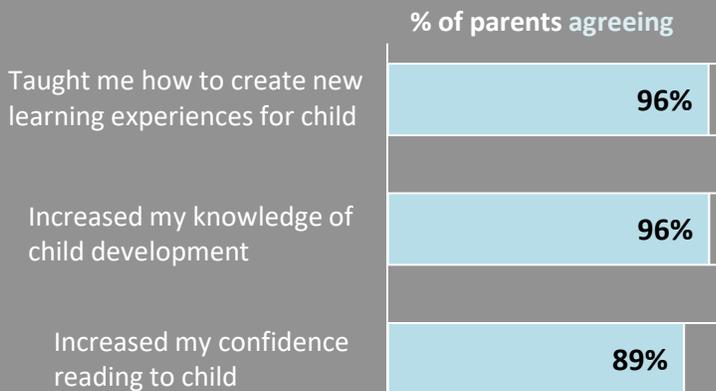
### 3

## PARENT EDUCATION

Parent education delivered to justice-involved parents through workshops, evidence-based programs, electronic tablets and one-on-one coaching

In 5 Wisconsin counties, parents in local county jails receive a workshop in which Extension educators teach interactive reading skills as a means of promoting positive parent-child relationships.

### Most parents in jail learned new information and felt more confident as a result of the workshop.



Of the 53 parents in jail that reported their experiences in the workshop, 96% said the workshop taught them how to create new learning experiences for their child and increased their child development knowledge. Nearly all parents reported an increase in confidence. Most parents indicated they would take actions to have more frequent visits, letters or phone calls with their children (not pictured).

Parents were asked what impact the workshop had on them, if any. 87% of parents reported the workshop had a very positive effect on them.

In addition to the interactive reading workshop, Extension educators also piloted an adapted version of the **Parenting Inside Out** program in 5 local county jails. The 8-session parent education course for justice-involved parents focused on communication, discipline and literacy activities, among other topics.

In the pilot phase, 30 parents enrolled in Parenting Inside Out (PIO) and 16 parents completed the program. Most parents were fathers.

Of the 16 parents who completed the program:

- 12 parents (75%) said the quality of their relationship with their children had improved.
- 10 parents (63%) said they started having more frequent contact with their children.
- 12 parents (75%) said PIO had a very positive effect on them.

## COVID-19 Pandemic Response

Due to COVID-19, many local jails restricted access of visitors and external partners, including Extension educators. In response to justice-involved families' unique challenges during the pandemic, Extension Educators began sending Family Literacy Kits to children previously enrolled in Literacy Link strategies. **Between April and August 2020, 220 Family Literacy Kits and 494 children's books were distributed across 4 counties.** Feedback from families about the utility of the Family Literacy Kits is forthcoming.

**FAMILY LITERACY KITS** typically include a:

- Children's storybook
- Information sheet for caregivers (topics range from self-care to COVID-19)
- Family activity sheet
- Letter template and stamped envelope for mailing to the parent in jail



## 4

**TELESTORY**

**Free, child-focused visits where children connect in real-time with their parent in jail through literacy activities**

Children visit local libraries where they connect with their parents in jail through a secure video. To date, **30 children and their 19 parents in one county jail** have visited via TeleStory. Caregivers and parents provide feedback after their 1<sup>st</sup> visit and one month after the initial visit. Information collected from 9 families that piloted TeleStory suggests:

- Prior to the TeleStory visit, most **children were not visiting** with their parents in jail.
- Parents in jail **used skills learned in Extension workshops** during their TeleStory visit.
- After their TeleStory visit, parents in jail **intended to have more frequent contact** with their children.
- TeleStory **was less costly, more comfortable and closer to home** compared with the county jail.



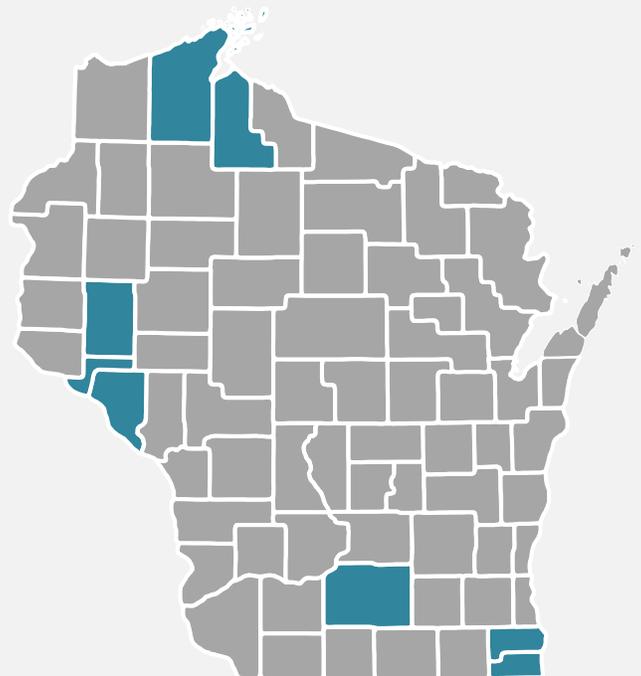
## About THE LITERACY LINK

The Literacy Link is currently **piloted in 8 Wisconsin counties including Ashland, Bayfield, Dunn, Pepin, Buffalo, Dane, Racine and Kenosha**. The project will soon expand to serve children and families in Brown and Milwaukee Counties.

**We partner with jails, criminal justice organizations, libraries and others** to engage justice-involved children and their families in literacy activities. At local county jails, we provide education programs, support services, evaluation tools, curricula, and books. The project was initially funded through the UW System President's office in 2017. **Learn more about The Literacy Link at <https://theliteracylink.extension.wisc.edu>.**

### Contact

This evaluation brief was created by the Population Health Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. For questions, please contact The Literacy Link coordinator Elizabeth Lexau at [elizabeth.lexau@wisc.edu](mailto:elizabeth.lexau@wisc.edu).



**The Literacy Link Pilot Counties**