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To cite this article: Catrine Andersson & Annelie Björkhagen Turesson (2022): Bedtime stories from inside – family practices and affinities in families with incarcerated fathers, European Journal of Social Work, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2022.2040442

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2040442

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Published online: 21 Feb 2022.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bedtime stories from inside – family practices and affinities in families with incarcerated fathers

Godnattsagor från insidan – familjepraktiker och affiniteter i familjer med frihetsberövade fäder

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ABSTRACT
The present paper aims to explore whether a prison literacy project, Bedtime stories from inside, can contribute to improving and maintaining relationships between incarcerated fathers and their children. The analysis is focused on the concepts “doing family” and “affinities”. The material consists of anonymous evaluation forms from the incarcerated fathers (70) and the carers (46). The results show that deeper familial connections are possible when fathers are allowed to interact with their children in a way that includes attending to practicalities like reading fairy tales to their children. The family practices within the project contribute to challenging norms of masculinity and overcoming impulses to shut down emotionally. The project highlights the need for the prison system and social work practice to support families in the hard work of forming and maintaining connections.

KEYWORDS
Family practices; parental incarceration; affinities

Introduction
The present paper aims to explore whether a prison literacy project can contribute to improving and maintaining relationships between incarcerated fathers, mothers/carers, and their children.

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theoretical terms, the paper investigates whether the practices involved in the project are experienced as ‘doing family’ and creating ‘affinities’ (Mason, 2018; Morgan, 2011).

The paper is based on a study of the project Bedtime stories from inside (Godnattsagor inifrån), a Swedish family literacy project that seeks to strengthen the bond between incarcerated parents and their children to allow them to positively get involved with their child’s emotional, social, and intellectual development. The project was initiated by librarians in Malmö in 2008 and is based on a collaboration between the public library and the prison services (Andersson & Johansson, 2010).

The project is inspired by two British projects, the Big Book Share and Storybook Dads (cf. Storybook Dads, 2021), but the Swedish version has a stronger emphasis on teaching incarcerated parents about the importance of reading for children’s development. The project is run as a study circle consisting of group meetings that take place in the prison once a week for six weeks. Staff from both the library and the prison participate. Participants are recruited based on ethical criteria. For example, they cannot be convicted of crimes against children or the other parent of their child; they need to know basic Swedish; and the custodian of the child has to approve of the bedtime story being sent to the child. It is the Swedish Prison and Probation Service that decides whether a detainee fulfils these criteria. The Bedtime stories from inside ends with the parents sending the recorded story to their children, including a package of books adapted to the children’s age and interests.

In Sweden, the National Board of Health and Welfare estimates that about 8000 children each year have one or both of their parents in prison (Socialstyrelsen, 2018). The enforced separation generated by prison creates challenges for sustaining a relationship between parent and child, which makes possibilities for improving this relationship a pressing issue for social work. The daily contact and interactions at home become unachievable. Imprisoned parents cannot perform normal things such as cooking and helping with homework, which Morgan (1999, 2011) points to as important aspects of everyday family practices. Previous research has found that children with incarcerated parents are affected both socio-economically and emotionally by having a parent in prison during childhood (Björkhagen Turesson, 2009; Dobbie et al., 2018; Johnston, 2012; Sykes & Pettit, 2014). Children with incarcerated parents are more likely to suffer from mental illness than other children (Wildeman, 2010).

However, there is generally a lack of official initiatives aimed at supporting incarcerated fathers to become involved and maintain a working relationship with their children. Swedish children with an incarcerated parent are a group that is often invisible in policy and practice (Barnombudsmannen, 2004; Socialstyrelsen, 2018). In 2010 the Swedish Prison Law (2010:610) was weakened. The family’s place of residence is no longer taken into account when an inmate is placed in prison. For this reason it can be difficult for children to maintain a continuous relationship with their incarcerated parent. This makes it a priority for social work research and practice to further explore the existing initiatives in this area and to build on them to develop support for families during parental incarceration.

**Previous research**

Exploring how family practices are experienced during the incarceration of a parent, we base our analysis on research concerning how family practices are negotiated and experienced at a distance, how incarceration impacts families and children, and how projects supporting family relationships whilst in prison affect family practices.

**Doing family at a distance**

Family practices at a distance have primarily been explored in studies of work-separated families and migration studies, where the focus has been on transnational families (Eldén & Anving, 2019). Families face different challenges depending on the reasons for separation, but some things are recurrent, such as the importance of family norms, the technology for keeping in touch, and impact of states and institutions on family practices.
Family practices at a distance create either temporary or more permanent shifts in gender and family dynamics, such as who is responsible for the day-to-day care of children (Yeaoh et al., 2020). The separation also challenges the ideal of a family living together, and studies show that families separated by distance have to repeatedly justify the family relationship to the surrounding society and find it hard to live up to familial social norms (Strasser et al., 2009). Intergenerational family practices are also affected as the roles of family elders or relatives shift in relation to relocations (Landolt & Wei Da, 2005). The actions of states and institutions inevitably impact family practices. In the literature on transnational families, spatial ruptures are pointed to as a challenge for family dynamics but not necessarily as a cause for family disintegration (Landolt & Wei Da, 2005).

Incarcerated parents

In Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to keep in contact with a parent from whom they are forced to live apart. Nevertheless, several studies have shown that children experience severe difficulties in maintaining relationships with their incarcerated parents, and they suffer the consequences of this both during their childhood and, in some cases, later in life (Björkhagen Turesson, 2009, 2011; Dobbie et al., 2018; Johnston, 2012). Parental incarceration also has an independent effect on the emotional and behavioural development of children (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Murray et al., 2012). Additionally, children of incarcerated parents are more likely than other children to end up incarcerated themselves (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011; Murray & Murray, 2010).

Separations and broken relationships affect children negatively because the parent–child relationship is the very foundation of children’s social relationships and self-esteem. Children need a secure attachment to their parents in order to thrive and develop (Bowlby, 2008). Through systematic analyses of empirical studies, researchers have positively linked paternal warmth and sensitivity to the child’s needs with father–infant attachment (Cox et al., 1992; Van IJzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997). Dyer et al. (2018) have reported that fathers’ emotional closeness was associated with frequency of contact with their children. Further, Flouri and Buchanan (2002) have documented that levels of father involvement when children were seven years old predicted children’s closeness to fathers later in life. A systematic review by Sarkadi et al. (2008) indicates that the active and regular involvement of fathers provides several positive results – for example, enhancing cognitive development while decreasing criminality and economic disadvantage in low SES families – concluding that there is sufficient support to encourage both professionals and decision-makers to create good conditions to enable fathers to become involved and included in their children’s lives.

The Children’s Ombudsman in Sweden stated that it was difficult for children to maintain relationships with their parent in prison despite the fact that it is a right under Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Barnombudsmannen, 2004). According to the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare’s latest survey (Socialstyrelsen, 2018), the efforts and support from criminal and social authorities for the children with incarcerated parents are not enough. The social services need to support these children, for instance, so that they are able to maintain a continuous relationship with their parent in prison (Socialstyrelsen, 2018).

The significance of incarceration for a particular family is largely determined by interpersonal, economic, and cultural factors (Comfort, 2009). In a qualitative study by Björkhagen Turesson (2009), the results showed that for some families the prison sentence did not always mean something negative but sometimes created a turning point where parents and children got renewed contact, particularly in cases when the parents lived apart from their children for many years due to substance abuse problems.

Supporting family practices in prison

To mitigate the consequences of parental detention, parental support programmes have been developed to build the parenting skills of mothers and fathers behind bars and to support the
development of their children. There is a wide range of such programmes adapted to the age of the children. However, most of the parent education programmes in prison do not directly involve the children. Many factors can influence child involvement, such as lack of transportation, funds, and resources of the institutions and the families themselves. Some parental support programmes are aimed solely at the incarcerated parents (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013; Hoffmann et al., 2010).

The effects of these support programmes vary greatly, and many have not been empirically validated (Johnston, 2012). However, some studies have shown positive results of the programmes, including strengthening the bonds within the family, increasing parental empathy in relation to the children, and strengthening their parenting ability. For instance the study of Sandifer (2008) examined statistical hypotheses about change in seven parenting areas to see if parenting attitudes could change as a result of the programme. The study included both a treatment group and a control group. After the course the mothers increased their knowledge of child development which proved useful for enhancing their potential to recognise age-appropriate behaviour in their children, changed views of corporal punishment, changed attitudes toward parent–child role reversal, and increased empathetic awareness of their children’s needs. After the parenting programme, these mothers are more likely to understand their children’s feelings and needs. However, an increase in knowledge of parent–child communication could not be observed, nor do the parents feel more confident in their parenting ability after completing the parent programme.

Armstrong et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review and meta-analyses of 16 articles in the field of parenting interventions during incarceration. Small to modest improvements were found with regards to parenting ability, at least in the short-term. Further research is required to establish the effectiveness of parenting programmes more confidently, even in the post-release period.

Although many parental support programmes show good results in relation to the incarcerated parents, it is not always possible to see corresponding improvements for the children. This may be due to the fact that in many countries there are few opportunities for contact between children and incarcerated parents, which means that these parents do not have the opportunity to practice their new skills (Hoffmann et al., 2010). To overcome these problems, some prisons have created visiting facilities for children and families that enable increased contact (Cunningham, 2001). In Sweden, there are child-friendly visitor rooms and visitor apartments where the children can spend a few days with their incarcerated parent (Kriminalvården, 2020).

**Theoretical concepts: ‘doing family’ and ‘affinities’**

The concepts of ‘doing family’ or ‘family practices’ developed from a critique that argues against focusing on the family and instead encourages opening up the conversation to include the everyday practices that make up family life (Morgan, 2011), emphasising that family and kinship ties need to be ‘worked’ if they are to be maintained and remain meaningful. Within this approach, formal kinship ties are not as important as the day-to-day practices and attention to practicalities. Having a parent in prison means that there are no day-to-day interactions on which to build family practices, which is a significant challenge. Roseneil (2007) has argued that we must consider the viscosity and velocity of flows of intimacy and care as well as the implications of their absence.

Further strengthening the approach of analysing flows and connections, we will use the concept of ‘affinities’, developed by Jennifer Mason (2018). The concept emphasises potent connections – and how connective charges can be mediated through objects (Mason, 2018). The familial relationships that the present analysis is concerned with are indeed kinship relationships, but they are relationships facing significant obstacles in establishing connections, namely being in prison. Mason (2018) argues that relationships are most often analysed without regard to the sensory aspects and instead puts forth the idea that sensations are at the core of relationships.
Time is also significant for understanding affinities as it emotionally charges relationships in different ways (Mason, 2018). Incarceration is limited in time, but the material in this study includes many statements of trepidation and hopes for the future. Their circumstances have made future parent–child relationships precarious for several of the families that participated in the project; thus, time is important for understanding the connective charges of family and relationship practices.

**Material and method**

**Material**

The empirical material in the study consists of both collected evaluation forms from the incarcerated fathers and the carers (often mothers) and *quotes* from the fathers written down by the librarians in connection with the oral evaluation of the study circles. The oral quotes were important contributions as some fathers had difficulties expressing themselves in writing. Neither the evaluation forms nor the document with the recorded quotes included any personal data or other information that could reveal the families’ identities. A total of 70 fathers participated and filled out the evaluation forms. The forms were designed by the library and were collected from all 10 study circles, which have taken place at two high-security prisons and one low-security prison. The evaluation forms include both open- and closed-response options, asking about their views on the different sessions of the study circle, their previous experience of reading and visiting the library, and how the project had affected the relationship with their children. In this paper, we have only used the answers from the open-ended questions as only these issues were relevant to the purpose of this article. Some fathers did not have Swedish as their mother tongue or had writing difficulties, which meant that some responses to the open-responses were brief. This was compensated for in the oral part of the evaluation. These views were recorded by the librarians. There were no internal or external drop-outs, which was probably due to the fact that both the oral and the written evaluation were collected at the end of each study circle. *Bedtime stories from inside* was generally also perceived as meaningful by the participants, which certainly affected their willingness to carry out the evaluation. All participation in both the study circle and the evaluation was voluntary. The carers also received evaluation forms, and 46 out of 70 evaluations were sent back and are included in the material.

**Method of analysis**

The material has been analysed using thematic analysis. One advantage of a thematic analysis is its flexibility in relation to theoretical perspectives and empirical nuance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Aiming to capture family practices in order to explore the conditions of family practices in the situation where one parent is incarcerated, we have coded the material focusing on close relationships and care relationships. Themes that emerged as central for the analysis in relation to this focus were experiences of ‘giving’ and ‘receiving’ in relationships; experiences of relationships changing, both during the incarceration in general and during the project specifically; and the importance of material things for describing, building, and maintaining relationships.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations are of importance when conducting research on vulnerable groups. The empirical material on which this article is based does not contain any personal or other identifiable data. In order to prevent anyone from identifying the participants, we have read all the quotes with great care and made the necessary changes without affecting the content relevant for the purpose of this article. To make the material more personalised, we have used fictitious names in our presentation of the results.
Results

The situation for a family where one parent is incarcerated differs depending on context and the quality and type of previous relationships. However, in most cases, the parent–child relationship is affected during the incarceration. In the following sections, we explore different aspects of doing family in this situation.

Doing and giving

In the evaluation, many of the fathers mentioned doing something for their children as a central positive aspect. Doing and giving emerged as central themes during the analysis, and several of the fathers talked about them in different ways:

- The project has helped me come into the family somehow. Being a part of it even though you’re not there. I could give something. Because other than this, there is nothing I can do for my kids from in here. (Johan, incarcerated father)

This does not mean that the experience was easy. Several fathers described how the recordings were no pleasant experience:

- It’s been a learning experience. But hearing your own voice was hard! I had to just put myself through it. It was worth every drop of sweat, because it was something I did together with my son. (Fredrik, incarcerated father)

Relating the unpleasant aspects of making the recordings for their children, the fathers described how they were putting the wellbeing of their child before themselves. Doing this created an experience of connection; for instance, Fredrik described how he even felt that he did it ‘together’ with his son.

However, the fathers’ experiences were not limited to the positive aspects of connecting with their children. There was also pain involved in reaching out, in not allowing yourself to be cut off. Johan had knowingly chosen to serve his time as far away from his family as possible:

- It would have been hard to serve the time if home had been closer. […] It’s kind of the only way to cope – shutting out everything. It’s a survival instinct. (Johan, incarcerated father)

In the absence of everyday family interactions, Johan was concerned about having the images of family on his mind constantly. Not being a part of family practices was so painful that it could only be handled by extending the distance even further – by creating geographical distance that allows for emotional distance. That is, being far away could ease the pain by allowing Johan to shut the emotions out.

Creating bonds over a distance – affinities

One possible way of forming a connection over distance is by mediating it through objects. Mason (2018) argues that the theoretical concept of affinities can be used to describe potent connections that are mediated in this way, focusing on the sensory aspects and how they become significant for the relationship. These sensory aspects are predominantly present in the evaluation comments from the participants. Several of the carers made important points about highly charged emotional and sensory experiences when describing situations of the children listening to the stories. Malin said, ‘When he hears dad’s voice, he relaxes. I think it gives a sense of safety.’ Different positive emotions and experiences were mentioned, such as happiness, relaxation, safety, and closeness. The children’s bond with their incarcerated parent was described as strengthened by the experience. According to the carers, hearing the voice of their parent could contribute to the child’s relaxation and offer a chance to pick up words from the parent and learn from them.
However, the experience of listening to the voice of a parent who is not present every day was such a potent connection that it was not relaxing for everyone; instead, it gave rise to strong and complex emotions:

They were really happy, but they can’t bear to listen to the CD. When they have, they’ve started to cry each time, so we’ve turned it off. (Lisa, mother)

Happiness and sadness became intertwined in these stories from mothers whose children have had strong reactions to listening to the recorded stories. Several of the children started to cry when listening and had strong feelings of sadness. For some, it was possible to keep listening nevertheless and to gain a new emotional relationship to this highly charged object. For others, this was not possible, and they had to turn the recording off (such as the case of Lisa, mentioned above).

In addition to hearing the voice, receiving a package also had a sensory effect for some of the children. Rakel, one of the mothers, described it as follows:

We have had a very positive experience. She was so happy when the package from her dad arrived. She even thought daddy was home. That’s how close the experience was. (Rakel, mother)

The combination of voice and material seems to be very potent in the children’s experiences, as we were told by the mothers. Receiving a package with the book and the CD-case that the fathers made themselves, in combination with being able to hear the voice again and again, offers an opportunity to form a connection.

**Maintaining relationships over time and generations**

The aspect of time is central for understanding the experience of the stories and what they might mean for the parent–child relationship. Kinship relationships do not only exist in the now; they also contain experiences and trajectories toward the future, whether hopeful or filled with trepidation. Family practices during incarceration are embedded in a temporal frame of how family life was before, how it is now, and how it is imagined develop after. Thanks to the project, Peter now has hopes for a better relationship with his daughter than seemed possible before:

We’ve started talking about the books, and our communication has really improved. We’ve agreed to that when I get out, we’re going to take one of the books with chapters and read to each other – every other chapter. (Peter, father)

Hopes for the future thus affected the emotional charge of the project for some of the fathers. In terms of family practices, it is everyday care that usually makes up the relationship and forms the feeling of meaningfulness and security. The communication that emerged in relation to the project thus makes it possible to imagine a future. This is made possible through giving attention to practicalities – namely, talking about the books and making plans – which Morgan points out as central for doing family (Morgan, 2011). In comparison to Peter, Karina had a very different view of the future and thus of the possibilities of the project:

I am both positive and negative. Good for the father inside to be able to do something for the kids, and a positive thing for the kids to hear their dad’s voice. But it is a bad thing to give the children false hope about a dad that will probably never take his responsibility. (Karina, mother)

The family practices that emerged seemed, in Karina’s view, positive in the moment – both for the father and the children. However, talking about the future, Karina pointed to a risk of the children developing false hope about a father that Karina thought will probably never take his responsibility. Here, the future influenced the emotional charge of these family practices for Karina. The positive things in the moment – hearing their father’s voice and the father doing something for the kids – are related to fears for the future.
Family practices, reading, and gender

The language of the informants is closely linked to the theoretical concepts employed in this study. The informants frequently described how they want to do something for their family, supporting an analysis of family practices. However, a strong focus on doing things for your family and giving or contributing might also be understood within a framework of gender. Previous studies on fatherhood in Sweden have shown a strong presence of the discourse of involved fatherhood (Plantin et al., 2003). The fathers in our study do not have the possibility to be involved fathers on a day-to-day basis, but the quotes showing their positive emotions when they are able to do something for their family might be interpreted in relation to this discourse, allowing for a version of involved fatherhood at a distance. At the same time, there is a complexity here, as other norms of masculinity were described as present in the prison environment:

There is such a strong macho culture ... like before you had an image of yourself as an inmate and reading being this sissy thing – that you can’t just lie down and read a story and make funny voices for your child. Now I can’t wait to lie in bed and read bedtime stories for my son when I get out. (Patrik, incarcerated father)

The project meant a big change for Patrik – from having a derogatory view of reading for your child to longing for it. Patrik’s quote indicates the presence of, on the one hand, strong norms of ‘macho’ masculinity and, on the other hand, norms of involved fatherhood. These are mixed and negotiated by the fathers in our study. Despite norms of more ‘macho’ masculinities present in the prison context, the statements on parenthood were predominantly gender neutral. Few of the informants talked about fatherhood or motherhood, or about parenthood in gendered ways, when describing the importance of the fathers’ participation in the project.

From distance to closeness?

The following excerpts contain descriptions of how the participants have experienced changes in their relationships with their children and, in some cases, how they have gone from distance to more closeness by attending to practicalities (Morgan, 2011). Other informants reported similar experiences of improvements:

I didn’t have that much to talk about with my teenage girl before – she’s got quite the attitude. When we’ve talked lately, I have started to read the backside of books to her to find out what she’s interested in. We’ve started talking about the books and gained a better communication. (Bo, incarcerated father)

Bo acknowledged having achieved a closer connection with his daughter than he thought possible: ‘We have a deal now’, he explained, ‘When I get out, we’ll get one of the books with chapters and read to each other – one chapter each’. Other examples include Martin, who did not believe that he could entertain his son by reading to him but is very happy to see that it works.

Not all participants talked about improvements of communication. For instance, one mother, Eva, talked about how the children’s expectations of communication are not met with the recordings. She said that they were having trouble concentrating when trying to listen. It might be because they had trouble understanding it was recorded, she speculated. Another mother, Siri, was significantly less positive about the project throughout the evaluation. In response to questions about the kids’ reactions to the project, she wrote that the kids ‘had a negative reaction to it because they want connection, not a book’. In her evaluation, Siri wrote about her disappointment with the kids’ father’s lack of engagement with the kids, allowing us to see a bigger picture where the family practices must extend further than sending a CD and a book to create meaningfulness. We can also recall what Karina said about creating false hope for a relationship that might not work out.
Discussion

The project *Bedtime stories from inside* creates potent objects that transcend the prison walls and allows for situations where family ties can be stronger than normal during incarceration. This is evident in the participants’ quotes regarding ‘doing’ and ‘giving’, where fathers expressed being more practically involved and working on the family ties. Morgan (2011) points out how familial ‘work’ is more important than formal kinship ties and instead emphasises day-to-day practices. Applying this theoretically to the situation of incarcerated fathers means considering what ‘work’ might entail when family members are spatially distant. Here, the potent objects – the recordings of the stories and the hand made CD cases – help to make the fathers present in everyday situations, and hearing their voice builds on kinship bonds and similarities between father and child in mimicking words.

However, being more intimately involved is not possible for everyone. One dad expressed how geographical distance helped shut him off from emotional connection that would be too painful for him. This is important to reflect on in relation to the prison system as it is relevant for understanding family practices (cf. Landolt & Wei Da, 2005). As the system does not offer parents/fathers specific support for family ties, there is a risk that the tendencies of some fathers to cut themselves off from the emotional hardship of being connected to their family will be enhanced rather than challenged. This is something social work initiatives could potentially focus on. The everyday care that potentially creates security and meaningfulness in family relationships is lacking in the case of incarceration and there are few instances where trust and connection can be built. Nonetheless, there are instances in the material where, for example, feelings of abandonment have been relieved by the interactions the project offers.

Furthermore, gender norms are central for understanding the possible limitations of the project. The fathers described negotiating between macho norms and ideals of involved fatherhood. In relation to migration studies, where gender norms are challenged when women leave their families to become breadwinners, one might expect a family with an incarcerated father to rather cement gendered dynamics. However, due to the strong ideal of involved fatherhood in Sweden, our study did not exhibit such a pattern. Rather, the fathers seem to use the project to expand their view of what fatherhood might mean to them when they get out.

The study participants’ statements indicate that creating situations where the incarcerated parents can connect with their children around everyday topics is very positive in terms of improving relationships. In particular, a deeper connection is formed when the parents are given the opportunity to pay ‘attention to practicalities’, as Morgan (2011) conceptualises it, by following up on earlier conversations, inquiring after the child’s preference in books, or re-reading their favourite book. In contrast, the statements indicate that when no connection occurs around the stories, the books lose their potential – they become *just* books.

Limitations and strengths

The study provides valuable knowledge of the family practice that takes place between incarcerated parents and their children in relation to the project *Bedtime stories from inside*. The theoretical concepts ‘doing family’ and ‘affinities’ (Mason, 2018; Morgan, 2011) have been valuable in making visible how everyday practices and material things come into play in family practices. These could be used to inform future social work initiatives to work with families in similar situations. The study’s limitations concern the empirical material having been collected with the purpose of evaluating the project. However, the material contains a rich material for discussing family practices and affinities.

In addition, considering a child perspective on these issues, we first want to acknowledge that the empirical material and analysis that we highlight here centre the parents’ voices. The incarcerated fathers were the focus point of the project *Bedtime stories from inside*, which influenced the study design. Nonetheless, the children involved in the project also create family ties and relate to the
recordings. In some cases, the children have a weak or non-existent relationship to the incarcerated parent and have to work hard at creating a connection based on only the stories. This is important to highlight in relation to the theoretical concepts, which are often used to conceptualise practices of the parents. Thus, we would like to emphasise that family practices are not always done in connection to but rather by compensating for absences.

**Implications for social work practice**

The project highlights the need for an approach that specifically supports family ties, as there is hard work involved in staying connected to family during incarceration. Much would be won if there was a prison system and social work practice that aimed at supporting families in the hard work of forming and maintaining connections. Previous research has also shown the importance of the family for inmates. In a systematic review of 10 studies that explore the impact of prison visits from family members on three specific offender outcomes – recidivism, prisoners’ well-being, and rule breaking within the prison – the results showed positive effects of prisoners receiving visits. The visits reduced depressive symptoms in women and adolescent prisoners; further, there was some evidence that they reduced rule-breaking behaviour. One high-quality study suggested that visits reduced recidivism (De Claire & Dixon, 2017).

In the case of parental incarceration, there are few instances where trust and connection can be built. It is clear from the statements of the study participants that when incarcerated parents are given the opportunity to pay attention to practicalities, for instance, reading fairy tales for the children and by following up on earlier conversations around these books, there is also a possibility for them to make a deeper connection with their children. The fathers in this study were overwhelmingly positive toward the project; however, they still pointed to how it can require challenging norms of masculinity and overcoming impulses to shut down emotionally. The mothers outside the bars were also predominantly positive, although some of them wanted to emphasise the potential risks of the children experiencing disappointment.

The potent objects in the project – the recordings of the stories, the CD cases and the books – help to make the fathers present in everyday situations. However, when no connection occurs around the stories, the books lose their potential – they become *just* books – something that the mothers highlight as a possible drawback.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Notes on contributors**

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