Preparing for Release Evaluation Report
Stages 1 and 2 (Pre and Post Course)

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Introduction and Background

80% of prisoners and 90% of partners said that they had concerns about living together

In 2003 Action for Prisoners’ Families (APF) commissioned Relate Central Office to develop a workshop for prisoners and their partners, which would help to prepare them for release. Relate was chosen because of their experience of counselling couples in relationship skills at times of crisis and in educating couples.

Evaluation System

The evaluation of the programme is in 4 stages:

1. Pre course
2. Post course (same day)
3. 3 months after release
4. 12 months after release

This report draws together the evaluation data from Stages 1 and 2.

Participants

The data presented here is based on 38 couples; between them the respondents had 32 children. There were 30 prisoners pre workshop, 32 prisoners post workshop; 21 partners pre workshop and 36 partners post workshop. Pre course questionnaires were posted to partners and handed to prisoners by prison staff. This resulted in a better response from prisoners than partners, as we were dependent on partners posting their forms or bringing them on the day.
Relate’s Work with Prisoners and Their Families
Relate has worked with a small number of prisons over the years, notably HMP Huntercombe, HMP Bedford, HMP Winchester and HMP Lindholme.

Relate Centres provide a range of services for both prisoners and prison staff:
- ‘Building Better Relationships’; a course focussed on developing relationships with peers within prison as well as their families
- Relationship counselling services
- Prison Officers have attended Relate courses on ‘Understanding Relationships’ and ‘Basic Counselling Skills’ enabling them to support inmates, especially when there are problems at home

Design Process
The workshops were developed by the Life Skills Team at Relate Central Office. Firstly training needs were analysed through a process of literature review, questionnaires with prisoners, partners and prison personnel and discussions with Relate practitioners working within prisons. Draft workshop materials were developed in consultation with Action for Prisoners’ Families.

Trainer Selection
From the outset, it was felt important that an external trainer was used for the work. This would enable prisoners and partners to feel that their time together would be more relaxed. We used one trainer, on each occasion, a female. Relate’s trainers are competent to work with a mixed gender group and to balance the needs of men and women, and would be used to doing this in the counselling room and with other groups. Trainers hold qualifications in couple counselling or family counselling as well as a professional training qualification. Trainers also have experience in working with socially disadvantaged groups.

The Workshops
Two workshops were developed for the client group:

**Inside Out** is targeted at prisoners and their partners to prepare them for release. Originally the client group was specified as prisoners and their partners, within three to four months of release.

**Together Apart** is for prisoners and partners to help them maintain their relationship for the period of incarceration.
Content
Prisoners and their families face particular difficulties around the time of resettlement. Much has changed for both parties during even a short period of incarceration. The workshops seek to address issues common to all couples, such as communication, dealing with conflict and developing intimacy, as well as those issues particular to prisoners and their partners:

- Reforming as a couple after long term separation
- Managing the aftermath of returning home
- How to include a prisoner in home life at a distance

The workshop format is educational and includes a range of techniques for learning skills, challenging attitudes, providing a safe place to talk and plan as a couple, as well as giving helpful information about being together again. There were also therapeutic elements to the work. Couples were given the opportunity to express their feelings in a safe group environment and to explore their needs as a couple.

Choosing the Client Group
Two prisons were identified by APF as pilot prisons: HMP Acklington and HMP Ashwell. One workshop was run at HMP Acklington and four workshops at HMP Ashwell. Both prisons are Category C.

All participants were volunteers. Posters were used to invite Prisoners to take part in the workshops. Initially uptake was slow for the pilot. For later workshops more prisoners volunteered as a result of recommendation by other prisoners and the reassurance they received from prison officers.

Both prisons used short cut methods of getting a group together. At HMP Acklington, the prisoners had previously attended a course about violence in relationships\(^1\). HMP Ashwell selected those who had attended a course about parenting.

18 of the 33 couples involved in this evaluation have children

Following the prisoners volunteering, a letter was sent to their partners from Relate and Action for Prisoners’ Families. It was felt important that an invitation was given by a neutral party rather than from the prison. In practice however, prison officers played a key role in phoning partners to encourage them to attend. This did not seem to put partners off attending.

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\(^1\) This was not compliant with the requested screening process.
Partners were offered childcare and travel expenses to enable them to access the service. They said this made a big difference to their ability to attend. 18 of the 33 couples involved in this evaluation have children; a total of 32 children.

**Practical Arrangements**
Workshops were run over 1 day from 10am – 4pm with lunch. The workshops took place in the Chaplaincy at HMP Acklington and in the Visitors’ Centre at HMP Ashwell. In both locations an informal seating arrangement was adopted. At HMP Ashwell this meant that fixed seating was removed.

At both HMP Acklington and HMP Ashwell the catering students in the prison provided a special buffet lunch for the workshop participants. Prisoners and their partners really appreciated this effort to make them feel at ease and to create a relaxed informal atmosphere.

“time to talk privately...discuss changes in routine” Prisoner

**Security Issues**
Prisons were initially concerned about security issues whilst having an informal day for the prisoners and partners. However, they made a special effort in switching off cameras, removing fixed seating, not using drugs dogs and allowing couples the freedom to move around. Couples said that they appreciated this and it helped distinguish the day from other visiting times.

At each event at least one prison officer was present at all times. They were discreet and kept a distance so as not to listen in on couples’ conversations. On one occasion the cameras were turned back on because the prisoners and partners were becoming ‘too intimate’ during the workshop. The trainer reminded participants of the ground rules for the day.
**Pre Workshop Questionnaires**
Prior to attending the Inside Out workshop, prisoners and their partners were asked to complete a pre course questionnaire. We asked them questions about:

- their feelings about release
- their feelings about living together again
- their satisfaction with their relationship
- their expectations about the workshop

**Going Home & Living Together Preparation**
Prior to attending the workshop, prisoners and their partners were asked how well prepared they felt for living together again:

![Graph showing preparedness for living together](image)

This graph shows that although a majority of respondents felt well prepared for living together again, partners felt less well prepared and were 5x more likely to rate their level of preparedness as bad or very bad. This could be because prisoners generally receive more input on the general concepts of going home and their partners are not routinely involved in sentence planning.

Prisoners felt that the time they had spent apart had helped to strengthen their relationship. They said that regular contact with their partner was important to them. However, a number of partners said that they felt they had grown more independent and wouldn’t want to give this up when their partner was released. Both prisoners and partners were concerned about having changed during their time apart and how this might affect their relationship after release.
Concerns about going home

“We’ve both changed, my daily routine is completely different now, as is my daughter's”

80% of prisoners and 90% of partners said that they had concerns about living together again, with partners showing a great deal of anxiety. Prior to imprisonment some couples’ relationships had been adversely affected by the use of drugs, not being able to communicate and stress due to offending behaviour. However, other couples rated their relationship as strong and were determined to keep it that way. Some of the concerns prisoners had were:

- partners having grown independent and built up their own lives during separation
- having to consider other people after having spent long periods of time looking after themselves
- loss of intimacy due to time spent apart
- ability to build new lives with their partner

“I’m worried he’ll be violent again and I will lose my son. I’m worried he’ll cheat on me again”  Partner

The area of building and retaining trust was of particular concern. Partners were also concerned they may both have changed. A number of partners were worried about:

- arguing
- domestic violence
- sex
- changes in outlook (religious convictions deepened)
- reoccurrence of events from the past (i.e. re-offending).

“I’ve been on my own for a long time, before there was a lot of paranoia. I don’t want that life style again … we’ve moved area, me and the children are settled”  Partner
**Relationships & Each Other**

Prisoners and their partners were asked to rate the health of their relationship. The graph shows, convincingly, that partners had a tendency to rate their relationship as in 'serious trouble' with prisoners consistently feeling more positive and optimistic.

![Graph showing relationship ratings](image)

57% of prisoners and 73% of partners said that they had specific concerns about their relationship. For prisoners these concerns included trust, difficulty communicating with their partner, their partner changing and commitment. Trust was the most commonly cited problem on both sides including issues of infidelity, the risk of return to offending and future commitment. Some partners were worried about the time they’d spent apart and potential selfishness of their partner, trust and again violence was mentioned as an area of concern. More positive partners said that they would take things slowly and see what happens and try to cope with any problems that may come up in the future.

**57% of prisoners and 73% of partners had specific concerns about their relationship**
Awareness of their Partners’ Lives
Both groups of people were asked: How aware are you of your partner’s life at the moment?

The reason for asking this questions was that relationship research indicates there is a direct link between ‘understanding your partner’s world’ and relationship stability.

How aware are you of your partner's life at the moment?

(1 = unaware, 10 = very aware)

“[We need] patience ‘til we can change our routines into one”
Expectations of The Workshop

Hopes
Couples were asked what they would like to cover in the workshop. Prisoners listed:

- adjusting to living as a couple again
- dealing with selfishness
- communications skills
- talking about problems and avoiding arguments
- self control
- sexual aspects of the relationship
- child discipline
- getting a job
- building trust
- forgetting the past and starting afresh

Prisoners commented that they thought the day would help and be a good forum to help them hold onto their relationship.

Partners were hoping to cover things like:

- ‘fitting’ back together
- talking and not arguing
- communication and avoiding conflict
- patience and listening
- putting the past behind them

Concerns
17% of prisoners and 36% of partners had initial concerns about the workshop. Prisoners told us during workshops that they were initially fearful about the format of the workshop in case they were asked to disclose too much information. Other concerns were about their partners’ travel difficulties and how they would get to the prison, however concerns mainly focussed on people overhearing their personal discussions.

Partners were initially more negative than prisoners about the workshop. They were mainly worried about being open and honest with their partner. They were also worried about talking as part of a group and others hearing about their issues and private circumstances.
Post Workshop Evaluation
Following their attendance at the workshop we asked prisoners and their partners to complete a further questionnaire. This was completed at the end of the day, during the last session of the workshop.

Living Together & Their Relationship
Types of support needed
Participants were asked if they would need support from each other when living together again and what sort of support this would be. 90% of prisoners and partners agreed that they would need support from each other. Prisoners said they would need support from partners in the following areas on release:

- patience and understanding
- not getting into trouble again
- emotional support
- listening
- reassurance

Partners listed support with:

- children
- finances
- improved communication
- trust and honesty

Changes in expectations
Both groups were asked if their expectations about living together had changed as a result of attending the workshop.

Have your expectations changed about living together?

Prisoners generally felt more confident about going home. Partners were split equally in their feelings, half still being nervous but others were more
optimistic than they had been prior to the workshop. Both groups commented on having learned new ways of dealing with problems and were more determined to make things work in their relationship both before and after release.

“\textit{I got to learn more about what my partner wants and what it’s going to be like}” \\
\textbf{Partner}

“\textit{it’s definitely given me more tools to use in combating problems in the future}” \\
\textbf{Prisoner}

Following the workshop, prisoners and partners were again asked how aware they were of their partners’ lives, to measure whether there had been an increase as a result of the workshop.

The results are:

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Prisoners</th>
<th>Partners</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Same</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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The reported decrease in awareness of their partners’ lives could be due to a revelation of their own limitations in understanding. Many respondents reported discovering new things about their partner on the day, which may have led them to question their previous levels of awareness and recognise room for improvement.

\textbf{90\% of prisoners and partners said that they would need support from their partner}

- patience and understanding
- not getting into trouble again
- emotional support
- listening
- reassurance
**The Workshop: What was useful?**

Prisoners and their partners were asked what had been most useful about the workshop. Prisoners listed:

- openness of discussions and group work
- being able to talk freely
- spending quality time with their partner
- being together for a whole day
- hearing how others cope being in this situation and were encouraged to learn that others were having similar experiences

Concerns about confidentiality amongst peers were not mentioned and seem not to be an issue post workshop.

The majority of partners felt that time together talking without the restrictions of the visits environment was most helpful. Partners valued the open discussions with the group. They also valued listening to others who are in the same situation. Partners found it a useful way of enabling them to understand more about their partners’ life and routine in prison.

The majority of prisoners agreed that spending time with their partner and talking was the most enjoyable part of the day without the restrictions of ‘normal’ visits. Prisoners also said that the time was the most enjoyable aspect allowing them to relax a little longer and focus on each other. Prisoners enjoyed discussing each other’s expectations for the future. Both groups enjoyed the group discussions, sharing and listening to other people’s difficulties and situations. Both groups felt that they had benefited and found it helpful to spend this time talking about their relationship.

“One older partner commented that discussions were aimed at younger people. Having lunch together was noted as having helped to make the day relaxed and fun.

“the workshop gave me a much better insight into things that made him angry and upset and I found out things he appreciated about me. We would not have discussed these subjects if not on this course”

One older partner commented that discussions were aimed at younger people. Having lunch together was noted as having helped to make the day relaxed and fun.

“how to re-build our relationship, how to cope with each other’s changes”

Prisoner
To enhance the experience and gain more benefit from the workshop, prisoners said they would like to have seen some of the following things included in the workshop:

- relationships with other members of their family
- dealing with their children
- how to get back into bed together
- coping strategies for life outside of prison

Partners also thought that relationships with children was an important area to be covered as this was an issue facing a number of the couples. Partners would also like to cover financial issues, building trust and many would like to obtain details and information of other organisations they could go to for help if need be in the future.

**The Workshop: Visiting Facilitator**

94% of prisoners and 100% of partners felt that it made a positive difference having a visiting facilitator. The prisoners said that it made the day feel more relaxed, they felt more able to talk freely and it allowed them to be more open with each other without feeling like they were being monitored.

Partners didn’t feel under the normal pressure of visits. They felt it was good to have an unbiased facilitator, with no talk of ‘rules’, thus making the atmosphere more relaxed. Partners felt more able to discuss things without the rush of normal visiting times and the feeling of being under pressure of being watched, monitored or restricted.

“It was very helpful because you know that the person is trained in helping people having relationship problems”

Partner
The Workshop: Partner’s Involvement

When asked if they thought it was useful to have their partner included at this stage of preparation for release:

![Bar chart showing the usefulness of partner inclusion in the preparation phase.]

This shows, convincingly, that both partners valued sharing this stage of preparation with each other. On the whole prisoners thought it was very good, many commenting on the fact that it made them feel stronger. They felt it was nice to talk without being monitored and it helped them to understand their partners’ views and feelings.

“It was good to be involved as the whole process affects both of us, we should both be included in all stages, particularly in preparation for release”  
Partner

“Its good for girlfriends/wives to understand what its like for partners on the inside”  
Partner

Further Preparation & Relationship Support

Prisoners and partners were asked for other important areas of preparation they would like prior to release. Prisoners highlighted home visits and fewer restrictions being put on them. They would like 3 or 6 month follow up to the workshop for both themselves and their partners to further develop and work on their relationship.

Partners thought that general help with the problems associated with having a partner in prison would be beneficial to them. The would like the following:

- To attend more sessions on preparing for family life after release
- To be able to help their partners gain employment
- Quality of home leave to be improved
- Assistance in building the prisoners’ awareness of ‘normal’ life
The Workshop: Group Dynamics
Prisoners and partners both expressed an element of concern about the workshops prior to attendance. These concerns focussed on whether the groups would be confidential, and whether they would be judged and told what to do by the trainer.

The group work was made up of group discussion and activities and private couple conversations/skills practice.

Prisoners by and large appeared to be quite relaxed in a group of their peers. At HMP Ashwell the prisoners had often already attended parenting groups together and so seemed to have more confidence than their partners in this setting. Female partners were generally quieter and not so confident about speaking in a group, although they were observed to have no problems in their private couple conversations.

All participants gained confidence through the duration of the workshop, participating more openly as the day went on. Occasionally participation was less open by partners. One possibility could be that they were “protecting themselves”, suggesting there may have been an element of intimidation in some of the relationships.

Generally group discussions were lively and positive and the trainer had little difficulty with group management.

“I would really appreciate more sessions like this”  Prisoner
Domestic Violence and Harm

Prisons initially considered that prisoners with a background of domestic violence would be ideal candidates for the workshop. However, Relate does not work with perpetrators of domestic violence, whether or not convicted, in a way in which would be unsafe for their partners. A one day workshop with partners present would create safety concerns for partners as research shows that short term skills based work is not sufficient in changing violent or abusive behaviour.

Prisoners were screened for involvement in domestic violence prior to joining the workshop. This was done by the prison using a variety of methods. A number of clients mentioned issues of harm on their pre/post course evaluation forms in this pilot. This was despite our best efforts to screen cases out. It was logistically difficult to get pre course forms from partners until the day of the workshop. At this point it was too late to exclude anybody. The consequence of this was that trainers needed to be very sensitive to the possibility of this difficult dynamic being present in the room. Within some groups the women were cautious of what they said about their relationships. This is a natural way for them to make themselves safe. However, this would have limited the learning experience for these women. Trainers were careful to lead discussion in a way that would allow possible victims to protect themselves without fear of recriminations at a later date.

“One don’t want to change doing what I like but it may bring back the violence, or we’ll split up” Partner

One couple approached a trainer during the lunch break to discuss their self-harm problems as a way of arguing and punishing each other. On three or four other occasions women mentioned varying concerns about their own safety and that of their children.

“I’m actually looking forward to going home now. I am prepared to handle things without getting abusive or violent” Prisoner
Recommendations

Logistics
These workshops need good collaboration between the prison and the training provider, in order to form the groups:

- Early meetings to establish how the workshops will fit around the regime, are essential
- Trainers as well as Training Managers should meet the Prison Officers and as many other personnel as possible prior to the work starting in order to discuss the course. A meeting with the Governor would be essential in ensuring ‘buy in’ by the whole establishment.
- Regular opportunities to attend would be necessary in order to make the most of the personal recommendations of other prisoners.

Access
There should be an equality of access for all prisoners. The workshops are designed to benefit a wide range of couples, at different stages and levels of satisfaction in their relationship.

Staged Approach
Ideally, were money not an object, prisoners and partners would be able to attend a workshop of this kind during induction, and at resettlement. Depending on the length of the sentence, it would be helpful to have other opportunities to attend.

Future Outcomes
The initial findings, pre and post workshop, are contained in this report. Follow up with each couple is planned for 3 months and 12 months after release. We hope this will help us to measure the impact of the workshops once the couples have returned home.

Domestic Violence and Abuse
A number of clients expressed concerns about issues of personal safety within their relationships, sometimes these affected children directly. We would recommend:

- Continuing to use Trainers with full training in working with couples where there is violence or abuse
- Trainers work within a supervision system, which allows for full consultation with a specialist, where the safety of partners and children is paramount
Trainers are sufficiently equipped in their skills to manage a group where couples may have multiple and complex problems such as drug taking, multiple partners and self-harm. Specialist preparation is needed for this

More rigorous screening processes need to be considered for domestic violence

Changes to the Workshop
In reviewing the content of the course, following both prisoners’ and partners’ comments and requests, Relate will do the following:

- Give opportunity to input and discuss wider family and parenting issues including preparation of children for a parents’ homecoming. A step forward may be to trial a parenting/relationships course with both partners attending, covering both areas of learning. This would avoid alienating couples without children
- More focus on teaching about re-establishing a sexual relationship
- More time on the practical skills of conflict resolution
- More work on rebuilding trust
- Ensure that materials are appropriate for wider age group

Ongoing review of materials will continue and alternations made accordingly. Further evaluation at 3 and 12 months will inform us further about changes required to ensure materials are effective in strengthening the couples relationship.

Further research:
- It would be useful to assess the difference it makes to have a male trainer or male and female co-trainers
- Further work is needed on developing and providing interventions for perpetrators of domestic violence who are currently incarcerated. This work would be longer term and more expensive, but it should be done by relationship specialists and follow Home Office and other relevant guidance
Follow Up

A one day workshop is a brief attempt at providing support and education to couples at strategic points. However, HMP Ashwell staff also asked for additional help in maintaining the learning and support for prisoners when they have finished the day:

- Further resources could be used to develop a pack to support prisoners and partners. This would help them recall what they had learnt and provide advice and ideas for the future
- Prison Officers could be trained alongside, so that they can offer lay-support about relationship issues
- Other interventions could be designed for prisoners and partners to attend separately, allowing for a different learning experience to complement and follow up on the Couples Workshop
In Conclusion
Although many partners and prisoners felt well prepared for release, there was a significant difference where partners felt less prepared for the prisoner’s return home and more likely to voice serious concerns about their level of preparation. This would suggest a need for more preparation for partners to complement the prison services preparation of offenders.

The workshop answered many of the prisoners’ and partners’ general concerns, giving more realistic expectations, especially for prisoners.

Couples found the workshops beneficial in a variety of ways. They appreciated the practical skills offered, as well as discussions specific to being a couple again, but they most appreciated the opportunity to spend the day together focusing on their relationship.

An external facilitator was valued highly by the vast majority, especially as they could offer “expert” advice and support for relationship issues. Sometimes relationship issues raised were complex and domestic abuse was sometimes a factor despite screening. This called for extra resources to be employed to ensure the safety of clients and their children.

Close links were needed with the pilot prisons in order to build group numbers, and create a positive environment for the workshops to take place, whilst balancing security requirements.

Relate will continue to develop its services for prisoners and their partners.