

Tarrengower Prison Family Video Visits Pilot Program



VACRO

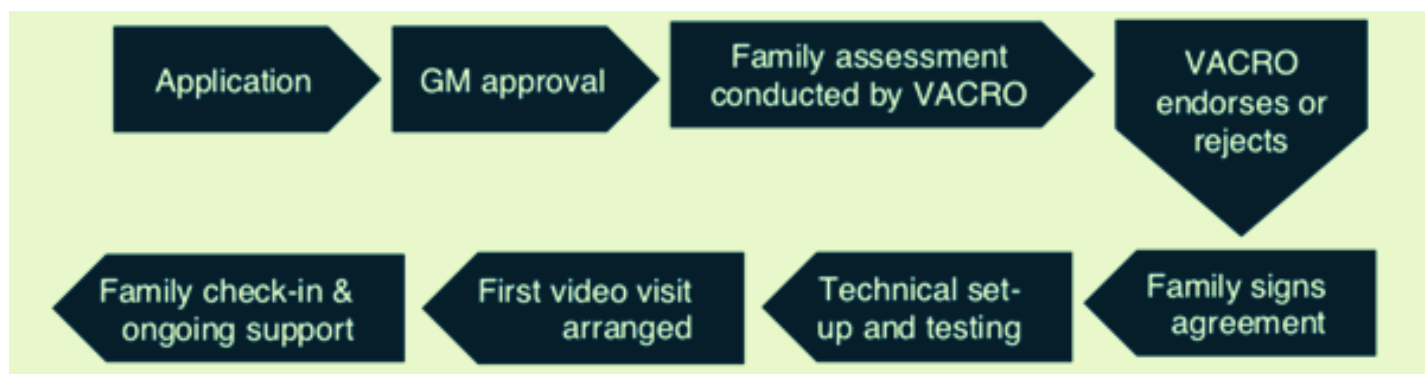
OVERVIEW

Tarrengower Prison Family Video Visits Pilot Program was a trial program that ran between 2017 and 2019.

- It connected mothers in prison with their children in the community.
- Women had 30-minute video visits with their children and family using Jabberguest software fortnightly.
- They could select a time between 3 pm and 9 pm on weekdays to ensure there were no clashes with tele court or other professional appointments.
- The video background would be switched to colourful decorations instead of the original custody-related settings.

Recruitment of participants

Mothers' applications were approved by the Tarrengower General Manager and the following process was followed:



Ongoing support

VACRO's Family Video Visits Coordinator worked closely with the families and the prison staff; provided support with logistical issues and ongoing family-focused socio-emotional support (for instance, debriefing after calls). The worker was able to refer them to community services and even facilitate access to crisis material aid, including food vouchers.

Numbers

The two-year Family Video Visits program:

- facilitated 170+ family video visits
- connected 19 mothers in prison to 45 children

Partners

VACRO and Corrections Victoria (CV) within the Department of Justice and Community Safety,

"The video visits allowed my eldest daughter to open up about how she was struggling, being bullied at school. She couldn't do it in the visit centre with everyone else around and I couldn't "read" her properly on the phone. But on the video I can see her shoulders slump, I can see her face, and we can talk privately about what's really going on."

Quote from a mother

"He cannot wait to see his mum! Thank you, truly, for making it possible for him to see his mum, it has helped him a lot."

Quote from a family member

THE CHALLENGE

Most of the mothers in prison and their families face challenges maintaining strong family relationships and meeting individuals' emotional and psychological needs. Prison visits provide an opportunity for connection, but the environment can be difficult and the prison location far from families. The Family Video Visits Pilot Program addressed the environmental barriers that prevented family members from visiting prisons, including issues such as the geographic distance, financial strain, and inflexible visit times. The program enabled a kind of connection that telephone calls and contact visits at the prison could not provide. It provided the chance for mothers in prison to see and to be integrated into their children's everyday lives at home. Meanwhile, the children could also engage with their mothers from a safe, comfortable place at a suitable time.

OUTCOMES

A 2020 program evaluation reported positive feedback from mothers in prison and family members. The mothers felt more confident in parenting and in post-release relationships with their children, as they were more connected. The family members helped mothers rebuild relationships that had become strained due to imprisonment. The program also relieved the stress of visiting prisons, and prepared children for the parent's re-entry into the home. Such outcomes strengthened family relations and helped women self-identify as parents, which augmented Corrections Victoria's Reintegration Pathway as well.

More specifically, the evaluation found that:

- 100% of mothers in prison reported that they and their children felt happier and more connected following participation in the program.
- 75% of women reported they felt more confident in their parenting after their release.
- 75% of family carers also agreed that video visits had improved children's behaviours at home and increased their confidence.



"This is different to a phone call - I can see their facial expression, body language, and better understand how they're coping."

Quote from a mother

'I think it's changed his view on her because it's so private, and it's just really the two of them...he gets an opportunity to show her things...and connect her with what he's doing and what she's doing...it makes a better connectedness between them I think.'

Quote from a grandparent

KEY LESSONS

What works?

Foregrounding identity as a parent:

Recognising the women first as mothers, rather than prisoners, contributes to building their sense of self-belief; and is vital to strengthening the mother-child relationship and successful reintegration after prison.

Focus on building parents' capability:

In general, incarcerated parents have limited opportunities to demonstrate their capacity to parent effectively. Parents valued a safe, non-judgemental space to set their own goals and build their parenting capability in a meaningful way.

Digital modes are a value add: We learnt that digital support can improve the parenting experience by providing alternative contact to face-to-face visits. Parents did different types of parenting to that in the challenging and public space of prison visit centres: intimate discussions on bullying or discipline and joyful bonding in seeing their children connect with pets, new toys, or watching dance routines.

What does not work?

Delivering programs for children using adult-centric approaches: Video visits fail to achieve their potential if they are not highly sensitive to the circumstances of the children involved. The needs and perspectives of children are often overlooked by the adult-centric operations of the justice system. Instead, a family-centric approach is required in which arrangements reflect the needs and wants of children, carers and mothers.

Using digital modes without technical support and capability building: Families can lack the technological aptitude to successfully set up and conduct digital visits independently. Motivation from the family worker also encourages families to be more engaged and to establish and maintain these visits.

Family support from within the correctional system: The wellbeing of prisoners' families falls outside the 'core business' of the correctional system. These families understand this and can find it difficult to trust and collaborate with workers employed within the system. In this context, family support workers employed by community-sector agencies like VACRO can have more success in gaining the trust and rapport necessary for this work to succeed.