

**NEAFCS Human Development/Family Relationships Award**

*The Literacy Link Team*

**Supporting Documents**

- 1. The Literacy Link Website (linked below)**  
<https://theliteracylink.extension.wisc.edu/>
- 2. Literacy Link Strategy Document (pp. 2-17)**
- 3. Sample Literacy Kit Letter Writing Packet (pp. 18-22)**
- 4. Preliminary Findings Impact Report (pp. 23-26)**



# The Literacy Link

USING LITERACY-RICH EXPERIENCES TO CONNECT  
CHILDREN WITH THEIR PARENTS INVOLVED IN THE  
CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM



**Extension**

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



<https://theliteracylink.extension.wisc.edu>

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# Child and Family Well-Being in the Era of Mass Incarceration

## INTRODUCTION

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The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. At the end of 2016, over 6 million adults were under correctional supervision in the U.S., with more than 2 million incarcerated in jails and prisons and over 4 million on parole or probation<sup>1</sup>. In Wisconsin, 100,500 individuals were under correctional supervision<sup>1</sup>, with people of color disproportionately affected<sup>2,3,4</sup>.

Often invisible in the mass incarceration epidemic are the children of the justice-involved. In the U.S., approximately 7% of children have experienced the incarceration of a co-resident parent at some point in their lives<sup>5</sup>. In Wisconsin, about 88,000 children have had a parent in jail or prison during their childhood<sup>6</sup>. That's enough children to fill Lambeau Field.

Research suggests that, on average, parental incarceration is harmful to children's development<sup>7,8,9,10,11,12</sup>. There are also negative consequences for the broader family system. For example, research has found reductions in incarcerated fathers' engagement in parenting<sup>13</sup> and caregivers' mental health and well-being<sup>14,15</sup>.

Despite the risk associated with incarceration, the systems in which children are embedded can provide critical opportunities for intervention and support. While the family system is often targeted through parent education and youth mentoring programs<sup>16</sup>, few dual generation strategies exist that provide opportunities for parent-child connection while the parent is incarcerated or on parole or probation.



# The Literacy Link

## STATEWIDE APPROACH

The Literacy Link is a program of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension. Led by University Extension educators, The Literacy Link promotes positive, literacy-based interactions between young children and their justice-involved parents and caregivers.

In partnership with local jails, libraries, and other community partners, the goals of The Literacy Link are to:



Promote language and literacy skills in children by creating literacy-rich experiences in jail and justice settings that extend into the home



Foster healthy family relationships by promoting positive, literacy-focused interactions between children and their justice-involved parents and caregivers

Through four targeted strategies, The Literacy Link provides research-based interventions that address the needs of parents, caregivers and their children.

### THE WISCONSIN IDEA

2.

The Wisconsin Idea is elegantly simple: Extending the resources and research of the University beyond its walls to all Wisconsin residents. The Literacy Link capitalizes on Extension's extensive access to cutting-edge research to build evidence-informed programming that benefits justice-involved children and their families.

# WHO WE REACH

The Literacy Link takes a **family systems approach** to serve young children, their parents involved in the justice system and the caregivers with whom they live during their parents' absence. While some interventions target justice-involved parents *or* their children, The Literacy Link provides opportunities for parent-child engagement through literacy-based activities, focusing on both generations to buffer the intergenerational impacts of incarceration. While the primary focus of The Literacy Link strategies is justice-involved parents, any justice-involved family member with young children can participate.

**The Literacy Link focuses on young children, from birth to age 8.** Advances in neurodevelopmental science suggest that reaching children in the earliest years of life can have a profound impact on their development. Capacities that flourish during the early years of life, including attachment to caregivers and emergent cognitive skills, may be impacted by a parent's incarceration<sup>17</sup>.

Research suggests that children are most likely to experience the initial incarceration of their parent prior to their 9<sup>th</sup> birthday<sup>5</sup>. By intervening when children are young, The Literacy Link provides support and resources that serve to *buffer the stress of incarceration* during important periods of development.

The Literacy Link strives to reach a diversity of families, including those that are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

Nationwide, research suggests that certain populations, including children of color, those with low economic resources, and children residing in rural areas are more likely to have experienced parental incarceration<sup>5</sup>. **The Literacy Link strives to reach families that are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.** This includes serving families that live in tribal communities, in cities and towns with large African American populations, and in rural counties.





# LITERACY LINK STRATEGIES

## MAKING READING MEMORIES



After participating in a parenting skills workshop offered in jail, parents are video recorded reading one or more books for their young children. The books and recordings are then sent to the children. The goal is to increase literacy opportunities for children and maintain the parent-child relationship during incarceration.

### RECORDED BOOK READING

A virtual literacy connection between parents in jail and their young children

## SPATIAL CHANGES TO VISITATION



Waiting and visitation areas in jails, courtrooms, and other justice spaces are transformed to offer literacy-rich experiences. Child-focused additions include family-friendly visitation learning stations, along with seating and other adaptations to make visits more positive and engaging. Educational wall toys and decals challenge children's spatial skills. Children can take home a free, high-quality, age-appropriate book with each visit, to continue reading at home. In one county, a token-operated vending machine distributes free books to children visiting their parents in jail.

### CHILD-FRIENDLY VISITATION

Learning-rich jail and justice settings that foster parent-child engagement

# LITERACY LINK STRATEGIES

## TELESTORY



### FREE, LITERACY-FOCUSED VISITS

Children visit local libraries to connect in real-time with their parent in jail

Instead of traveling to the jail or paying a private company for a remote visit, children can now visit with their parent in jail through a secure video system located in a public, tribal or school library. The library-based video visit includes child-friendly spaces with books and educational materials, flexible scheduling, and a free, high-quality book for the child to take home after each visit. Before the visit, parents in jail are offered a workshop on visiting and reading with their child so they can be ready to make their time together full of positive, child-centered interactions.

## PARENT EDUCATION



### PARENT EDUCATION

Science-based education that boosts the nurturing skills of justice-involved parents

A variety of supports provide parents in jail with information about parenting from a distance and providing literacy-rich experiences for their children. Parenting Inside Out<sup>®</sup>, a research-based program for incarcerated parents, boosts parents' confidence and skills in parenting. Electronic tablets are loaded with parent education tools, such as Extension's [Parenting Future Readers fact sheets](#). One-on-one coaching and group workshops are also offered in justice settings to educate parents on how to use literacy as a tool for positive interactions.

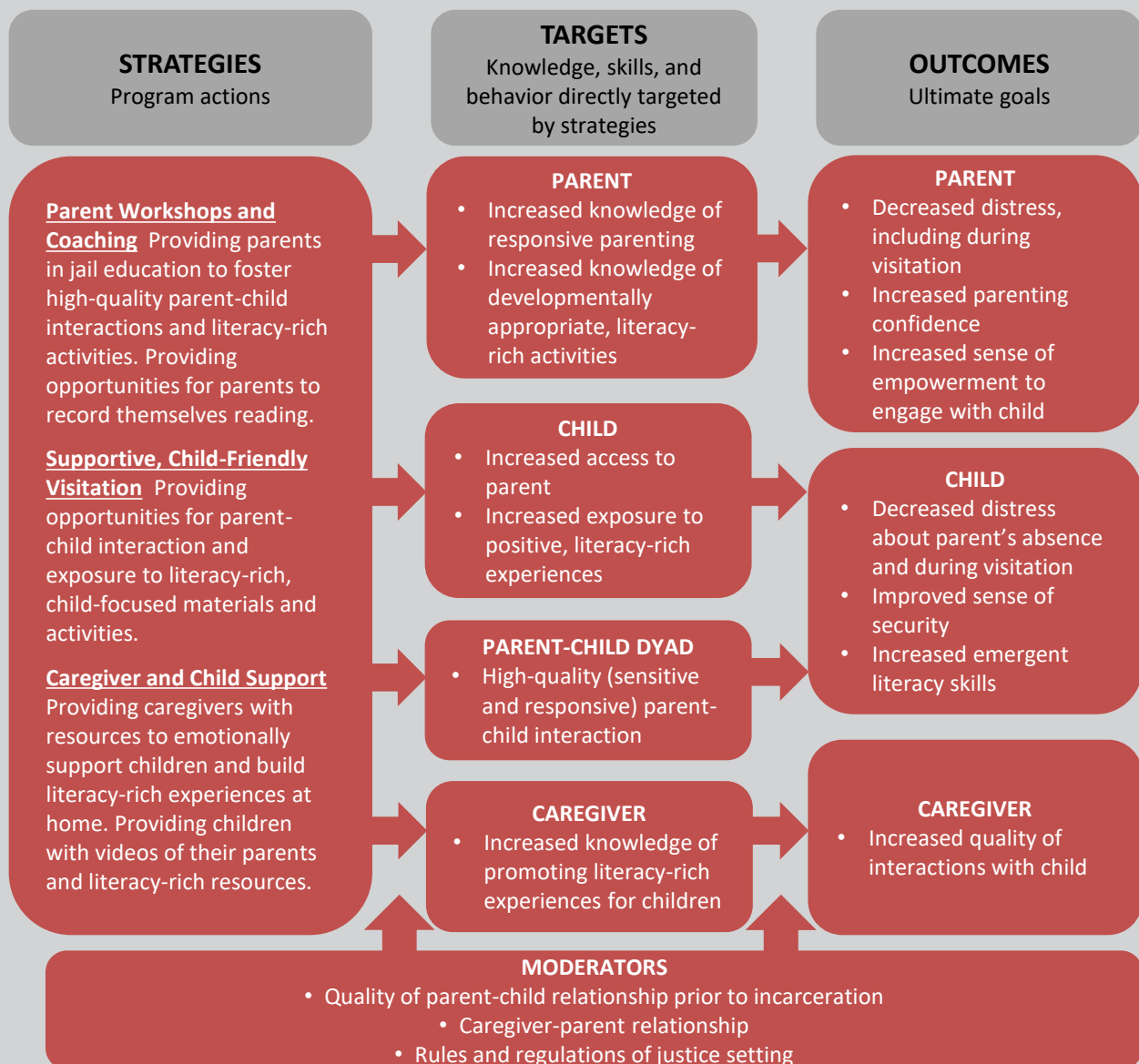


# THEORY OF CHANGE

The Literacy Link’s theory of change provides a roadmap for implementing strategies and measuring impact. It is comprised of four components:

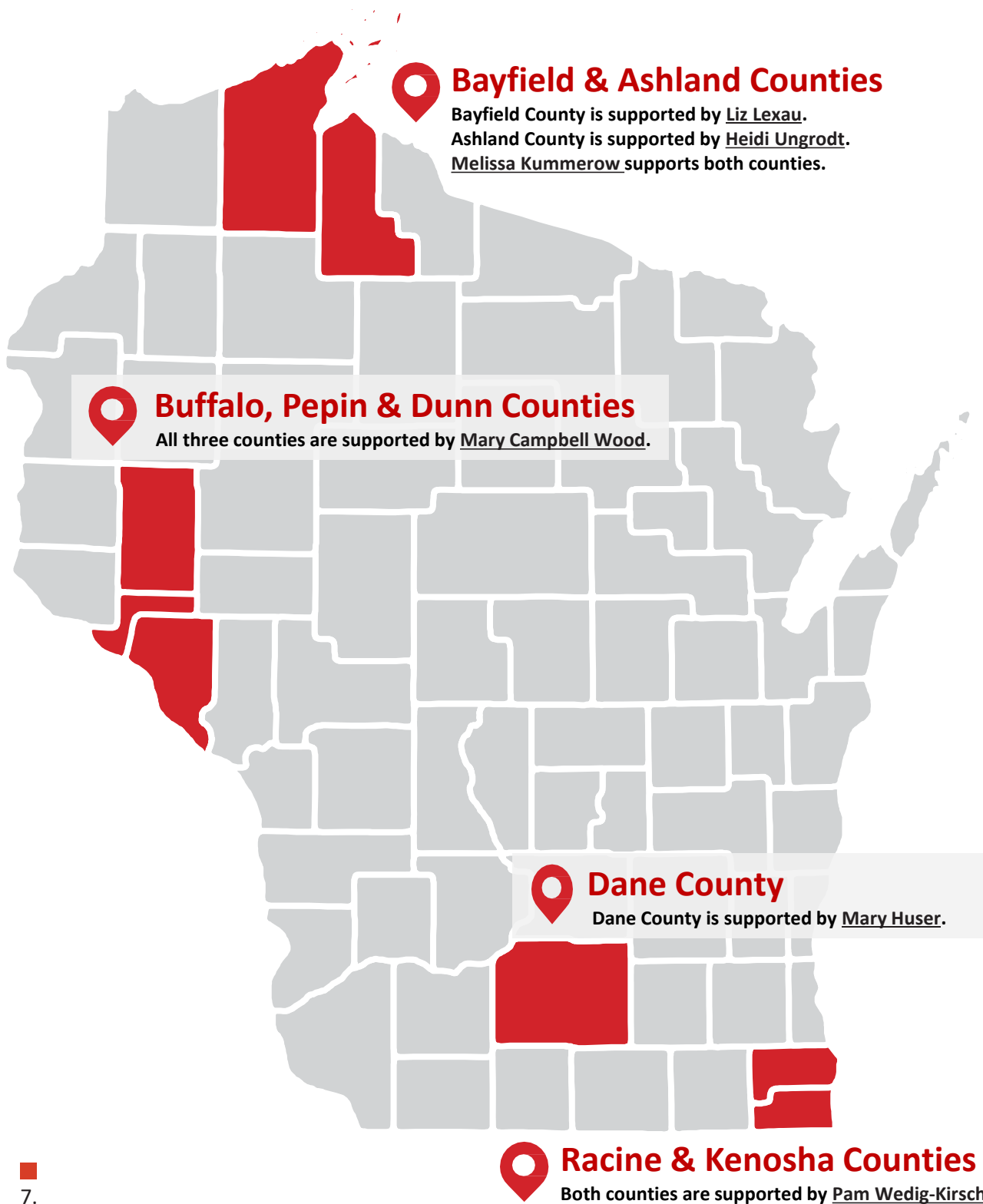
- **Strategies** are the person- and place-based key ingredients that describe *what* about the strategies work.
- **Targets** are the knowledge, skill, and behavior change in individuals who are directly impacted by the strategies. Targets explain *how* the strategies lead to outcomes.
- **Outcomes** are the meaningful changes in well-being that follow changes in targets. Outcomes demonstrate *why* the strategies are important.
- **Moderators** identify *for whom* the interventions may work best and in what contexts.

The theory of change was built from the IDEAS Impact Framework out of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University.



# WISCONSIN PILOT SITES

The Literacy Link currently operates in **8 counties** supported by University Extension educators and staff. Each county works with local partners to determine The Literacy Link strategies that are appropriate for the local context.



# STAKEHOLDER QUOTES

We have a responsibility to serve all of the public that this state encompasses. Not just the few, but all regardless of where they are, what has impacted their lives...where they come from. It doesn't matter, we have that responsibility.

**UW SYSTEM PRESIDENT RAY CROSS**  
remarks about The Literacy Link  
UW Board of Regents Presentation 2019

“

It put in perspective that even though I am here, I can still connect with and parent my child.

**PARENT IN JAIL**  
who participated in a Making Reading Memories workshop

She seems much happier and talks about her mom more often than before the visits. Her mom is more a part of her life now. They have that connection again.

”

**CAREGIVER**  
of child who participated in Telestory

“

We have had parents read to children who have never read to them before. This is the first time they've ever read to their child, from the jail...it's very positive in that connection that has been made.

**SHERIFF PAUL SUSIENKA**  
remarks about Making Reading Memories  
UW Board of Regents Presentation 2019

He reads now! He wouldn't read before. He used to prefer to play with guns and things and he wouldn't read a book.

**CAREGIVER**  
of child who participated in Making Reading Memories





# OUTCOMES

## Child, Parent, and Justice-Settings

The Literacy Link team relies on a variety of methodologies to document outcomes associated with our efforts. These include qualitative descriptions of programming conducted at each pilot site, observations of parent-child visitations, interviews with community partners, and surveys from incarcerated and justice-involved parents and their children’s caregivers. While measurement tools are standardized across Literacy Link strategies, Extension educators adapt the tools to meet their local communities’ context and culture.

Below is a brief description of the key outcomes The Literacy Link targets.



### PARENTING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Strategies build parenting knowledge and emphasize the importance of responsive “serve and return” interactions and age-appropriate, literacy-based play. Goals include increasing parents’ confidence and sense of empowerment to engage with their children.



### CHILDREN’S EXPOSURE TO LITERACY-RICH ENVIRONMENTS

Children are exposed to literacy-rich spaces within justice-settings that promote high-quality parent-child interaction. Children are provided books and other literacy materials to foster their emergent literacy at home.



### POLICY, SYSTEMS AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Extension educators work directly with local correctional settings to improve visitation spaces and adapt current visitation and operating policies to promote and maintain the child-parent connection.



### CHILD OUTCOMES

- Strengthen connection to parent
- Increase exposure to literacy-rich materials

Children’s outcomes are primarily assessed through caregiver self-report surveys distributed four weeks after children’s first contact with The Literacy Link. Caregivers are asked to reflect on the extent to which their children’s involvement with The Literacy Link has strengthened the parent-child relationship. Caregivers also provide information about the extent of their children’s involvement in Literacy Link programming and the perceived effects of that programming on their children’s well-being.

Children’s exposure to literacy-rich materials and change in literacy habits are assessed through questions including the number of days in which caregivers read to children, library visits, and number of books in the home. Children’s preference for reading is also assessed through caregiver report.



### PARENT OUTCOMES

- Strengthen parenting skills
- Increase confidence to engage with child during justice involvement

Parent outcomes are assessed through parent self-report surveys. Parents are surveyed after their involvement in jail parenting workshops and after recording a video or participating in a Telestory visit. Although each Literacy Link strategy has specific parent surveys, certain key outcomes are measured across strategies. These include parents’ perceived parenting skills, such as the ability to engage in certain literacy activities with their children, and parents’ confidence to maintain contact during incarceration and justice-involvement.

Parents are also offered the opportunity to guide future programmatic decision making by providing feedback via survey responses and focus groups.

# CHILD & PARENT OUTCOMES

# EVALUATION & QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Extension has partnered with the Population Health Institute within the UW-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health to implement a comprehensive and rigorous evaluation of The Literacy Link strategies. The Institute is led by a team of experts in their fields and has a long history of partnering with federal, state, and county agencies and tribal nations to examine a variety of behavioral health programs for criminal justice populations, including diversion projects, problem-solving courts, and family reunification programs.

The evaluation is led by Dr. Lindsay Weymouth, who has over a decade of experience working with families that interface with the criminal justice system. Dr. Weymouth has expertise in child development within the context of risk and has published widely in peer-reviewed academic journals and handbooks, including the recently published *Handbook on Children with Incarcerated Parents*.

The Literacy Link evaluation includes process and outcome methodologies, with emphasis on documenting reach, or the extent to which programming is reaching families, and dose, or the amount of programming each family receives. Quantitative and qualitative methods are used to assess key targets and outcomes as detailed in The Literacy Link's theory of change. The evaluation also documents policy, system, and environmental changes that occur in correctional settings that partner with The Literacy Link.



University of Wisconsin  
Population Health Institute  
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH



# OUR VISION

**Our vision is to transform the lives of justice-involved families by reshaping the lived experience of young children with jailed and justice-involved parents.**

## **IMAGINE...**

*The transformation of jail and justice spaces across the nation into creative, innovative and interactive literacy-rich environments where any child brought into that space is surrounded by learning opportunities.*

## **IMAGINE...**

*Every jail in Wisconsin has a space designated for recording book readings...a place for jailed parents to select a book and record a message for their children. It's a comfortable, literacy-rich space that inspires parents in jail.*

## **IMAGINE...**

*Families throughout Wisconsin going to designated spaces in community libraries that are welcoming, safe, private and learning-rich. Children connect with their incarcerated parents in supportive, child-centered environments.*

## **IMAGINE...**

*Probation offices, social service buildings and court spaces that build literacy and parent engagement into reintegration plans that offer parents ways to contribute to their children's development.*

Yes, we think big, but we have science and public good on our side. We welcome inquiries from those who seek to be:

- A **catalyst** for positive community change that shares our purpose to ensure access to resources and opportunities for justice-involved families
- A **partner** that thrives on innovation, creativity and research and honors the lived experiences of vulnerable families
- A **funding force** that can help us reshape the experiences of children with incarcerated parents

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# THE LITERACY LINK

*Connecting children and parents in justice-involved families with literacy-rich experiences and environments*

January 19, 2021

Hello Parents,

The Literacy Link helps connect children and parents through books and writing. We'd like to invite you to take part in our Family Literacy Kit program.

If you'd like to participate, use this form to select a free book for your child(ren) and write them each a letter. **Return this form to jail staff by Thursday, January 21st.**

**We will need permission from your child's caregiver to mail the book and letter. Include contact information for the caregiver on the form. If possible, let them know we will be calling for permission.**

We hope that the books and letters will grow literacy and connection for your child and bring enjoyment for everyone.

Sincerely,

Heidi Ungrodt

UW-Madison Division of Extension, Ashland County



Extension

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

**An EEO/AA employer, University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title VI, Title IX, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act requirements.**

# INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Fill out the contact information in the blue box on this page. **We can only send the package if we can reach your child's caregiver for permission.** (Note: There must be no restrictions preventing you from contact with the child and caregiver.)
2. Look through the list of books and **CHOOSE 1** book that you would like mailed to your child. (If we no longer have a book you choose, we may substitute a book for a similar age group.)
3. Write a letter or draw a picture for your child on the last page of this packet. This will be mailed along with the books you choose.
4. Return this packet to jail staff by **Thursday, January 21st.**



### Important:

If you have more than one child, you will need to fill out a different packet for each child.

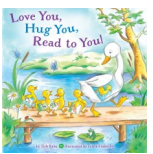
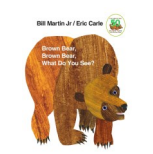
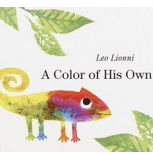
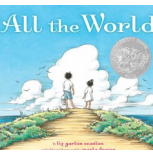
This program is for children ages 12 and under


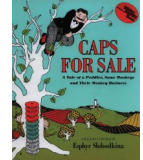
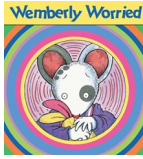

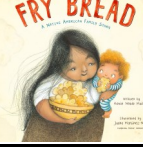
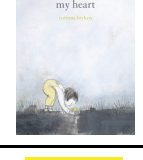
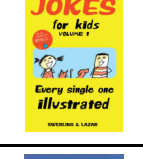
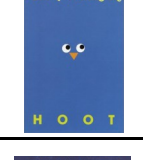

**\* PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!**

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Caregiver's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

	Title	Age	Description	Check Box to select
	U is for Unicorn (board book)	0—3 years	Explore touches and flaps on every page in this exciting ABC book. From magical unicorns to zooming rockets, it's an alphabet like no other!	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Love You, Hug You, Read to You (board book)	0—3 years	"There are three things I'll always do ... love you, hug you, read to you!" The simple promise of togetherness offered in this book encourages parents to engage with their child while reading.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Brown Bear, Brown Bear (board book)	0—4 years	A big happy frog, a plump purple cat, a handsome blue horse, and a soft yellow duck - all parade across the pages of this delightful book.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	A Color of His Own (board book)	0—4 years	The charming story of a chameleon searching for his own color, who ends up finding a true friend.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	All the World (board book)	0—6 years	Following a circle of family and friends through the course of a day, this book reminds us of importance of things great and small, from the tiniest shell on the beach to the widest sunset sky.	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Title	Age	Description	Check Box To select
	Llama Llama Time to Share	3—6 years	Llama llama has trouble sharing with his friend. In a tug of war, Llama's stuffed toy is ripped, but Mama quickly sews it -- and the tykes learn to share and become real friends.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Be Kind	3—6 years	When Tanisha spills grape juice all over her new dress, her classmate wants to make her feel better, wondering: <i>What does it mean to be kind?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Caps for Sale	4—8 years	The napping peddler discovers that all of his caps are missing, and - look! - they are being worn by monkeys in a tree. Can the peddler get his caps back?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Wemberly Worried	4—8 years	Wemberly worried about everything. Big things. Little things. And things in between. If you ever worry (or know someone who does), this is the book for you.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	What James Said	4—8 years	A funny, heartfelt, perfectly pitched story about misunderstandings and the importance of true friendship.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Fry Bread	3—8 years	A picture book about food, family, history, and culture.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	My Heart	4—8 years	Some days your heart is a fence to keep the world out. But some days it is wide open to the love that surrounds you. From moments of great joy to times of quiet , your heart is your guide.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	The World's Best Jokes for Kids, Volume 1	7— 10 years	"What did the table say to the chair? Dinner's on me." Kids love jokes, and they also love silly drawings The comic drawings will help get the kids reading ... and the whole family laughing.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Hoot (chapter book)	8—12 years	Everybody loves Mother Paula's pancakes. Everybody, that is, except the colony of cute but endangered owls that live on the building site of the new restaurant.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	When Stars are Scattered (graphic novel)	9—12 years	Heartbreak, hope, and gentle humor exist together in this book about a young man who is able to create a sense of family and home in the most difficult of settings. It's an unforgettable look at the day-to-day life of a refugee.	<input type="checkbox"/>

**When you are away...**

## Writing Letters to Children

Writing letters is a wonderful way to stay in contact when loved ones are separated. Letter writing is a way for families to stay connected and provides an opportunity for the parent to be involved in teaching their children.



### Why Write Letters?

- **Maintains relationship** between the parent and child.
- **A letter is a gift**, something your loved one can hold and look at when they are missing you.
- **To teach:**
  - Babies & preschoolers learn skills that get them ready to read.
  - Older children practice & strengthen their reading skills.

### Tips

- **Keep letters short**, 1-2 sentences for a preschooler, a few more sentences for elementary age children.
- **Write about the child's interests.**
- **Draw a picture** on the letter. Pictures can be simple. (The same picture of a smiley face on every letter is fine!)
- **Write often**, especially on special occasions
- **Letters are appreciated** even if the child doesn't write back.

### Ideas for Letters

- Draw cartoons
- Draw pictures
- Make line drawing for loved one to color
- Write words to a song
- Write a poem - make your own or one you like
- Write a bedtime story
- Use Sentence Starters – attached

### Addressing the Envelope

#### From Parent to Child:

Parent Name, ID # Facility Name Street Address or PO Box City, State Zip Code	stamp
Caregiver's Name and child's first name #### Street Address City, State Zip Code	





## Sentence Starters

**Here are some ideas to start your letter.**

(Share the coordinating sentence starter with your loved one to use when writing back to you.)

**Writing a few sentences & drawing a picture about what you wrote is a great letter!**

Here are some ideas to start YOUR letter to your child.	Share this matching sentence starter at the end of your letter for your child to write back to you.
I am writing this letter to you because...	I am writing this letter to you because...
When I was younger, I liked...	When I am grown up, I want to...
My earliest memory of you is...	I remember when...
How do you feel when...? Draw 3 feelings faces, for example: happy, excited, surprised.	Here is my drawing of my _____ face.
When I am with you, I like to _____.	When I see you, I would like to _____.
Would you like to play I Spy? I Spy a _____. (Draw pictures & write three I Spy phrases. For example: I Spy a big raindrop, I Spy a tall flower, I Spy a round ball.)	Can you find a _____ in my drawing?
When I write to you, I feel _____ because _____.	When I get a letter from you, I feel _____.
One of my favorite foods is _____.	One of my favorite foods is _____
I am thankful for you because _____.	One thing I am thankful for is _____
Something that I've learned is _____.	Something that I've learned is _____.
Here's my joke for you.	Here's my joke for you.
My favorite book to read to you is _____ because _____.	My favorite book is _____.
When I was younger, I liked to play _____.	I like to play _____.
Something that makes me laugh is _____.	A funny thing that happened to me is...
One of the many special things about you is...	I feel special when...



# 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.

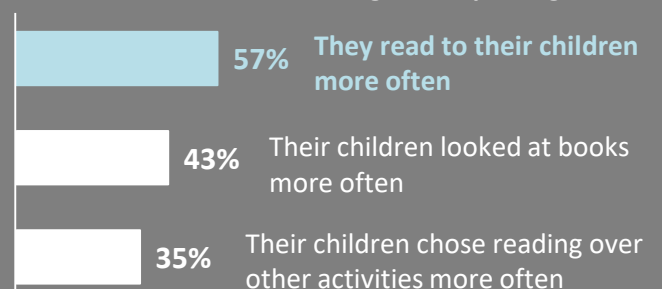
57% of caregivers read to their children more often after receiving the video. Some caregivers reported children looked at books more often and even chose reading over other activities more often.

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**.



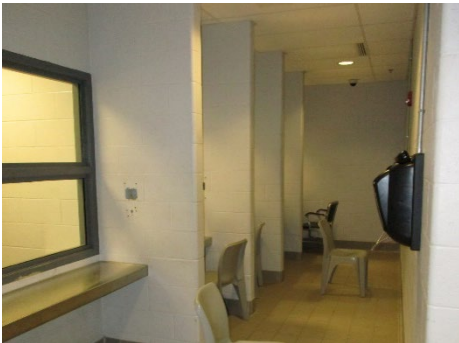
Dane County Jail Visitation Before Spatial Changes



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



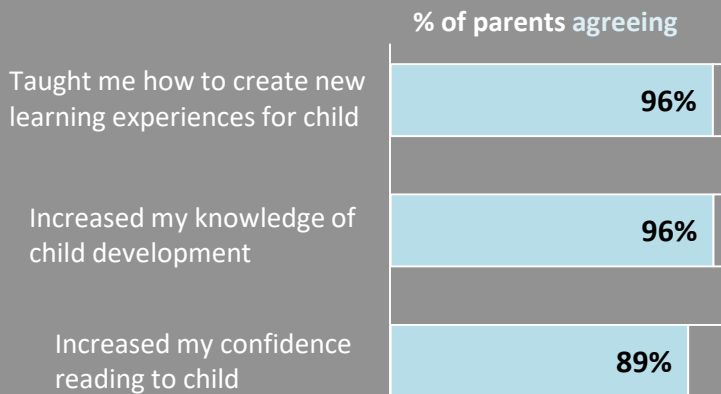
### 3

## 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.



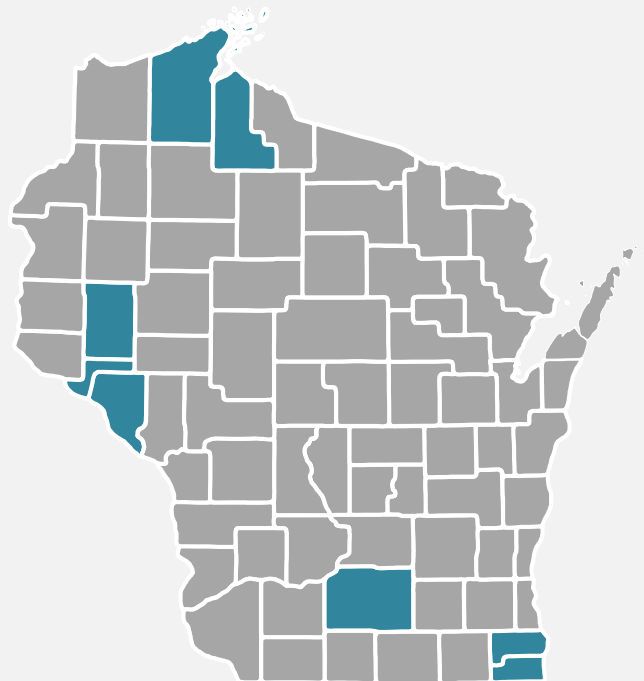
## About THE LITERACY LINK

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**

# NEAFCS Human Development/Family Relationships Award Application

## *The Literacy Link Team*

### **Introduction**

**Abstract:** The Literacy Link partnered with jails, family agencies, and public and tribal libraries to connect children and parents in justice-involved families through literacy experiences and environments. The program strengthened family relationships and literacy exposure for children. From 2018 to 2020, over 200 children received books and videos of their incarcerated parents reading to them. Forty-nine children and parents connected through literacy-focused video visits. More than 500 parents participated in education and more than 400 Literacy Kits were distributed to families. Jail visiting spaces were transformed into child-friendly, literacy-rich environments. In evaluation with caregivers whose children received videos and books, 90% said it helped maintain the parent-child connection. Nearly all parents (96%) completing a dialogic reading workshop said it taught them how to create new learning experiences for their children. 89% reported an increased confidence in reading to their children.

**Target Population:** The Literacy Link, an initiative of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension, used a family systems approach to target children of justice-involved families. The audience included 1) children aged ten and younger, 2) their justice-involved parents, and 3) their caregivers during the period of parental incarceration. Support for all three is critical to maintaining and strengthening foundational relationships, which are the bedrock for healthy child development, especially during times of stress and uncertainty. In the U.S., more than five million children (7%) have experienced the incarceration of a parent who lived with them.<sup>1</sup> Families of color are disproportionately impacted. Research has shown links between parental incarceration and numerous negative impacts for children, including physical and behavioral health issues during childhood, delays in literacy skill development, lack of school success, and poor mental and physical health in adulthood.

Parental incarceration is included among the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's list of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs are associated with negative outcomes across the lifespan and children who experience parental incarceration are more likely to experience additional ACEs, such as parental substance abuse, parental mental health issues, or neglect. This puts them at even greater risk for poor outcomes. To help offset this risk, it is critical to address the needs of these children and their families. Research shows that strong, responsive relationships between children and their caregivers can buffer against the negative impacts of adversity and toxic stress<sup>2</sup>. The Literacy Link serves to maintain and strengthen these foundational relationships by connecting children and their justice-involved parents through literacy-based resources, experiences, and spaces.

**Objectives:** The Literacy Link was launched to foster healthy connections between young children and their justice-involved parents through evidence-informed literacy and learning opportunities. The program, offered as a pilot in eight urban and rural Wisconsin counties, focused on two primary objectives:

- ***Fostering healthy relationships*** in justice-involved families by promoting positive, literacy-focused interactions between children and their parents or caregivers
- ***Promoting language and literacy skills*** in these children by creating literacy-rich experiences in both the home and justice settings

## **Program Description**

**Plan and Activities:** The Literacy Link Team worked closely with local partners to assess the needs of justice-involved families; develop and implement innovative strategies to address those needs; and promote family-friendly policies. Delivery methods included:

***Recorded Book Reading*** – Through the *Making Reading Memories* program, parents in jail were coached and video recorded reading books to their children, who then received the video and book along with information for caregivers at home. Through this program, 204 children received books and videos

of their parents reading to them. Extension educators facilitated both face-to-face recordings and, during the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders, recordings via Zoom. Caregiver tip sheets covered information on child development, the importance of frequent reading, and caregiver self-care.

***Child-Focused Video Visits*** – Through *TeleStory*, Educators facilitated real-time, literacy-based video visits between 49 parents and children. Children visited for free from a child-friendly learning environment at a local public or tribal library and engaged with their parents in jail who had the same set of books and learning materials as the children.

***Parent Education and Coaching*** – The team provided education and coaching for justice-involved parents on early literacy (including child development and dialogic reading), emotion coaching, structure/routines, play, communication, and other parenting topics. Extension educators developed a dialogic reading workshop to use as a stand-alone class and as a pre-requisite for parents participating in the *TeleStory* or *Making Reading Memories* programs. Delivery was face-to-face and via Zoom. They also adapted *Parenting Inside Out*, a widely used evidence-based program for incarcerated parents, by adding related literacy activities using children’s books with social/emotional themes.

***Transformed Spaces*** – Educators assessed justice spaces and added child-friendly learning enhancements to visiting areas and other spaces where children spend time. This can reduce the stressful, institutional feel for the child, parent, and caregiver during visits. It also enables families to use visits as an opportunity for learning together. Children can take a free book home for their home library.

***Family Literacy Kits*** – During the COVID-19 Pandemic when schools were closed and jails prohibited visits, the team surveyed caregivers to learn their immediate needs and responded by distributing more than 450 Literacy Kits to children and caregivers. A typical kit included books chosen by the parent in jail, a letter from the parent, crayons and letter-writing materials for the child, and learning and self-care information for the caregiver.



***Family-Focused Policies*** – Team members worked with jail administration to develop research-based policies to support family connection.<sup>3</sup> Examples of policy changes include increased recognition of the importance of family connection during incarceration and re-entry, increased opportunities for children to visit at no cost, and the addition of family-friendly, child-centered visits. For example, in one jail site, parents can sit on the floor with their child to read and play in a literacy-rich family space.

**Resource Development:** To supplement these strategies, The Literacy Link team developed numerous Extension-branded educational materials for parents in jail and caregivers at home. They also developed promotional materials including a [website and video briefs](#), as well as written protocols that are now being used to expand The Literacy Link into other Wisconsin counties.

New or gently-used high quality children’s books and materials were provided for all outreach activities and were chosen to represent a diversity of families, cultures, and authors. The team obtained most books at low cost through [FirstBook.org](#). In addition, The Literacy Link was chosen to receive the OMG Book Award, a competitive grant from First Book that brought \$21,000 in books to use and share with family-serving partners in multiple counties. Several parents have participated in multiple Literacy Link activities, making a significant contribution to their child’s home library.

## **Program Impact**

**Evaluation Methods:** The team partnered with a UW-Madison Population Health Institute scientist with expertise in children of incarcerated parents. They developed a Theory of Change, corresponding evaluation protocol, and evaluation tools. Feedback from parents was obtained via in-jail surveys. Feedback from caregivers was obtained via follow-up surveys and interviews. The Literacy Link also conducted evaluation interviews by phone with participating jail and justice partners.

### **Selected impacts:**

- In a survey of 58 caregivers of 88 children, nearly all (90%) agreed that *Making Reading Memories* helped maintain the connection between the children and their parent in jail.

- Most caregivers (57%) reported reading to their children more often after receiving videos and 43% reported that their children read or looked at books more often.
- Of 53 parents surveyed following a dialogic reading workshop, 96% said it taught them how to create new learning experiences for their child and increased their child development knowledge. Nearly all (89%) felt more confident reading to their child following the workshop.
- Information collected from families participating in *Telestory* video visits showed that after their visit, parents in jail intended to have more frequent contact with their children. Prior to *Telestory*, most of the children were not visiting with their parents in jail.

**Visibility:** The Literacy Link has been the subject of several news stories. The team has also presented to the UW-System Board of Regents, at the National Children of Incarcerated Parents Conference and at state conferences. Extension is identified as the leading partner.

**Sustainability:** Local justice systems are complex. Rules, resources, and security concerns vary from one county to another. The Literacy Link initiative requires that Extension educators work effectively with local justice facilities to address unique needs. This initiative received start-up funding from the UW-System. The team demonstrated that with the strategic use of low-cost, high-quality books from organizations like First Book, and with local partnerships to help identify and obtain other materials and equipment, The Literacy Link strategies are powerful, cost-effective ways to strengthen family relationships and build literacy skills for justice involved children and their families.

1. Murphey, D., & Cooper, P. M. (2015). [Parents behind bars: What happens to their children?](#) Washington, DC: Child Trends.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.) [Essentials for Childhood: Creating Safe Stable Nurturing Relationships and Environments for All Children.](#)
3. Peterson, B., Fontaine, J., Cramer, L., Reisman, A., Cuthrell, H., Goff, M., . . . Reginal, T. (2019). [Model Practices for Parents in Prisons and Jails: Reducing Barriers to Family Connections](#) (National Institute of Corrections). Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections.