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Executive Summary

This evaluation examines how *Taonga mō ngā Tamariki* supports parents in the care of Corrections to strengthen relationships with their tamariki, build confidence in their parenting role, and contribute to positive intergenerational outcomes for whānau. The programme is a whānau-centred, literacy, and relationship-based intervention that combines culturally relevant resources with practical learning to support connection through reading, storytelling, play, and everyday interaction.

The findings show that the programme is highly effective in increasing knowledge, confidence, and parenting capability. Participants demonstrated substantial gains in understanding child development, particularly brain development, emotional regulation, and the importance of positive interaction. Knowledge of the benefits of reading, storytelling, and singing increased markedly, with most participants shifting from low or moderate understanding to high levels of knowledge following the programme.

These gains translated into increased confidence and capability. The majority of participants reported feeling confident to read, talk, and engage with their tamariki, including those with low literacy. By reframing reading as relational and flexible, the programme reduces barriers and enables parents to connect through a range of accessible approaches.

A key outcome is the strengthening of parenting identity. Participants described a shift from corrective or reactive approaches toward more intentional, relational parenting. Many expressed renewed hope and a stronger sense of purpose, recognising that they can remain active, positive parents despite being in the care of Corrections.

The programme also strengthens parent–child connection. Participants reported increased understanding of how to build and maintain relationships through everyday interactions, even at a distance. Books, games, and shared resources play a critical role in enabling this connection, providing a focus for communication and shared experience across separation. Child-centred visits further enhance this by enabling real-time, meaningful interaction.

Corrections staff view the programme as high quality and well-integrated within the operational environment. Its focus on whānau, wellbeing, and positive engagement complements existing approaches, and provides a constructive pathway for participants to engage with their identity as parents.

Overall, Taonga mō ngā Tamariki is activating key protective factors associated with improved outcomes for tamariki and whānau. These include strengthened relationships, increased parental engagement, and enhanced pro-social identity. While long-term outcomes such as reduced reoffending cannot yet be measured, the

programme is contributing to the conditions identified in the literature as supporting positive change and has strong potential to support improved long-term trajectories for whānau.

Introduction

The purpose of this evaluation is to understand how Taonga mō ngā Tamariki supports parents to strengthen their relationships with their tamariki, build confidence in their parenting role, and contribute to positive intergenerational outcomes for whānau.

Taonga mō ngā Tamariki is a whānau-centred literacy and relationship-based intervention developed by the Storytime Foundation and delivered to parents and caregivers in the care or under the management of Ara Poutama Aotearoa Department of Corrections. The programme combines access to culturally relevant books and resources with structured learning that supports parents to engage with their tamariki through reading, storytelling, play and everyday interaction (Storytime Foundation, 2026; Woodley, 2022).

Evidence Base

The programme is grounded in an evidence base linking family connection with reduced reoffending and improved intergenerational outcomes. International research shows that maintaining meaningful family relationships is associated with significantly lower rates of recidivism, with reductions of between 26% and 39% for people in prison who sustain family contact (May et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2016). These relationships can strengthen pro-social identity, increase motivation to change, and support pathways away from offending.

Beyond immediate impacts on reoffending, the literature highlights the importance of interrupting intergenerational cycles of offending. Children of incarcerated parents face increased risks of poorer educational outcomes, behavioural challenges, and later justice involvement (Gluckman, 2018; SUPERU, 2015). However, these outcomes are not inevitable. Strong, stable, and supportive relationships, particularly with parents, are consistently identified as key protective factors that can alter potential trajectories and poor outcomes.

This is supported by research on child development and attachment. Shared reading, talking, and singing promote language development, cognitive growth, and long-term educational success (Bus et al., 1995; Kalb and van Ours, 2014). Critically, it is the relational interaction within these activities that drives impact. “Serve and return” exchanges between adults and children build the neural architecture that underpins learning, behaviour, and emotional regulation (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, n.d.). For tamariki experiencing adversity, including parental incarceration, these nurturing interactions can buffer the effects of toxic levels of stress.

Māori models of wellbeing also place whānau and relationships at the centre of health and wellbeing. Concepts such as *whanaungatanga* emphasise the importance of building, maintaining, and strengthening relationships, while *whakapapa* reinforces the

intergenerational connections that link tamariki to their parents, ancestors, and future generations. Within this worldview, strong parent–child relationships are not only protective for individual development but are fundamental to the wellbeing of the wider whānau, shaping identity and belonging across generations.

Together, this evidence suggests that approaches which strengthen attachment, support positive interaction, and enable parent–child connection show promise in reducing reoffending and disrupting intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

The Programme

Programme Context and Rationale

Parents in the care of Corrections can face significant barriers to maintaining their parental role, including physical separation from their tamariki, limited opportunities for interaction, and uncertainty about how to connect in ways that feel natural and positive. The everyday aspects of parenting that build and sustain relationships, such as taking children to play sport, going fishing, helping with homework, sharing meals or simply having regular conversations, are no longer possible. There may be few shared experiences to draw on, limited access to photos or reminders of daily life, and little to talk about within the constraints of the prison environment. As a result, some parents struggle to see how they can actively parent from within these constraints, and tamariki may miss out on the ongoing, everyday interactions that support connection, belonging and security.

Taonga mō ngā Tamariki is responding to this by providing practical, accessible ways for parents to engage with their children, including books, games and shared activities that create a focus for interaction and conversation. The resources are either shared during child-centred visits, or posted out to tamariki in packs.

The resources are designed to support parents to talk, play, read and express care in ways that build confidence and strengthen connection.

The Sessions

The programme begins with whanaungatanga, where participants share their experiences and aspirations for their tamariki. This includes developing a collective understanding of what they want for their children, with consistent themes including safety, love, connection, identity and a positive future. This grounding in participant values is critical to engagement and relevance.

The first session focuses on brain development and attachment, helping participants understand how children learn and how relationships shape development. The second session focuses on literacy and learning, reframing reading as a relational and enjoyable activity. The third session consolidates learning through reflection and

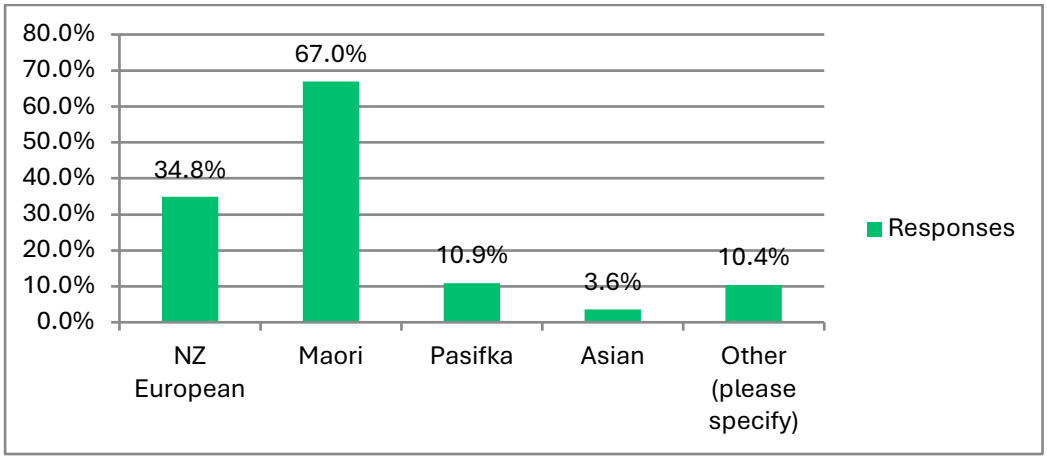
application, including the creation of personalised resources and the selection of books to be shared with tamariki.

Participants receive book bags containing books, games and learning resources, enabling them to apply their learning beyond the programme. Child-centred visits provide further opportunities to practise these skills in real-life interactions with their tamariki, supporting the translation of learning into behaviour.

Method

This evaluation draws on qualitative and quantitative data collected across multiple programme delivery sites. Data sources include facilitator observations, reflections from Corrections staff (seven) and participant feedback from 37 programmes run in 2025. A total of 225 programme participants (64% male, 34% female and 2% other genders) completed questionnaires. Two-thirds of participants self-identified as Māori, with around one-third as NZ European and 11% as Pasifika.[1]

Ethnicity of participants



n=221

The analysis focuses on assessing the extent to which the programme is achieving its intended outcomes, particularly in relation to knowledge, behaviour, relationships and the activation of protective factors associated with longer-term change.

Process outcomes

Corrections staff consistently describe the programme as high quality and express strong support for its delivery and outcomes.

They consistently highlight the value of the programme being delivered by a manager and facilitators who have a background in Corrections and a strong understanding of the Corrections environment and how it operates in practice. This includes knowledge

[1] Note that participants could select more than one ethnicity, so the total exceeds 100 percent.

of prison routines, security requirements, approval processes, and what can and cannot be brought into sites. This familiarity enables the programme to be implemented in a way that is seamless and workable within operational constraints, reducing disruption and minimising additional workload for Corrections staff. It also supports effective coordination of key components such as child-centred visits, where understanding scheduling, approvals and movement processes is critical.

Staff note that this operational competence increases their confidence in the programme, as it aligns with site requirements and runs smoothly within existing systems. As a result, the programme is not seen as an added burden, but as a well-integrated intervention that fits within the Corrections context while still achieving its intended outcomes.

Participant Outcomes

Increased knowledge and understanding

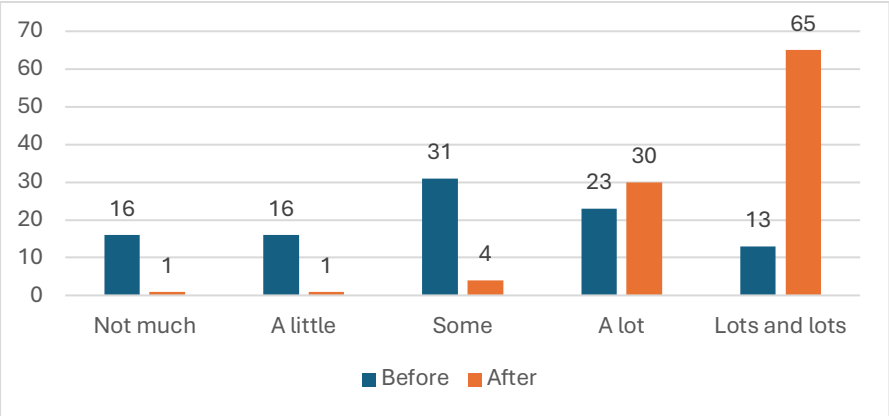
While 95% of respondents said they enjoyed the programme, they also demonstrated an increased understanding of brain development, emotional regulation and the importance of positive interactions.

> "It helped me remember the importance/fun of games and that they aren't just a task." Participant

Benefits of reading

Knowledge of the benefits of reading to tamariki shifted markedly increasing from 36% to 95% after participating in the programme.

Knowledge about the benefits of reading to tamariki (%)



n=224

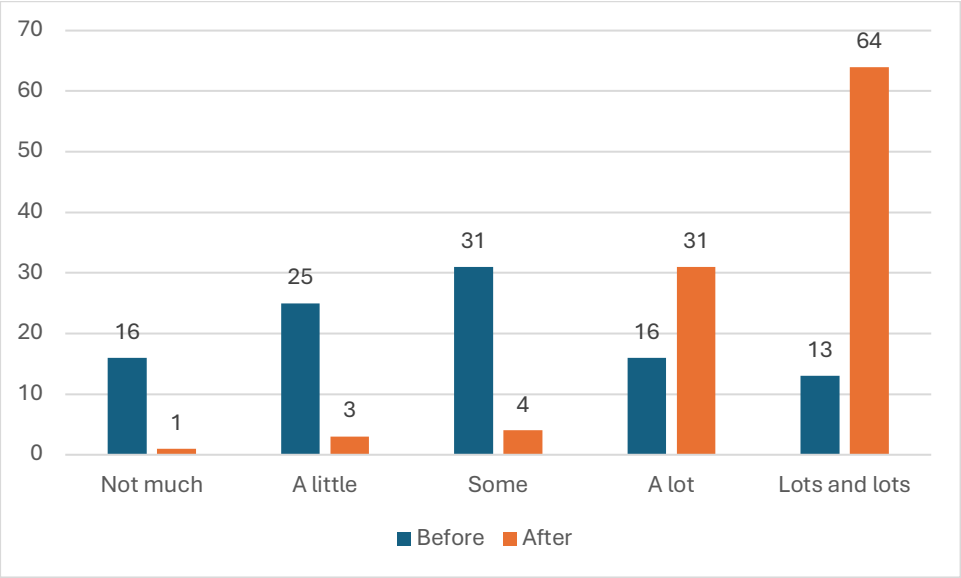
Benefits of storytelling and singing

A similar pattern emerged regarding the benefits of storytelling and singing to tamariki. Before the programme, many of the participants indicated that they had a low

understanding of the benefits. After the programme, this had shifted substantially from 29% to almost all participants (95%) reporting a good knowledge.

> "I was fascinated most about the storytelling and songs can help with my baby development." Participant

Knowledge about the benefits of storytelling and singing to tamariki (%)



n=223

Increased confidence and capability

The programme leads to significant increases in confidence with the majority of participants (93%) reporting high levels of confidence reading, singing and telling stories to their tamariki. The remainder said they had some confidence in doing so.

Importantly, the programme is accessible to parents with a wide range of literacy levels. Even those with low literacy recognised they were able to engage with their children through pictures, storytelling, conversation and shared play. By reframing reading as flexible, relational and enjoyable, the programme reduces barriers to engagement.

> "I learned about reading books with children, and not necessarily using the words to tell the story, but using the pictures and the child's imagination." Participant

This helped to reinforce that connection is not dependent on reading ability, but on interaction and engagement.

Strengthened parenting identity

The programme models positive parenting approaches and provides practical ways for participants to put these into practice, including through the use of praise, encouragement, and responsive interaction.

Participants described a shift in how they understand their role as parents, often contrasting this with their own upbringing where positive reinforcement was limited.

> "I wasn't really given much of the positives, I didn't really know what to say cos I thought my job was to correct my kids." Participant

Learning about the impact of positive language and affirmation was particularly influential.

> "I learnt that positive affirmations build oxytocin which creates positive influence, building strong foundations to shape and strengthen our tamariki." Participant

This learning supports a move from reactive parenting toward more relational, intentional, and supportive approaches.

> "Taking your time with my kids to regulate my emotions so that they can regulate theirs." Participant

For many, this shift strengthened their sense of identity as parents and was described as hopeful.

> "That it is never too late to change and become a better parent." Participant

Importantly, participants felt they could still be active parents while in the care of Corrections. They expressed a desire to be present, engaged, and supportive, with increased motivation to contribute positively to their children's lives:

> "I learned that positivity is hugely beneficial for kids. Reading builds connections." Participant

The process of selecting books, creating personalised resources, and reflecting on aspirations reinforces this identity and provides tangible ways to express care and connection. As one participant reflected:

> "I learned how to reconnect." Participant

The importance of building connection

For participants, learning about the importance of connection has helped reassure them that even small, consistent acts of engagement can have a lasting impact. In a Corrections context, this is helping to support a sense of purpose, reinforce their positive identity as parents, and support them in their parenting role

> “I learned that I am (still) my kids’ biggest treasure.”

Their knowledge of how they could build connections with their tamariki through reading, talking and singing increased from 37% of participants to 95% following the programme.

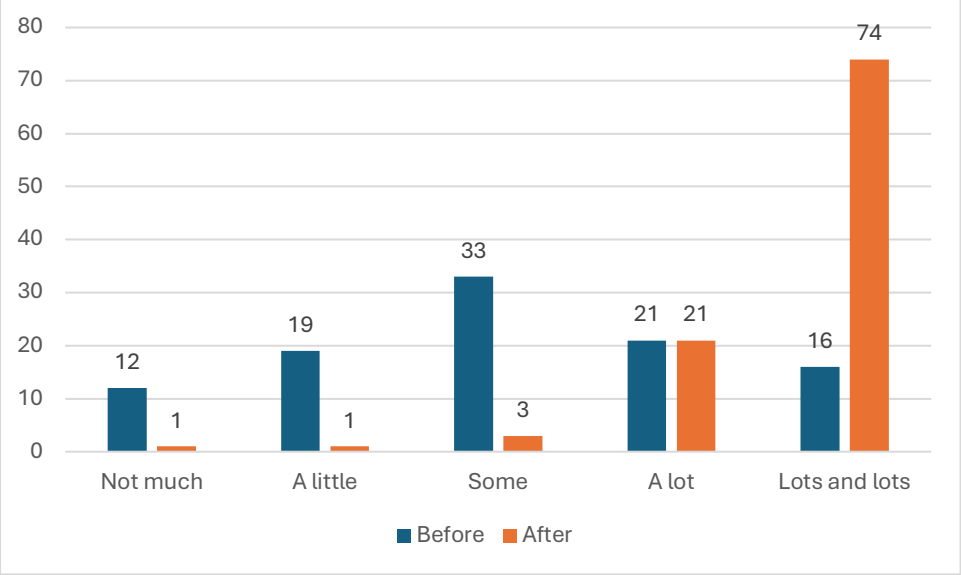
> “I found out that reading is a possible way to reinforce good relationships.” Participant

> “Reading to our kids builds a protective cloak around them.” Participant

Moreover, some were hopeful that damaged or challenging relationships, or past parenting mistakes could potentially mend or be repaired.

> “That the relationship between me and my son can always be repaired and how important building our connection through reading, interacting singing is.” Participant

Knowledge about building connections with your tamariki reading talking and singing (%)



n=223

The resources are good quality

The books and resources are high quality and appreciated. The participants say they enjoyed the quality of the books and resources. Many were also impressed with the variety of books and the generosity shown to their whānau.

> “Everything was more than I expected - the quality is everything and more - I couldn’t ask for better. Participant

> “I have been gifted 3 books for my baby girl and [they] are brand new. I appreciate the resources. Participant

Good-quality, relevant books support shared reading and connection as they are more likely to be read and engaged with. This is particular important as the research shows the outcomes of reading together is calming and can strengthen relationships; outcomes that are highly relevant to supporting pro-social behaviour and rehabilitation in Corrections settings (Woodley, 2024). Moreover, the evidence suggests that books that reflect the culture and language of participants, help maintain cultural connections and support identity, belonging, and wellbeing (Woodley, 2024). It is noted that the participants particularly enjoyed having a choice of books in te reo Māori and other languages.

> “Great selection of te reo books, the game's and other things were super cool.” Participant

The books and resources are the mechanism that supports the connection

Both staff and participants agreed that the availability of books, games and shared activities provides a focus for interaction that supports ongoing connection, even when physically separated. Sending books and resources home creates shared experiences across distance, giving parents and tamariki something to connect around and talk about, and enabling parents to remain actively involved in their child’s learning and development.

The programme supports parents to maintain contact through letters, phone calls, Audio Visual Links, shared stories and personalised resources.

Child-centred visits, however, play a critical role in strengthening these relationships. They enable parents and tamariki to engage together in real time through reading, play and conversation, in ways that more closely reflect everyday family life. These visits support deeper connections, reinforce attachment, and allow parents to practise and embed the skills developed through the programme. Parents report that these visits are more positive, less stressful and more engaging than standard visits.

> “I got to sit close and read not only with words but interact and get my children also looking at pictures.”

Improved engagement within Corrections settings

Staff note that many programmes within Corrections are focused on offending behaviour and risk reduction. In contrast, Taonga mō ngā Tamariki, with its focus on relationships with whānau and wellbeing, is valued as a positive, constructive and engaging intervention within the Corrections environment. It offers a different kind of programme experience, one that supports connection, builds parenting capability and creates a constructive focus for participants. Corrections staff note it enables

participants to engage with their identity as parents and to invest in their role within their whānau.

Staff also recognise that this focus has broader significance beyond the immediate programme. By strengthening relationships between parents and their tamariki, supporting positive parenting practices, and enabling ongoing connection, the programme contributes to the conditions associated with improved outcomes for children. In doing so, it aligns with efforts to address recidivism, intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and offending, with staff noting that supporting parents to remain connected and engaged with their tamariki is a critical pathway to longer-term change for both parents and their whānau.

Programme improvements

More opportunities to interact with their tamariki

Hōkai Rangi – Ara Poutama Aotearoa Strategy 2019–2024 and the Hōkai Rangi Refresh (2024) place whānau at the centre of rehabilitation and reintegration, recognising both the risks faced by children of incarcerated parents and the complex experiences of parents in the care of Corrections. These include trauma, disrupted relationships, and socio-economic disadvantage, all of which can shape parenting confidence and capability.

Within this context, creating environments that support parents to strengthen their role and connection with their tamariki is critical. *Taonga mō ngā Tamariki* contributes to this by emphasising positive, relational engagement through reading, talking, and singing. Child-centred visits are a key extension of this approach, enabling parents to apply their learning in meaningful ways and reinforce whānau relationships.

Participants highlighted the value of these connections and the opportunity to further enhance child-focused interactions.

> "If this programme is about our kids, why do we not have any special calls or AVL visits with them?" Participant

A greater range of books

There were some participants who would have liked to see a greater range of books, particularly in their home languages. It was noted that multiple copies of the more popular books would enable participants to select titles that others had chosen.

Conclusion

Taonga mō ngā Tamariki responds to the complex realities faced by parents in the care of Corrections by strengthening parenting capability, supporting positive relationships, and enabling meaningful connection with tamariki. This approach aligns with Hōkai

Rangi – Ara Poutama Aotearoa Strategy 2019–2024 and the Hōkai Rangi Refresh (2024), which prioritise whānau-centred pathways to rehabilitation and reintegration.

The evaluation shows that the programme is activating key protective factors associated with improved outcomes for tamariki and whānau. These include strengthened parent–child relationships, increased confidence in parenting, and greater engagement in positive, developmentally supportive practices. Together, these shifts reflect movement toward more intentional and relational parenting.

Enhancing opportunities for child-centred connection, including through visits and other forms of contact, will further strengthen programme impact by supporting the practical application of learning.

While longer-term outcomes such as reduced reoffending cannot yet be measured, the programme is strengthening key protective factors identified in the literature and reflected in Hōkai Rangi priorities. These include stronger whānau relationships, enhanced pro-social identity, and sustained connection, all which have been identified as having the potential to reduce reoffending and support more positive outcomes for whānau.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen child-centred connection opportunities
Increase access to child-centred visits and explore additional options such as enhanced AVL calls or structured parent–child interaction opportunities. This will enable participants to apply their learning in practice and deepen parent–child relationships.

2. Embed and expand the programme across sites
Given the strong outcomes and high levels of staff support, continue to embed *Taonga mō ngā Tamariki* within Corrections sites and consider opportunities for wider rollout to increase reach and impact.

3. Increase availability and diversity of resources
Expand the range of books and resources available, particularly in te reo Māori and other languages, and provide multiple copies of popular titles to support participant choice and cultural relevance.

4. Maintain and support high-quality delivery
Continue to ensure delivery by facilitators with strong understanding of the Corrections environment. This operational alignment is critical to successful implementation and staff confidence.

5. Strengthen pathways for ongoing engagement
Support participants to continue applying learning beyond the programme through

follow-up opportunities, resource provision, and ongoing access to materials that enable connection with tamariki.

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