

Evaluation of “Building Stronger Families – Feb 2011

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Introduction

The Building Stronger Families (BSF) course seeks to strengthen the relationships between prisoners and their partners.

Good relationships are associated with a reduced likelihood of the prisoner offending after release¹. The couple relationship is under great stress in prison, with a high probability of breakdown². The Building Stronger Families (BSF) course addresses three well-known problem areas: poor communication, disagreements over parenting and stress over handling money. In each of these cases imprisonment exacerbates the problems³.

The Building Stronger Families course started at HMP Dartmoor in 2005 and has had over 1,200 couples attend. It has now been extended to cover female prison and juvenile prisons, but this evaluation focused solely on male prisoners and their partners.

Description of BSF course

The standard BSF course runs for one day per week for six weeks. The first two days cover communications, including avoiding negative communications, increasing positive communication, forgiveness and commitment. The second two days discuss parenting with a focus on ways the couple can better resolve issues together. The final two days look at how couples talk constructively together about money with some practical advice about spending and budgeting.

Impact on Relationship

Time for Families has evaluated the course using two survey tools: Enrich, which measures relationship satisfaction, and its own TtF scale, which combines sub-scales on dedication and confidence in the relationship (using standard scales from the University of Denver⁴), communications about parenting and money and satisfaction with visits. The two tools give very similar results.

The key findings are:

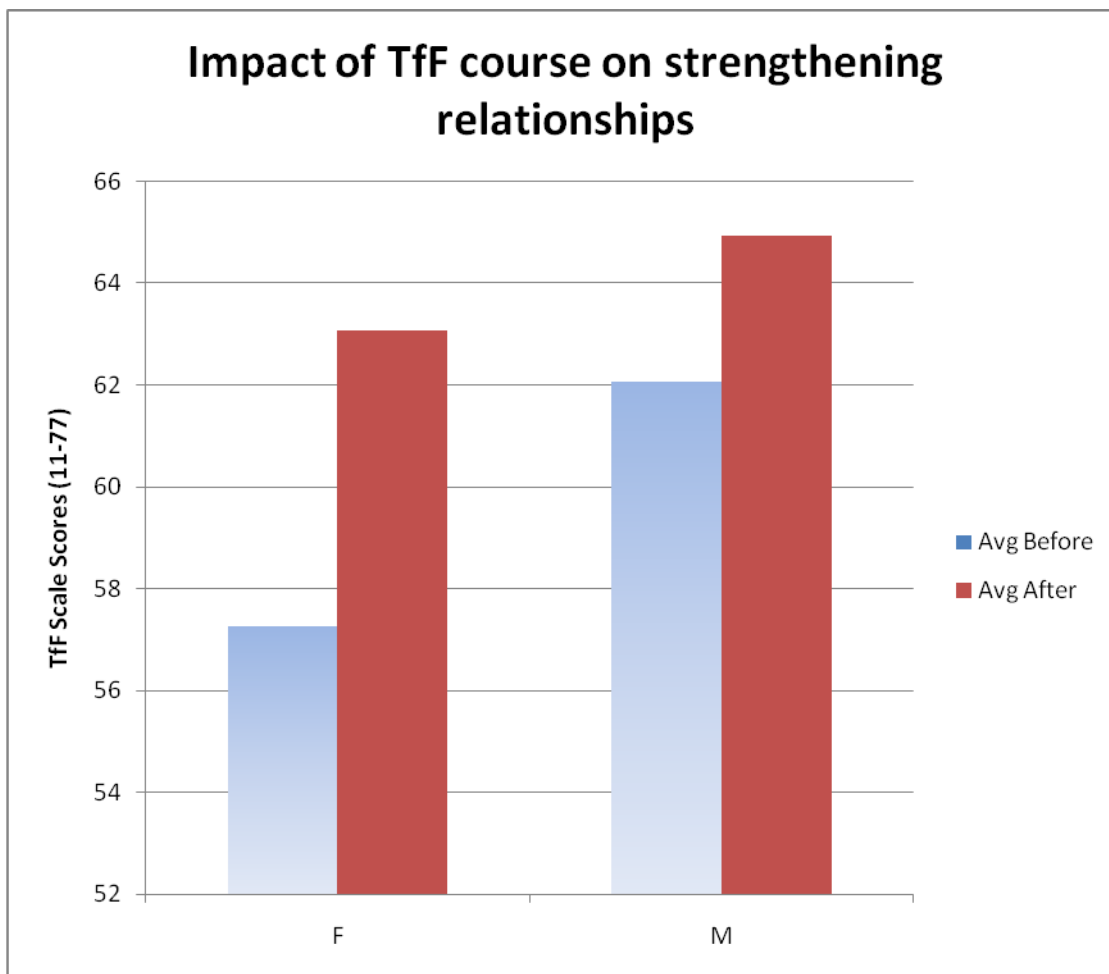
- The impact of the course on relationships is large, especially for the female partners.
- Women start from a much lower position than the male prisoners. This may reflect an unrealistic perspective on the part of the men.

¹ Bales and Mears, “Inmate Social Ties and the Transition to Society: Does Visitation Reduce Recidivism?”

² Social Exclusion Unit: *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners*.

³ Carroll and Doherty, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs.”

⁴ Stanley, “Assessing couple and marital relationships: Beyond form and toward a deeper knowledge of function.”



What is happening within the relationship?

We have examined some of the components of the relationship to see what mechanisms are being affected by the course. Each table shows the average increase in the scale over the course.

Confidence

How confident do the couples feel in the strength of the relationship?

This is linked to mental health, especially depression in the woman.⁵

The results show the partners have a large increase in confidence, while for the men the course has a moderate effect. This means the couple have a greater belief that they have a future together and that they have the skills to face problems together.

Confidence

Sex	Average
F	2.78
M	1.34
Both	2.06

These figures are similar to a comparable course run in Oklahoman prisons (average for Male Offenders 1.66 – female partners not measured)⁶.

Dedication

“Partners who share a strong level of interpersonal commitment tend to have a strong sense of couple identity, or a “we-ness” that pervades how they approach life. They also are more likely to say they have a strong desire for a future together or long-term view. Dedication is also

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Einhorn et al., “PREP Inside and Out.”

characterized by placing the needs of the partner and relationship at a higher priority as well as a willingness to sacrifice for one another”⁷. This study shows a moderate increase in dedication for the female partners, with, again, a smaller impact on the men.

An increase in dedication (i.e. commitment) means that the person is less likely to be “on the market” for a new relationship, and so the relationship is more likely to survive the prison sentence and the difficult adjustment period post-release.

Dedication

Sex	Average
F	1.31
M	0.55
Both	0.93

Money

One unique aspect of the Tff course is the focus on the couple talking about money together, and especially its emotional impact. This aspect of the course has a medium effect. However, in telephone follow-up interviews, about 9 months after the course, the interviewees had a good recall of the money parts of the course.

Money

Sex	Average
F	1.02
M	0.69
Both	0.86

Visits

Prison visits provide the primary form of communication for couples, but most complain that these are very unsatisfactory. It is difficult to have a serious conversation during a visit. There is growing evidence that both the quantity and quality of visits affects rehabilitation⁸ For the women, the course makes a medium impact, but for the men the impact is small.

Visits

Sex	Average
F	0.75
M	0.29
Both	0.52

Parenting

The approach of the Tff course is to encourage the couples to discuss parenting issues. This is the only item where the impact on the men is greater than on the women, although the impact on the men is small.

Parenting

Sex	Average
F	0.14
M	0.41
Both	0.27

⁷ Stanley, Kline, and Markman, “The Inertia Hypothesis: Sliding vs. Deciding in the Development of Risk for Couples in Marriage.”

⁸ May, Sharma, and Stewart, *Factors linked to reoffending: a one-year follow-up of prisoners who took part in the Resettlement Surveys 2001, 2003 and 2004*; Bales and Mears, “Inmate Social Ties and the Transition to Society: Does Visitation Reduce Recidivism?”; Clarke et al., “Fathering behind Bars in English Prisons: Imprisoned Fathers' Identity and Contact with Their Children”; Derkzen, Gobeil, and Gileno, *Visitation and Post-Release Outcome Among Federally-Sentenced Offenders*; Monahan, Goldweber, and Cauffman, “The Effects of Visitation on Incarcerated Juvenile Offenders.”