



Article

# Process Evaluation of a Prison Parenting Education Program for Women

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**Abstract:** Most women experiencing incarceration are mothers, and concerns about their children are a primary focus. The aim of this paper is to describe the process evaluation of a parenting education program in a prison setting. The Mothers Matter parenting education program was co-designed based on the preferences of the women in an Australian prison. The program is strengths-based, with a trauma-informed approach and accommodates cultural diversity. Most women who participated in the program were positive about the program and reported increased connections with their children and family, releasing guilt after apologising to their children, using self-care techniques, and were wanting to continue learning. Program fidelity was assessed through observation of the program. A logic model of the short- and medium-term outcomes is presented as well as the mechanisms of impact that can be used to strengthen future parenting education programs and evaluations.

**Keywords:** parenting education; women; mothers; incarceration; process evaluation



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## 1. Introduction

There are multiple pathways that lead women to offending (Broidy et al. 2018; Daly 1992; Joosen et al. 2016). However, many women experiencing incarceration present with complicated histories that can include child abuse, sexual abuse, childhood neglect, and family violence (Covington and Bloom 2007; McCausland and Baldry 2017; Segrave and Carlton 2011). Building on the gendered perspective, which views women as victims, intersectionality research equally considers the intersecting and compounding systems of oppression impacting women in prison such as age, race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, limited education, violence, and abuse (Gueta 2020; Potter 2013). Intersectionality addresses individual and structural influences, shifting the focus towards the response of systems and emphasises the legitimacy of lived experience and self-determination (Bunn 2019). In Australia, the lives of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women need to be situated in a historical context which considers the devastating effects of colonisation and the impact of the Stolen Generations (Baldry 2009, 2013; Baldry and McCausland 2009; Tilton and Anderson 2017). Multiple traumas may affect a woman's ability to maintain employment and create issues with parenting and mental health, which can lead to alcohol and substance misuse (McCausland and Baldry 2017; Stathopoulos 2012). With the high possibility of incarcerated women experiencing childhood trauma, neglect, and physical and emotional abuse, the likelihood of a continuation of the same style of parenting is much higher (Kim 2009).

In Australia, women make up approximately 8% (n = 3448) of the prison population, which has increased by 64% over the last decade (AIHW 2020, p. 2). Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women account for 33% of the total female prison population in Australia<sup>1</sup> (AIHW 2020, p. 4). Most women in the criminal justice system in Australia are mothers; however, these statistics are not routinely collected (AIHW 2019, p. 72).

When women are incarcerated, often the most painful and distressing aspects of imprisonment are the stress of separation and concerns about their children, as well as

restricted child contact (Baldwin 2017; Fowler et al. 2022; Stone et al. 2017). For mothers experiencing incarceration, connection with their children may be the only source of hope and motivation (Covington 2007), and parenting education in prison can present as an opportunity for women to maintain relationships or reconnect with their children and family. Strong relationships between the caregiver and the woman in prison can encourage successful parenting after release (Arditti and Few 2008).

There is considerable research on the impact of parental incarceration on children (Murray et al. 2012; Wildeman and Turney 2014). Even a short sentence can leave children traumatised by separation from their mother (Baldwin 2017). The effects on children appear greater when their mother is the primary caregiver (Arditti 2012). A literature review by Murray and Farrington (Murray and Farrington 2008) reported children with an incarcerated parent are at high risk of anti-social behaviour, offending, mental health conditions, substance use, difficulties with schooling, and unemployment. For children, one of the key protective components is a stable caregiver (Burnson and Weymouth 2019; Hanlon et al. 2005). Studies have shown that encouraging positive connections and engaging in healthy activities can enhance resilience (Nesmith and Ruhlman 2008) as well as demonstrate genuine care, connection, and a positive attitude toward the child's future (Zhang and Flynn 2020). These components can be addressed during parenting education and potentially impact the mother, child, and family and contribute to reducing community risk.

Many parenting programs have been created for incarcerated women (Bell and Cornwell 2015; Collica-Cox and Furst 2019; Kamptner et al. 2017; Kennon et al. 2009; Loper and Tuerk 2011; Miller et al. 2014; Perry et al. 2009; Wilson et al. 2010; Scudder et al. 2014; Simmons et al. 2012; Urban and Burton 2015), with positive short-term impacts. Variations in program design and delivery make it difficult to determine the components that make a program effective, and it is recommended that programs articulate intended changes and how the design and delivery may produce change (Armstrong et al. 2018; Loper et al. 2019). This research project included developing one of the few parenting programs for women experiencing incarceration based on their own preferences. The setting is an Australian women's prison. The aim of this paper is to describe the process evaluation of the program implementation process and how the parenting program impacted the participants. Presented in this paper, is a logic model (Figure S1) and the mechanisms of impact to demonstrate how program activities lead to the desired outcomes; in simple terms, what works and how (Will Keith Kellogg Foundation 2004). A need for ongoing assessment of program fidelity has been identified (Loper et al. 2019) and is included as part of this study. It has been recommended that more process evaluations are conducted in prison settings (Brown and Gelsthorpe 2022). There are a limited number of published process evaluations reporting on parenting education in prison settings, for example, (Butler et al. 2019). assessed a program for fathers and Norman and Enebrink assessed a program for mothers and fathers together (Norman and Enebrink 2023). Several studies have reported on aspects of prison parenting implementation (Collica-Cox and Furst 2018; Fowler et al. 2018); however, to our knowledge there are no other published process evaluations concerning parenting education for women in prison.

Evaluation research often focuses on outcome measures or the impact of the program; however, without evidence assessing the reality of program implementation, it can be difficult to gain insight into the benefits and challenges of a program (Bauman and Nutbeam 2023). Process evaluations go beyond assessing the outcomes of a program and ask a broader range of questions about fidelity, the quality of the program delivered, how the intervention produces change, the effect of where the program is delivered, and how the program can be optimised (Will Keith Kellogg Foundation 2017; Skivington et al. 2021) The need for evidence-based programs for people experiencing incarceration was highlighted over twenty years ago (Latessa et al. 2022). The current study outlines how a process evaluation was conducted in a prison setting and can be applied to other prison programs to improve programming offered to people experiencing incarceration.

### *The Mothers Matter Parenting Program*

The parenting program named Mothers Matter was developed using a community-based approach (Badiee et al. 2012; Israel et al. 2005; Stoecker 2013). Details of the development of the program are published elsewhere (Lovell et al. 2020, 2022). In brief, the research was initially motivated by the women and staff at the prison who identified a need for a parenting education program relevant to women in prison. The research included talking to key members of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community. This was followed by focus groups, with women experiencing incarceration, which provided the researchers an opportunity to understand the needs of the women and was important to identify the specific mothering needs of the First Nations women. Finally, interviews with prison staff were undertaken. This sequencing enabled the researchers to advocate and explain to the staff the needs suggested by the women and identify any potential barriers that might exist in supporting their needs.

The focus groups with women interested in attending a parenting education program confirmed their aims, parenting topics of interest, challenges likely to be experienced, activities to include, and the preferred program length. The findings from the women were shared with the staff during staff interviews and they made suggestions about parenting education topics, who might be suitable to facilitate the program, and identified potential challenges. The suggestions the women made underpinned the development of the program (Lovell et al. 2020). As part of the prison community, key prison staff members, as well as experts in parenting education, an Aboriginal organisation, and people with Child Protection knowledge and experience reviewed a draft of the Mothers Matter program. Finally, input was sought from Aboriginal Elders and a person with lived experience of incarceration.

The Mothers Matter program is underpinned by the strengths of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander parenting practices<sup>2</sup> (Geia 2012; Lohoar et al. 2014) and incorporates positive/supportive parenting (Ulferts 2020). Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander parenting practices are diverse; nonetheless, there are documented strengths that can be applied to parenting today (Atkinson and Swain 1999; Geia 2012; Malin et al. 1996; Penman 2006; Kruske et al. 2012). The Mothers Matter program endorsed these strengths and promoted connection, understanding, teaching, reflecting, and building relationships. The design and development of the program was founded on the needs of the women in the prison, and aimed to meet the cultural safety of participants, particularly Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women. Previous studies found that the cultural safety and appropriateness of parenting education has been missing for participants of prison parenting education (Brown and Bloom 2009; Henson 2020).

Various video clips accompany the program, including parenting information, positive communication, and Dadirri (deep listening). The video clips were produced by other organisations and were copyright-free or written approval for their use was sought. Other video clips were created specifically for the program, and included a session introduction, video interviews with a woman who had previously experienced incarceration, an expert in Child Protection, and an Aboriginal Elder. These video clips were created to convey knowledge, wisdom, and inspiration from lived experience. During each session, the women were provided a corresponding workbook containing activities and information to keep for future reference, and four specifically designed booklets. Evidence-based parenting fact sheets were available if women required individualised parenting information (Government of South Australia 2019).

The program aims were to provide women time to discuss their parenting strengths and challenges; gain knowledge about parenting and Child Protection; support connection of mother, child, and caregiver from prison; understand child behaviour; understand the importance of health and wellbeing; and be inclusive of cultural diversity. The program comprised eight two-hour sessions (see overview in Table 1). The program was designed to be conducted over one month to accommodate the women on short or remand sentences. Women on remand are often restricted from attending programming due to staff shortages,

budgets, and fear of compromising legal proceedings prior to judgement by the courts (Baldry 2010; Woldgabreal et al. 2017). In this study, the women on remand or on short sentences could attend the Mothers Matter program.

**Table 1.** Program fidelity.

Session Name and Number	Intended Content	Content Fidelity	Timing	Participant Engagement	Adherence to Program Theory	Overall Quality of Session
1 An introduction to Mothers Matter	Introduction	Y	2	3	Y	4.5/5
	Group norms	Y	2	3	Y	
	Personal aims	Y	2	3	Y	
	Parenting styles	A	3	3	A	
	The ‘good enough mother’	Y	1	3	Y	
	Video interview	Y	2	3	Y	
	Mother guilt	M	1	3	Y	
	Parenting history	M	1	3	Y	
	Building support	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	
Total	6.5/9	4	3	7.5/8		
2 Parenting Values and setting goals	Introduction and warm-up (a story of connection)	Y	3	3	Y	3.5/5
	Parenting values	A	3	2	A	
	Goal planning	Y	1	2	Y	
	Why goals are important	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	
	Prioritising and delegating goals	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	
	Video interviews	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	
	Card making (Photo)	Y	N/A	N/A	N/A	
Total	3.5/7	0	2.3	2.5/3		
3 Letter and phone communication	Introduction and warm-up (deep breathing exercise)	Y	3	3	Y	3.5/5
	Writing letters to children	Y	3	2	Y	
	Phone calls	Y	1	3	Y	
	How to tell your children you’re in prison	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	
	Video interviews	Y	2	3	Y	
	Total	4/5	1	2.7	4/4	
4 Caring for ourselves, helps care for our children	Introduction and warm-up (whisper down the line using inspirational quotes)	Y	2	3	Y	4.5/5
	Intense parenting moments—why parents become angry	Y	2	3	Y	
	Recognise triggers	Y	2	3	Y	
	Dealing with intense emotion	Y	3	3	Y	
	labelling emotions	Y	2	3	Y	
	Self-care	M	1	2	Y	
	Walking meditation	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	
	Dadirri (deep inner listening)	Y	2	3	Y	
	Total	6.5/8	5	2.8	7/7	
5 Understanding children’s needs and managing behaviour which challenges	Introduction and warm-up (yoga)	Y	3	3	Y	5/5
	Hierarchy of needs	Y	2	3	Y	
	The basic needs of children	Y	2	3	A	
	Positive discipline	Y	2	3	Y	
	Understanding your child’s behaviour	Y	3	3	Y	
	Total	5/5	3	3	4.5/5	

Table 1. Cont.

Session Name and Number	Intended Content	Content Fidelity	Timing	Participant Engagement	Adherence to Program Theory	Overall Quality of Session
6 Play and communication	Introduction and warm-up (neck stretch and massage)	M	3	2	Y	4/5
	Types of play and importance	A	3	3	A	
	Videos about play	Y	2	3	Y	
	Positive communication	Y	1	3	Y	
	Problem solving activity	Y	1	3	Y	
	What stops parents listening	Y	1	3	Y	
	Total	5/6	1	2.8	5.5/6	
7 Child safety	Introduction and warm-up (strengths activity)	Y	3	3	Y	5/5
	A minute of silence to acknowledge trauma	Y	2	3	Y	
	Why children are removed	Y	2	3	Y	
	Understanding the Child Protection system	Y	1	3	Y	
	Working with Child Protection	Y	3	3	Y	
	Making changes and reunification	Y	3	3	Y	
	Support	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	
	Video interviews	Y	2	3	Y	
	Total	7/8	3	3	7/7	
8 Time to reflect	Introduction and warm-up (guess the scent activity)	Y	1	3	Y	4/5
	Connecting with the caregiver	Y	2	3	Y	
	Reflect on Mothers Matter	Y	3	3	Y	
	Video interviews	Y	2	3	Y	
	Parenting scenarios	Y	1	3	Y	
	Funny finisher	Y	1	2	Y	
	Total	6/6	2	2.8	6/6	
Key						
Content fidelity						
The content outlined in teaching guides compared with observation of program session.	Y = 1 attempted and implemented as intended.	A = 0.5 content added that was not intended.			M = 0.5 some missed content.	N = 0 not attempted or included.
Pacing						
Each section of the program was timed during the observation (number 2 totalled to determine how many sections of the program kept to time).	1 = not enough time spent.	2 = timing as planned.			3 = longer than planned.	

Table 1. Cont.

Session Name and Number	Intended Content	Content Fidelity	Timing	Participant Engagement	Adherence to Program Theory	Overall Quality of Session
Participant engagement Observed engagement was assessed by active involvement, participant questions and discussion, listening, and body language (the total is the average score). Adhere to program theory. Facilitator behaviour, communication, and approach with participants. Consistently maintains underlying program philosophy. Overall quality of the session This score out of 5 was determined by the notes taken by the first author during observation of the sessions.	1 = not engaged. Talking within the group off topic, moving around the room, consistently not involved in discussions and question time or activities.	2 = mostly engaged. Some members of the group talking amongst themselves, one or two participants not actively involved in discussions and/or questions.			3 = engaged. Cohesive group discussions, questions, attentive body language and listening. Able to recall learning.	
	Y = 1 adhered to program theory intended.	A = 0.5 added content that was not intended.			N = 0 Did not adhere to program theory.	N/A not applicable as content was not attempted.
		1 = Poor 2 = Average 3 = Good 4 = Very good 5 = Excellent				

The implementation process involved selecting program facilitators, facilitator training and program facilities, coordinating timing with the women and prison, and ensuring all items brought into the prison were listed and checked through security.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Recruitment

This pilot program was advertised in the prison using posters and brochures, and women could register their interest for the program. A limited number of places were available (8–10) in the pilot program; however, women who were interested in attending could write their name on a waitlist. The pilot program was offered to women in medium security; however, in the future it may be offered to women in other areas of the prison. A prison staff member assisted in recruiting women for two information sessions about the Mothers Matter pilot program, with the sessions presented by one of the authors (BL). During information sessions, the content of the program and time commitment were explained. The women were informed that BL would observe the program and take notes during each session. During information sessions, the content of the program and time commitment were explained. Women were informed they could withdraw at any time and participation was voluntary. All women, including the facilitators of the program, signed a consent form.

## 2.2. Participants

Program facilitators included an experienced parenting educator from a community-based government organization, and a psychologist from the Department for Correctional Services. An Aboriginal health worker from prison health was invited to provide support to the Aboriginal women in the group. A co-facilitation model was utilised to facilitate the program. This model has been used for parenting education in prisons in the past (Kennon et al. 2009; Scudder et al. 2014; Collica-Cox and Fagin 2018). The facilitators attended a full-day training session and were provided with a comprehensive manual and session plan to guide each session. The training day was followed by four two-hour training sessions, providing an opportunity to ask questions, clarify information, engage in activities, and establish their role for each session, depending on their personal preference.

The pilot program participants comprised nine women experiencing incarceration. All were biological mothers (n = 22 children) and one had a caregiving role for family when in the community (n = 1 child). The age range was between 27 and 51 years, with a mean age of 38. Eight women, of whom three were Aboriginal, were born in Australia and one in Vietnam. The age range of their children was less than six months, up to 25 years and two women were grandmothers of children who were two years of age or younger. The children in the community were being cared for by grandparents (n = 4), the woman's partner (n = 1), previous partner (n = 1), a friend (n = 1), foster care (n = 1), and adult children caring for themselves and their siblings. Five of the women identified as the primary caregiver of the children when in the community, and two women reported Child Protection involvement.

## 2.3. Study Design and Data Collection

The study is a mixed method process evaluation based on The Medical Council Research Guidelines (Moore et al. 2015). The process evaluation determines if a program has been delivered as planned, the effort required to produce the intended output, strengths, and challenges, and is critical for informing required changes (Will Keith Kellogg Foundation 2017). In the current study, the process evaluation assessed the implementation (timing of sessions, participant engagement, adherence to program theory, facilitation observation, and quantity); mechanisms of impact (how the effect of the program occurred) and the context in which the program was delivered (barriers to attendance and program resources). Qualitative data were collected by observation of the implementation of the program. Quantitative data were used to assess program fidelity and a pre- and post-survey was completed by the participants of the Mother Matter program.

Qualitative data were collected through observation of the program. The researcher noted group attendance, reasons for not attending, timing of program content, engagement of the women, group dynamics, interaction with activities, the participants', and the facilitator's reflection during and after the session. The actual content covered in the sessions was compared with the content outlined in Table 1. The first author (BL) attended implementation meetings and debriefing sessions during and after the program. Participants (n = 7) were followed up with ten weeks after program completion to verify the data. There were six women remaining in the prison, four who participated in a group discussion, and two women attended a one-to-one discussion. One woman had been released and was contacted via telephone. The data reported were also verified with the facilitators of the program.

The method of observing the pilot program is congruent with a naturalistic approach, where data were collected to understand the socially constructed and multiple realities of the participants in the prison context (Lincoln 1985; Given 2008). The prolonged engagement in all aspects of the program implementation provides credibility to this study (Noble and Smith 2015). During each session, the women were given a pre- and post-questionnaire, with questions based on the content. The questionnaire was peer reviewed, reviewed by an Aboriginal cultural advisor, and a woman with lived experience who tested the questionnaire for understandability and timing. The questionnaire included several Likert-type

questions for example: “I feel confident to teach my child/children about their emotions”, “I understand the importance of looking after my own health and wellbeing”, and a prompt for general feedback. A Brief Parental Efficacy scale was used before and after the entire program.

During the program, the women and facilitators were seated around a large table which enabled the women to see and hear each other, as well as the facilitators. The room had a small kitchenette with access to refreshments. The prison provided a laptop and screen to view presentation slides and video clips. Stationery was provided to encourage notetaking, reflection, and continued letter writing with children and family.

Direct observation of the program was conducted by the first author; therefore, reflexivity was necessary. It is recognised in naturalistic enquiry that the researcher brings knowledge, experience, and subjectivity to the research and therefore it is important to outline the researcher’s position (Given 2008). The reflexive process of critical self-reflection provides transparency and trustworthiness (Noble and Smith 2015). The lead researcher (BL) has nursing and midwifery expertise and was responsible for facilitating the development of the Mothers Matter program with the prison community. As a developer of the program, she understood the content, activities, and underlying philosophies which assisted in observing and assessing the quality of program delivery and implementation. Through observation of all aspects of the implementation process, the researcher observed what worked well, the impact on the women, and challenges, barriers, and problems encountered. The lead researcher was aware of potential bias as a developer of the program, and reflected on how she interpreted challenges and areas for improvement.

The qualitative data collected during observations and the questionnaires are presented using qualitative description. Qualitative description was chosen for this study to provide a comprehensive summary of the implementation process and gain a deeper understanding of the impact the Mothers Matter pilot parenting education program had on the women. Qualitative description maintains the authenticity of the data and the data presented remains close to the voice of the participants as highlighted by Sandelowski (Sandelowski 2000).

#### 2.4. Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using content analysis to organize and derive meaning from observed, verbal, and written data and construct realistic conclusions for a prison setting. Content analysis was used to present the words of the participants and understand meaning in relation to the impact of the program and the implementation process (Bengtsson 2016). The notes taken during observations were transcribed into a table to display the findings and separate the data into headings which included: content covered (including observations and communication by the facilitators), what was communicated by participants, timing, engagement, and missed content. Data immersion commenced during observations whilst making field notes. Transcribed data were read and re-read by the researcher to identify data contributing to understanding the process evaluation, the challenges, and the impact for the women. During data analysis, credibility was attained by researchers BL and AB reading the transcript data and coding all the data separately, using NVivo 1.7.1 (qualitative data software). The researchers discussed their findings and identified similar codes in the process. Discussion of the coding differences continued until we agreed the results were reflective of the overall data and the findings were presented accurately. This process was strengthened by verifying the results with the program participants and facilitators. The codes and extracts were reviewed in NVivo and presented to inform the evaluation using the Medical Council Research Guidelines as a framework (Moore et al. 2015).

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Implementation

Implementation of the program refers to how the program was implemented and what was included. These findings comprise an assessment of content fidelity, the timing of activities content within the sessions, participant engagement, adherence to program theory, facilitator observation, and quantity of the program delivered.

##### 3.1.1. Content Fidelity (Program Delivered as Intended)

An assessment of the program fidelity is displayed in Table 1. The fidelity assessment was guided by the checklist developed by [Anis et al. \(2021\)](#). An estimation of content fidelity was calculated at 80% to provide objectivity to this assessment. There were program elements that were missed, including videos and activities. The majority of missed information was included in the session workbooks designed to reflect the content of each session and were also received by the women when absent from a session. Women were observed to engage with the workbook during the program and reported reading and writing in the workbooks in their own time.

##### 3.1.2. Timing of Sessions

Each session was divided into two 2 h sections separated by a refreshment break. Facilitation of the first section was often longer than scheduled and this impacted the second section. The first author observed time management challenges for both sections. The scheduled timing of sections was adhered to 42% of the time. Thirty percent of program content took longer than planned, and 28% less time than planned. Discussion time was sometimes a difficult challenge for the facilitators to manage, as some women would dominate conversations with topics not specifically relevant to parenting or the rest of the group. Group norms were discussed at the beginning of the session, nevertheless, it appeared difficult to interrupt women who were emotional or discussing sensitive matters. The two facilitators had differing styles and beliefs about managing group dynamics. One facilitator managed group discussion by focusing on validating what was said by the women, with the belief that once trust was established, conversations could be redirected more easily. The other facilitator discussed the importance of sharing time equally within the group and if one participant dominated the allocated time it could create a problematic pattern for future sessions and impact other participants.

##### 3.1.3. Participant Engagement

In most sessions, the women were engaged, interested, and involved in the session content. At times some women seemed less engaged, for example, some women experienced difficulty writing a letter to their child, or at times when one participant became the focus of the session, others became disinterested.

##### 3.1.4. Adherence to Program Theory

Although components of the program were sometimes missed, or timing was not adhered to as planned, the underlying intended positive parenting philosophy was observed to be conveyed during each session. The program was designed to consider parents with children from all age groups and one participant commented that all the women in the program had children of differing ages and yet they were all able to “take something” (Participant 3) from the program.

A strengths-based, trauma-informed approach underpinned the program and intended to address the six key principles of safety: trustworthiness; peer support; collaboration; empowerment voice and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues. The trauma-informed approach is underpinned by the belief that recovery is possible ([SAMSHA 2014](#)). Elements of this approach were observed. For example, the facilitators showed belief in the women when one woman asked the facilitators twice, “is it too late?” (Participant 7) because the mother was worried about repairing her relationship with her child. A facili-

tator responded on both occasions, “it is never too late”, as she conveyed unconditional regard that recovery is always possible.

On one occasion, a participant discussed another participant (not in attendance at the time) in a negative way. The facilitator promptly discouraged this style of communication and encouraged her to be respectful of others whilst reflecting on the course content about managing emotions. The facilitators were encouraged to role model the style of communication and behaviour being taught in the program and interrupting negative comments about other participants was an example of how role modelling can be effectively implemented.

To promote the principle of empowerment voice and choice, the women were given the option to choose sessions they wanted to attend when they registered for the program. The session content was described to the women, and they were provided a written outline to refer to. Two women out of nine decided they would not attend the session called ‘child safety’ which focused on Child Protection as they expressed it was not relevant. All other women decided to attend all sessions, including the session about Child Protection even where it was not a personal issue. Some women discussed wanting to learn more to support other women.

The strengths of Aboriginal parenting practices were discussed during the program, as well as the importance of continued connection to cultures and empowering children through teaching their cultures. Each session started with an acknowledgement of country, which was read by a different person each time. In the seventh session, a script was read by one of the facilitators to acknowledge the trauma and historical trauma that women may have experienced, which was followed by a minute of silence. This was a powerful moment in the group where silence was respected, and this framed the session leading into Child Protection.

During the program, women were asked to contribute their knowledge, thoughts, and experiences about parenting for discussion. The women were encouraged to respond and were thanked for their involvement.

### 3.1.5. Facilitation Observations

Observations of the co-facilitation roles identified some challenges. Differences in approaches may be due to varying levels of experience, knowledge, and education, as well as unfamiliarity with each other’s approaches and communication style. The more experienced facilitator undertook the lead role and the other facilitator a supportive role which was decided prior to program commencement. Challenges and difficulties were observed regarding the coordination and scheduling of exercises/tasks within the program. One facilitator showed expertise in parenting knowledge, which aligned with the underpinning concepts of the Mothers Matter program. Nevertheless, the other facilitator brought to the program the knowledge of psychology and experience working in the prison setting. The first author provided facilitators with feedback via email and during debriefing sessions. Facilitators were observed to implement the feedback during the following sessions, although time management remained a challenge.

Opportunities for the psychologist to continue to support the women outside the program or liaise with the social work department was seen as beneficial. The need for multiple facilitators and continuation of support beyond the education program was necessary at times when the women were visibly upset or discussed their challenges whilst reflecting on their past parenting. For example, one woman stated, “I keep thinking of how much of a failure I am. I think this course is making me feel like more of a failure” (Participant 7). Another woman in the group reassured her by saying “your daughter was thinking, my mum is right there for me” (Participant 8). Although for this woman it was challenging to reflect on her previous parenting, she stated that she was going to come to every session, even when it was hard, and had called her child to tell her how much she loved her. These reflective thoughts demonstrate how challenging attending parenting education can be, and the learning and behaviour change that can follow reflection and

peer support. Some women experienced an emotional response when they spoke about separation from their children and described feelings of guilt. A few women were emotional when they were offered time to write about a special experience they had spent with their child, one woman stating, “I’m going to struggle today” (Participant 5). Although this was a struggle, all participants engaged with writing a letter with support from the facilitators, and 10 weeks after the program reported the importance of being provided with letter writing support. One woman said, “my daughter finds it hard to get letters from me and I was upset, gutted to find this out but I respect her wishes.” (Participant 5). The Aboriginal health worker undertook a supportive role and offered women assistance during group work and activities and contributed to discussions about Aboriginal culture and parenting.

### 3.1.6. Quantity of the Program Delivered

All eight sessions were delivered by the two facilitators and the Aboriginal health worker attended three sessions. Each session was allocated 2 h, which was scheduled to coordinate with the women’s employment and the head count conducted in the prison. Although the program time was scheduled, it appeared to be a challenge to transition smoothly into the program room where the education was conducted. On average, women were 10 min late for the start time. At the end of the two hours, the women were collected by the officer at the scheduled time.

### 3.2. Mechanism of Impact

The mechanism of impact describes how the effects of the program occurred (Moore et al. 2015). These mechanisms include: facilitator knowledge and skill; peer learning; family communication; acquiring self-care and positive communication skills; and increased parenting knowledge. Table 2 shows the mechanism of impact.

**Table 2.** Practical constructs related to mechanisms of impact.

Mechanism of Impact	Facilitator Knowledge and Skill	Peer Learning	Family Communication	Acquired Self-Care Strategies	Acquired Positive Communication Skills	Increased Parenting Knowledge
Practical constructs	Warm, friendly, approachable. Non-judgemental. Understand impact of trauma and trauma-informed approach. Awareness of the circumstances of women experiencing incarceration. Understands cultural safety. Occasionally shares personal story. Knowledge of parenting theory and practice. Establish boundaries with the group. Manage group dynamic.	Encourage women to find a ‘buddy’ to support each other during and after the program. Encourage women to teach others who missed a session. Encourage peer support and a positive, nurturing culture in the group.	Women encouraged to discuss the program and parenting concepts with family and children. Booklets designed to share with family. Supported to write letters and send a card. Information provided to improve telephone communication.	Controlled breathing. Deep listening. Mindfulness. Emotional regulation. Understanding guilt. Setting goals and prioritising. Reflective thinking.	Facilitators role model positive communication skills. Positive communication and active listening theory. Child focused communication. Encourage use of skills with all relationships.	Parenting styles Strengths of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander parenting practices. The ‘good enough mother’. History of parenting. Parenting values. Intense parenting moments. The basic needs of children. Positive discipline. Understanding children’s behaviour. Understanding play. Understanding Child Protection.

#### 3.2.1. Facilitator Knowledge and Skill

Rapport with the participants was established early in the program as the facilitators were observed to be warm, friendly, and upfront about not making judgements. It was observed that most women appeared to feel safe in the group and openly discussed

their feelings, thoughts, and experiences and several women shed tears. The facilitators used humour and sometimes shared examples from their own lives and hardships to relate to the women. The facilitators demonstrated an understanding of the reality of the women's lives. One woman referred to the facilitators, saying "you have been open and honest" (Participant 1), demonstrating that trust and rapport had been established. This woman also said, "during the course her feelings were validated, I felt normal". This feeling of acceptance symbolizes the skill of the facilitators to validate the feelings of individual women whilst in a group setting. At the ten-week follow-up, women discussed the importance of the facilitators being supportive, without judgement, and not being connected with the Department of Child Protection, and once this was established, one woman explained she was able to let her "walls down" (Participant 1).

### 3.2.2. Peer Learning

Peer learning and support was encouraged by the facilitators and in the program's design. The women were invited to align themselves with another participant to practice forming support networks, encourage attendance, consolidate learning, and read the workbooks together. Therefore, during the program women found a person to 'buddy' and it was observed that peer support existed within the group and continued outside group time. This observation was confirmed in the post-program follow-up. An example of peer support was demonstrated by one mother who asked permission if she could help explain a situation causing guilt for another participant who was having difficulty explaining herself. This example of a conversation clearly highlights that peer support from participants was happening whilst undertaking the program, and the ability to discuss parenting challenges together was valuable.

The women extended peer support outside the group setting and reported meeting with women who had missed a session. Their peer support was aided by reflecting on notes they had previously written. Another woman said, "we were answering questions when we went back home (back to the unit) and talking to each other about the program" (Participant 1). One mother in the post-program follow-up discussed how other women felt empowered by another participant because she "knew a lot and answered the questions really well" (Participant 3). This mother acted as a positive role model in the group and demonstrated that it is possible to parent in a similar positive way to the parenting theory being discussed during the program.

### 3.2.3. Family Communication

Women were encouraged to connect with their children and family by writing letters, sending cards, telephone conversations, discussing the program, and sharing program booklets. The comments made about their children highlighted the importance of encouraging the women to talk about the program with their family and caregivers. One woman commented on feeling very positive about experiencing increased contact with her son, "my son is happy—he said it was excellent when I told him I was doing a parenting program. He now wants me to call him more, makes me feel over the moon." She went on to say, "That's the main thing, I feel more confident, and he always answers the phone straight away now" (Participant 5). The positive response this mother received from her child rewarded and reinforced their connection, while also resulting in increased confidence in her relationship with him.

The women were provided the opportunity to have their photo taken and send a card to their children. After this activity one mother reported, "my kids were so excited when they got the photo that they put it in a frame" (Participant 3). The women enjoyed the card making activity and were proud of the cards they created, giving them a sense of achievement.

One mother discussed communicating what she had learnt during Mothers Matter with her mother and caregiver of her children as she explained "connection, not attention and mum sees a different response in my child" (Participant 3). She could see how her

mother had implemented her suggested changes and this impacted her child in a positive way. The development of healthy relationships with facilitators, and importantly their children and family, provide positive psychological outcomes for women, including: increased vitality; empowerment; knowledge of self and others; self-worth; and aspiration for more connection (Miller 2008). The importance of connection with children and family was observed in the women over the program and the women who had re-commenced connection were able to sustain these connections when followed up with ten weeks after the program.

#### 3.2.4. Acquiring Self-Care Skills

One participant discussed using self-care techniques, including deep listening (Dadirri), a technique she had learnt the previous week, as she explained, “I sat outside and let the sun soak into me” (Participant 3). Another woman described using the slow breathing exercise, “I use the breathing technique because of the guilt, I use the breathing. I have flashbacks and I feel guilty and then I use the breathing” (Participant 5). One woman discussed people recognizing changes in her, “everybody’s noticed a change in me. I am becoming aware of my surroundings. I think about what I say before I say it. I’ve done a full 180, before it was all about me. It feels like I’ll be able to go places, talk to people. I feel safe now with you [the group]” (Participant 1). These comments demonstrate the ability of the women to apply their learning to their current circumstances in a useful and positive way.

#### 3.2.5. Acquiring Positive Communication Skills

The program included positive communications and active listening skills, which the facilitators role modelled during the program. One woman discussed what she had learnt during the program, and said, “I thought I was a disengaged parent and I had that stuck in my head. I want to be an engaged parent. I spoke to [child] on the phone, the other day and used what I had learnt here—it’s ok to feel upset and angry, it’s normal to feel this way” (Participant 7). This comment illustrates the ability for the women to apply the communication style they were learning whilst validating the feelings of the other person. During the program, the women were presented with a scenario about how to discuss with the caregiver of their child, differences in parenting styles that may cause disagreements. One woman answered using the style of communication that she had learnt in a previous session, when she explained, “I understand that you got upset but there are other ways of dealing with it” (Participant 2).

#### 3.2.6. Increased Parenting Knowledge

The women were asked to re-cap what they had learnt at the beginning of each session and remembered previous content and demonstrated they were grasping the concepts through practical implementation of the strategies within the sessions. One woman had noticeably changed over the time spent during the program. This mother cried on multiple occasions at the beginning of the program, but towards the end she appeared happy and felt the program had impacted how she was feeling and her relationship with her children. The concept of guilt and shame were discussed early in the program, which enabled some women to acknowledge the guilt and move forward in a positive way. A few women described feeling empowered as they apologised to their child/ren, “I had to let it go and was able to apologise. Without this course I couldn’t have done that” (Participant 1). This mother went on to discuss her emotional regulation explaining, “I held so much anger, now that has subsided.” “You’ve opened doors in this course, that you don’t know” (Participant 1). Some women felt that Mothers Matter helped them to recognise they were “on the right path as a mother” (Participant 3 and 8) which provided them confidence in the parenting style they were already using and confirmed they were not needing to make significant changes to their parenting.

### 3.2.7. Overall Satisfaction

The women had the opportunity after each session to write a comment about their likes, dislikes, or suggested changes to the program. A number of women wrote “thank you” for coming to the prison. The women were grateful for learning about topics including parenting styles, to improve as a parent, to help themselves realize their potential, and to problem solve or overcome hurdles. Some women wrote they were “enjoying” the sessions, or the sessions were “extremely helpful”. A few women wrote they were enjoying the facilitators and described them as, “very easy and relatable” and “amazing”. Feedback included “other women need this”, “I highly recommend this to be a core program at the prison”.

During the sessions, women made comments about recommending the program to other women. One woman said “I think this course is awesome. I think we need to congratulate you for doing this” (Participant 5). One mother was thankful that she had the opportunity to attend the Mothers Matter program as she recognised that she may not have had the opportunity if she was on home detention.

### 3.2.8. Quantitative Evaluation

When asked about the cultural appropriateness of each session, all women agreed or strongly agreed using a Likert scale that each session was culturally appropriate. In the final session women were asked to rate the workbooks and booklets: 0 representing not useful, and 10 representing extremely useful. Three women who attended the final session all rated the reading materials as extremely useful and, overall, the program as extremely helpful. One woman indicated the session and program length was too short and the other two said it was about right. At the follow-up session, a number of the women agreed having more time would be beneficial. All women who attended the program agreed or strongly agreed that each session was relevant, culturally appropriate, they were able to understand the content, the sessions were useful, and they would recommend the session to others.

The Brief Parental Efficacy scale included five statements about parenting and was therefore simple and quick to complete. The majority of women scored themselves in the higher range in the pre-program questionnaire and therefore few changes were observed after attending the program. Further, participant numbers were low in the final session. For this pilot, using a pre- and post-questionnaire with Likert scales for each session was not useful because of the small number of participants, and the fact that scores were so high before the session that little change was observed after it. The greatest incremental changes in a positive direction on the Likert scale were reported after the Child Protection session. The changes recorded may relate to a lack of knowledge about Child Protection prior to the session, and therefore demonstrated the knowledge gained.

## 3.3. Context

The context includes external factors that act as a barrier, influence, or facilitator of program success during implementation.

### 3.3.1. Barriers to Attendance

COVID-19 impacted program implementation, which initially delayed the program commencement. This circumstance was accommodated by the prison and the scheduled start date was adjusted. Unfortunately, by the fifth session, COVID-19 affected four participants and one was required to work because of staffing levels in the prison. COVID-19 continued to impact participation and as women returned to the group after a period of isolation, other participants were affected, which is reflected in the participant numbers of each session. The sessions continued regardless of the number of participants. The attrition rate over the program was 45%, and the main reason for non-attendance was COVID-19. One woman attended every session. Other reasons for non-attendance included program

double booking, which could have been avoided with appropriate planning, and two women had sentencing meetings to attend.

In the follow-up session, three women discussed wanting to continue parenting education when in the community, and one wanted to participate in missed sessions. One woman withdrew from the program after attending half a session but requested to continue to receive the workbooks and information. Although she found attending group sessions too confronting and reported feeling “too shy” to attend the group, she was willing to learn in her own time about parenting. At the post-program follow-up, she discussed commencing telephone communication with her children and mother after reading the workbooks. This mother reported that communication was difficult at first, and is now improving.

The first three sessions of the program were conducted on the days scheduled. The sessions were planned twice a week over 4 weeks. After the third session, a number of lockdowns were experienced, which required rescheduling of three sessions. These interruptions meant the program was taught over 6 weeks, instead of the intended 4-week duration. These changes required flexibility for the facilitators, the women, and room availability.

The facilitator and researcher, entering the prison from the community, needed to allow time to be processed through security and conduct a COVID rapid antigen test. Often, there was limited time to set up the room prior to the session, due to reliance on an officer to open the building and be present prior to entry. All items brought into the prison were listed for security prior to program commencement and were stored in the program room.

### 3.3.2. Program Resources

The women were grateful for the stationery received and certificate they were awarded after completion of each session and the whole program. The women were observed to be engaged during the videos and enjoyed seeing children who were included in some of the videos. One woman commented “watching the videos of parents interacting, reminded me how to play with younger children” (Participant 3). Some women acknowledged learning from what was said during the video interviews, for example, “I didn’t know you could get a walking pass on home detention; I’m going to get one of those” (Participant 1). At the ten-week follow-up, two women commented about the video interview with a woman who had experienced incarceration, commenting “she was a good role model” (Participant 4 and 8).

The prison provided a debrief each week which provided the facilitators an opportunity to discuss any issues with the support and guidance of a senior psychologist. The facilitators also took the opportunity to debrief with the first author or each other privately.

## 4. Learning for the Future

The mechanisms of impact and practical constructs are an outcome of this study, and are displayed in Table 2, and demonstrate elements of the program that had a positive impact on the women. These mechanisms can be used to strengthen or develop parenting education programs in other prison settings and contribute to what might be called the ‘best practice’ to meet the needs of women, as recommended by Loper et al. (2019). Discussing the program ten weeks after completion confirmed that most women involved in the program continued to feel positive about the Mothers Matter program. The women discussed using self-care strategies, apologising to their children, considering their children’s needs more, and approaching their children with a more positive attitude, they released guilt, and found guidance with letter writing useful. Over half of the women initiated discussion about continuing parenting education in the prison or community. One woman, who was a caregiver for a family member when in the community, reported not benefitting from the program. This may indicate the need to prioritise women with a primary caregiving role when spaces are limited in a program. Group education may feel too confronting for some women, and having access to reading material specific to their needs may be a more

appropriate format for learning, which was indicated by one participant in the current study who decided to withdraw from the program. This finding highlights the need to provide different options to suit individual needs and may also include one-to-one sessions or offering a smaller group size. The importance of positive group dynamics was reported in a recent study, as having a significant impact and the study recommended measuring the group atmosphere (Norman and Enebrink 2023).

In the current study, it was observed that certain aspects of the content were missed or rushed, which highlights the difficulty of working in a prison setting and balancing the content with behaviour and communication patterns that result from the trauma history of the women. This delicate balance was reported previously (Kelly et al. 2018), demonstrating the need for facilitators to acknowledge and skilfully address the trauma-related behaviours whilst continuing with program content. Some adaptation of program content is inevitable and is necessary to meet the individual needs of the participants (Durlak and DuPre 2008); however, program fidelity needs to be maintained and assessed as part of ongoing evaluation. The facilitators in this study occasionally added information because of their own experience and knowledge. This is difficult to control when facilitators have knowledge and experience to share, and is necessary to individualise the content; however, the program theory needs to be maintained (Haynes et al. 2016). The outline of key points in the teaching guide was an effective way to maintain program fidelity in the current study.

The co-facilitation model used in the current study involved a facilitator from inside the prison and one from the community, which presented some challenges. The facilitators were previously unknown to each other and consequently required more support in the initial phases of implementation. This challenge has not been identified in previous publications regarding the facilitation of parenting education in prison settings.

Despite the huge variation in the age of the children, the participants found relevance in the program content. Although the number of participants in this study were small, this finding identifies the potential for prison parenting programs to address the needs of children of all age groups. Including all age groups in parenting education requires program facilitators to have extensive knowledge about parenting across all developmental stages. A previous study identified that parenting education including older children was needed for some participants where the focus of the parenting program was children less than five years of age (Rossiter et al. 2015).

One of the challenges highlighted in previous studies was lack of child contact to enable consolidation of the parenting skills learnt during prison parenting education (Loper and Tuerk 2006; Perry et al. 2009; Troy et al. 2018). The women in the current study had varying levels of child contact and some of the women may experience a lapse of time before they have physical contact with their child, although at the time of writing several women had been released. For this reason, the Mothers Matter program focused on parenting whilst separated from children, as well as practical skills that can be utilised in day-to-day parenting. During the program, the women were informed they could apply the positive parenting philosophy to any relationship, which encouraged the women to practice what they were learning even when separated from their children.

The Australian Law reform recommends that programs for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women are to be taught by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women (Australian Law Reform Commission 2017). The Aboriginal health worker was able to attend less than half of the sessions due to illness and staffing limitations. If this role was more clearly defined and attendance deemed essential, then it may support attendance in the future. Ideally, the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women would be offered the Mothers Matter program in a group specifically for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women with at least one Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander facilitator; however, resources are limited to meet these needs.

## 5. Discussion

Overall, most women who participated in the Mothers Matter pilot program provided positive feedback, both observed and written. The women demonstrated their understanding of parenting concepts and were observed describing the knowledge they gained and applying positive communication skills in their life. The rapport developed between the participants and facilitators was observed to be important in the current study and has been reported to have positive impacts for women attending prison parenting education in previous studies (Norman and Enebrink 2023; Perry et al. 2009; Troy et al. 2018).

Other evaluated prison parenting education programs have reported positive short-term gains for participants (Collica-Cox and Furst 2018, 2019; Kamptner et al. 2017; Loper and Tuerk 2011; Perry et al. 2009; Scudder et al. 2014; Simmons et al. 2012; Wilson et al. 2010). Previous studies reporting on the implementation of parenting education in a prison setting described similar positive impacts on participants, such as improved communication and relationships with children, an opportunity to reflect on parenting, and the importance and benefit of peer learning (Butler et al. 2019; Collica-Cox and Furst 2018; Norman and Enebrink 2023). Challenges with implementation identified in previous studies include, staff shortages, lack of funding, competing priorities, security restrictions, and contribute to parenting education being seen as less important (Butler et al. 2019; Collica-Cox and Furst 2018; Norman and Enebrink 2023). The community-based approach utilised during the development of the Mothers Matter program may impact the ongoing support of the program in the prison, as program success relies on the engagement of key stakeholders and the community involved (Bauman and Nutbeam 2023).

There is lack of evidence to demonstrate any effects that children may experience when mothers attend parenting education in a prison setting (Troy et al. 2018). A previous study reported on child outcomes via the mother and school teacher (Menting et al. 2014), and in another example children participated in the parenting program and were included in the evaluation (Mindel and Hoefler 2006). The current study identified some positive impacts for the children; however, this was reported by the mothers.

Previous studies in a prison setting have reported high attrition rates greater than thirty percent when prison parenting education was implemented (Miller et al. 2014; Perry et al. 2009; Loper and Tuerk 2011). In the current study, COVID-19 was the main reason for non-attendance which may indicate that attendance could have been much higher without the pandemic. Ongoing evaluation will be required to assess reasons for attrition. If the program can be delivered twice a week over four weeks, as planned, this may improve attendance. Due to the high attrition rate in this study, caution must be taken when interpreting the results.

This study provided unique insight into how aspects of the Mothers Matter program impacted the women participants rather than focusing on outcome measures. Intended, changes and how design and delivery may produce change were identified as missing in the literature (Armstrong et al. 2018; Loper et al. 2019). The mechanisms of impact can be used to model and strengthen prison parenting programs. The logic model presents outcome measures for the parent, child, family, and potential impact on the community. Previous studies evaluating parenting education in a prison setting suggest potential for parenting education to have a positive impact on the parent, children, and their community (Eddy et al. 2022). The short- and medium-term outcome measures can be used to design a comprehensive evaluation of the program for the future. Evaluation of the implementation process increases the potential of developing an intervention that can be maintained in its intended context (Bauman and Nutbeam 2023).

Parenting education is necessary to holistically support women in prison, and should be offered alongside other programs that women may need to succeed. Support may include offering housing assistance, help with employment, family violence, mental health, drug and alcohol rehabilitation (Baldray 2009, 2010; Eddy et al. 2013; Rossiter et al. 2015), as well as continuing parenting education and support in the community. In previous studies, women experiencing incarceration have voiced the need for their children to be at

the centre of their planning for successful re-entry into the community, as well as the need for family support (Arditti et al. 2010; Baldry 2010). A recent rapid review of Australian literature concerning the needs and experiences of mothers in prison and after release has recommended placing the needs of women and children at the centre of services and addressing their gender- and parenting-specific needs (Breuer et al. 2021).

## 6. Conclusions

The implementation of the Mothers Matter program demonstrated challenges in the process and identified areas for improvement. The timing and content delivered in the program will require further adaptation for improved consistency of delivery in the future. To implement the recommendations of the Australian Law reform (Australian Law Reform Commission 2017), further work is required to sustain the involvement of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander facilitator. The importance of developing trust and rapport with facilitators was highlighted in this study, as well as the need for facilitators who understand the reality of women in prison, extensive parenting knowledge and experience, and understand cultural safety and trauma. The importance of providing various formats for learning was recognised in this study as parenting education in a group setting can be too confronting for some women. The mechanisms of impact and the logic model can be used to develop a more comprehensive evaluation for the future.

This study indicates the need to support women both in- and outside the prison, emphasising the relationship of parenting to all other aspects of a person's life. Providing women time for learning and discussion about parenting enabled the women in the Mothers Matter program to make changes to their relationships with their children, caregivers, and themselves. The impact of the Mothers Matter program was meaningful, which was evident through the words of the women themselves.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci12070370/s1>, Figure S1: Mothers Matter program logic.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in prison has been attributed to the devastating impact of the colonisation of Australia and the impact of the Stolen Generations (Australian Law Reform Commission 2017; AIHW 2019).
- <sup>2</sup> We acknowledge that there are many cultural differences in parenting practices that individuals will apply to their parenting.

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