

HAPPENSTANCE AND INNOVATION: IMPLEMENTING TONIES® TO BRIDGE LITERACY GAPS AND STRENGTHEN FAMILY BONDS FOR INCARCERATED PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

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Abstract

Low literacy among justice-involved individuals perpetuates cycles of disadvantage, hindering reentry while affecting children's emergent literacy and family bonds. This article explores family literacy interventions that foster parental involvement, empathy, and reading motivation despite incarceration. Central to this work is the tonies®, a screen-free, recordable audio storytelling device shown to enhance young children's comprehension, vocabulary, and attention. The project emerged through a chance encounter at the 2024 American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) National Conference, where the author met representatives from tonies®. That unexpected conversation led to a partnership grounded in a shared vision of incorporating tonies® as educational tools in correctional settings. A pilot program at a local detention center involved seven incarcerated parents recording stories for their families. The success of the pilot generated a \$7,600 crowdfunding campaign, expansion into a 4-H Christmas reading program serving more than 40 families, a juvenile detention facility pilot involving five participants, a federal correctional facility pilot with ten participants, and planned integration with the Women's Storybook Project of Texas in a state women's correctional facility. Emerging collaborations, including a theater arts curriculum integrated with tonies® recordings, further enrich participant skill development and family reconnection. Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate tonies®' potential as an accessible tool for strengthening literacy, emotional connections, and rehabilitation among justice-involved families and communities.

Keywords: community engagement; family literacy; tonies®; incarceration; developmental literacy; partnerships; happenstance

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Introduction

My work in community-engaged scholarship emerged from a simple yet urgent question: *How might literacy serve as a bridge between justice-involved parents and their children when physical separation threatens family bonds and long-term outcomes?* That question guided me toward local correctional facilities and, ultimately, toward developing partnerships grounded in trust, mutual learning, and a shared commitment to family connectedness.

Correctional systems are often framed through deficit-based narratives that overlook the humanity, creativity, and aspirations of incarcerated individuals and their families (Gatewood et al., 2024; Hill, 2025; Perez & Ames Hoffner, 2025). In contrast, community-engaged scholarship calls for approaches that honor lived experience and center relationships as sites of knowledge and transformation (Janke et al., 2023; Wallerstein et al., 2026). Through sustained collaboration with correctional staff, community advocates, and families, I sought to design programming that addressed genuine needs while respecting institutional constraints. These partnerships were not transactional; they required listening, humility, and a willingness to co-create solutions alongside those most directly affected by incarceration.

tonies® emerged as an innovative and accessible platform for this work. The tonies® system is a screen-free audio storytelling device that uses small character figurines placed on a Toniebox to play prerecorded or user-recorded stories, music, and other educational content for children. Figure 1 illustrates the device in use. By enabling

justice-involved parents to record themselves reading stories, tonies® provided children with a meaningful opportunity to hear familiar voices and maintain shared literacy routines despite physical separation. This approach served as a relational practice that affirmed parental identity, fostered emotional connection, and reinforced the belief that learning and affection can endure despite incarceration.

Figure 1. *Toniebox and tonies® characters*



Note. Picture courtesy of tonies®

Literacy has long been recognized as a protective factor for children, particularly those navigating systemic inequities. When embedded within family relationships, literacy can also serve as a tool to disrupt intergenerational cycles of incarceration (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2017; Dallaire, 2007; OJJDP, 2019). This programming positioned parents not as problems to be managed, but as active contributors to their children's growth and well-being. In doing so, it reframed incarceration not only as a site of loss, but as a space where meaningful intervention and hope can take root.

At its core, this narrative is an examination of partnership. It is about building bridges between universities and correctional facilities, between parents and children, and between scholarship and practice. By centering literacy, technology, and human

connection, this work illustrates how community-engaged approaches can foster dignity, resilience, and lasting impact for justice-involved families.

Bringing Lived Experience into Practice

I bring my lived professional experience as a former educational administrator in a federal prison directly into my scholarship and community-engaged practice. In this role, I designed and supervised educational programming for incarcerated adults while working within the constraints of a highly regulated correctional environment. My day-to-day work involved close collaboration with community partners, instructional staff, and institutional leadership to facilitate educational opportunities for the incarcerated population.

Through these experiences, I observed a profound and persistent need for family connectedness among incarcerated parents. Separation from children was frequently identified as one of the most emotionally disruptive aspects of incarceration, with long-term implications for parental identity, motivation, and well-being. Many parents expressed frustration over their limited ability to participate in parenting and simply remain present in their children's daily lives.

These observations shaped my scholarly commitments and continue to inform my approach to partnership development and program design. I view literacy not only as an academic skill but also as a relational practice that can sustain family bonds across physical separation. My current work builds on these lived experiences by advancing programs that position justice-involved parents as active contributors to their children's development and seek to interrupt intergenerational cycles of incarceration through connection, dignity, and engagement.

Why Literacy?

Literacy proficiency significantly influences social, economic, and health outcomes, yet low literacy remains a major challenge for justice-involved individuals, including incarcerated adults and youth (Aldib et al., 2024; Bather et al., 2025; Weaver & Mutti, 2021). The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) Prison Survey, which assessed English literacy among approximately 1,200 incarcerated adults aged 16 and older, found that a substantial proportion exhibited low literacy proficiency. Specifically, incarcerated adults had markedly lower literacy scores than the household population, with many performing at the Below Basic or Basic levels across prose, document, and quantitative literacy scales (Greenberg et al., 2007). More than half of incarcerated adults nearing release demonstrated Below Basic or Basic prose literacy, highlighting persistent disparities that hinder employment, reintegration, and everyday functioning (Greenberg et al., 2007).

Furthermore, research by literacy expert Richard Allington (2010) underscores how systemic issues, such as summer reading loss, exacerbate achievement gaps, particularly for economically disadvantaged children who are at greater risk for later justice involvement. Allington and McGill-Franzen (2010) analyzed longitudinal data and found that the summer reading setback accounts for at least 80% of the reading achievement gap by ninth grade, with economically disadvantaged students experiencing the greatest declines because of limited access to books during school vacations. This disparity not only widens educational inequities but also contributes to cycles of poverty and delinquency, as low literacy is associated with increased rates of school dropout and justice involvement (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2010, 2017; McDaniel et al., 2017). Allington's (2010, 2017) work advocates increasing access to books and voluntary reading opportunities to mitigate these risks, principles that could inform literacy programs in juvenile facilities and help prevent progression into the adult correctional system.

Prison-based literacy programs address these gaps effectively. Adult Basic Education (ABE) initiatives, targeting individuals reading below the ninth-grade level, yield positive post-release outcomes. Using administrative data from Florida prisons, Cho and Tyler (2013) found that ABE participation was associated with higher post-release earnings and employment rates, particularly for minorities and individuals who received consistent instruction, although the effects on recidivism were mixed.

Family literacy programs offer a holistic approach, especially for incarcerated parents, by strengthening intergenerational bonds, empathy, emotional connections, and a shared love of reading. These programs mitigate disruptions caused by parental incarceration, which can impair children's literacy and well-being. The Read to Your Child/Grandchild (RYCG) program in Pennsylvania prisons allows fathers to record video readings of books with personal messages for their children. Qualitative analysis of RYCG participants revealed that the program sustains parental involvement, counters disengagement stereotypes, and supports children's literacy through interactive storytelling (Prins et al., 2021). Other initiatives, such as *The Literacy Link*, connect justice-involved families with literacy-focused support to build resilience and positive relationships (University of Wisconsin Extension, n.d.). Programs such as *Books Behind Bars* and *Connecting Through Literacy: Incarcerated Parents, Their Children and Caregivers* (CLICC) promote shared reading to foster empathy, vocabulary growth, and secure attachments, buffering children against incarceration-related stress.

Similarly, the author facilitated a project at a state prison in 2022 that incorporated storytelling and book-sharing between incarcerated fathers and their children. Using *The Invisible String* (Karst, 2020) as a foundational tool for fostering connectedness despite physical separation, the project demonstrated improved feelings of connectedness (Roberson et al., 2024). This mixed-methods, quasi-experimental study found that participating fathers reported enhanced emotional bonds and perceived closeness with their children, while qualitative findings highlighted sustained relationships despite physical separation (Roberson et al., 2024).

A notable example is the Women's Storybook Project of Texas (WSP), which connects incarcerated mothers with their children through recorded storybooks to maintain family bonds and promote literacy. Since 2003, WSP has enabled 21,046 mothers to record stories, mailing 46,801 books and recordings to children with the support of 759 active volunteers contributing 72,596 hours (Women's Storybook Project of Texas, n.d.). Success stories highlight the program's emotional impact. Children report feeling closer to their mothers when they hear their voices, with one child noting, "*I love hearing her voice,*" while mothers express gratitude for the opportunity to remain "*real in their little lives*" (Women's Storybook Project of Texas, n.d.). The program aims to reduce recidivism, citing research suggesting that mothers who maintain family contact are up to six times less likely to reoffend. Testimonials from participants and Texas Department of Criminal Justice officials emphasize improved mother-child connections and motivation for rehabilitation, demonstrating how such initiatives foster empathy and a love of reading despite separation (Women's Storybook Project of Texas, n.d.; O'Connell, 2019).

Innovative tools such as the Toniebox, a screen-free audio storytelling device, extend literacy support and integrate well with family literacy programs serving justice-involved populations. A 2024 randomized study commissioned by tonies® and conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that children aged 3-5 using the Toniebox demonstrated 32% higher emergent literacy scores, including story comprehension and vocabulary, than non-users over 12 weeks, while also exhibiting reduced screen time (Norman & Wardrip, 2025). An independent 2023 study by FUNdamentally Children, involving 100 children aged 2-5 over 12 weeks, reported improvements in comprehension (60%; average increase of 13%), vocabulary (66%), and attention during activities (53%) (FUNdamentally Children, 2023). These auditory and interactive features promote phonological awareness and engagement, making tonies® well suited to supporting parental involvement through recorded family literacy experiences.

Low literacy perpetuates disadvantages among justice-involved populations; however, prison education, family literacy programs such as WSP, and tools like the Toniebox

provide pathways to skill-building, stronger family connections, empathy, and reading motivation. Insights from Allington's (2010, 2017) research on preventing achievement gaps through increased access to books further support proactive interventions aimed at interrupting cycles of justice involvement. Integrating these approaches could enhance reentry outcomes and strengthen intergenerational family relationships. The partnerships described in the following section explore scalable implementation in correctional settings in West Texas.

tonies® Discovery

My serendipitous discovery of tonies® occurred at the American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) National Conference, where I happened upon the tonies® exhibit among other vendors representing products that support family and consumer sciences and related industries. This chance encounter sparked an engaging conversation with tonies® representatives, leading to a fruitful corporate partnership that aligned their educational tools and outreach goals with my research agenda. The pivotal "aha" moment came when I learned about the customizable recording feature on Creative-Tonies, immediately recognizing how these screen-free audio devices could be integrated into my community-engaged research projects at the local detention center—enabling incarcerated parents to record personal stories and messages for their children, thereby fostering literacy, emotional connection, and family bonds despite physical separation.

The screen-free design added another layer of appeal by supporting efforts to reduce children's screen time, an area identified in recent research as increasingly important (Schmitt, 2021; Li et al., 2025). Accordingly, tonies® was adopted as a developmentally appropriate and engaging screen-free device that aligned with the study's objectives of encouraging storytelling and reading while strengthening family literacy connections.

Evolution of Blooming Partnerships

This chance encounter at the AAFCS conference evolved into a corporate partnership with tonies®, which expressed strong interest in supporting my literacy-focused programming at the local detention center. The collaboration aligned closely with my longstanding commitment to correctional education and to using literacy as a mechanism for sustaining family connections during incarceration.

Because an established partnership with the detention center was already in place, implementation of the tonies® initiative proceeded smoothly. Administrators and staff responded enthusiastically to the proposed project, recognizing its potential to enhance family engagement. We began with a small-scale pilot in which seven incarcerated parents recorded *The Invisible String*, with each reading uploaded to a Creative-Tonies device for families to use during shared reading experiences (see Figure 2). The effects were immediate and meaningful. Families reported a heightened emotional connection as children listened repeatedly to their parents' recorded voices, often expressing excitement and comfort while engaging with the story. These interactions appeared to promote empathy and positive attitudes toward reading. As awareness of the project grew, colleagues and community leaders increasingly recognized the initiative as an innovative and replicable model for supporting family literacy among justice-involved populations.

Figure 2. *tonies® Kickoff Party*



Note. Detention education staff, student research assistant, principal investigator, and correctional officers. Families of residents at the detention center were invited to learn about tonies®, the importance of fostering a love of reading, and ways to participate in the program.

Encouraged by the success of the initial pilot, I was invited to lead a crowdfunding campaign aimed at expanding the project's reach. The initiative resonated strongly with community members, generating \$7,600 in donor support from individuals committed to disrupting intergenerational cycles of low literacy among justice-involved families. Building on this momentum, a local Extension agent contacted me to adapt the model for a 4-H-supported initiative. Together, we developed a parent-child holiday reading project within the county jail. This collaboration resulted in a \$1,000 Walmart Community Impact Grant, enabling the program to reach more than 40 families. As part of the initiative, incarcerated parents selected holiday stories and mailed them home alongside Christmas cards, creating meaningful family connections and moments of shared joy despite incarceration. An additional goal of this book-mail-out initiative was to strengthen relationships with correctional administrators, paving the way for introducing tonies®-based programming.

While this holiday initiative was underway, I received an invitation to pilot the program at a local juvenile detention facility. Five residents who were parents participated in tailored programming that integrated tonies® recordings with structured literacy workshops. Concurrently, a nonprofit organization learned about the project through media coverage and shared the work with the supervisor of education at a federal correctional facility. This outreach led to the launch of an ongoing pilot involving ten incarcerated parents. In this setting, tonies® recordings were used to support parental involvement and promote child development from within the correctional environment.

Seeking to further scale the initiative, I contacted the Women's Storybook Project of Texas to explore integrating tonies® technology into its established programming model. The organization agreed to pilot the approach at a state women's correctional facility, blending the existing parent-child storybook recording process with tonies®-based readings to expand services available to incarcerated mothers.

These efforts have continued to generate productive collaborations. Informal connections made at professional conferences and community events have drawn

educators, local authors, and fellow scholars into the project. These collaborators now contribute complementary programming alongside tonies® recording sessions, including instruction in storytelling techniques, empathy-building activities, and creative writing practices. Such additions have enriched participants' skill development while deepening the quality of recorded materials shared with families. The cumulative momentum from these early partnerships has also opened pathways to broader interdisciplinary support. Grant proposals are currently under development, targeting cross-college and cross-university funding opportunities to support sustainable scaling of the tonies® initiative. These proposals aim to secure resources for larger participant cohorts, expanded instructional components, and systematic evaluation of outcomes related to family connectedness, child literacy development, and participant rehabilitation.

One especially promising collaboration is emerging with colleagues in theater arts. This partnership seeks to design a specialized curriculum that integrates tonies® characters with theater-based production activities suitable for implementation within correctional facilities. Participants will use Creative-Tonies to record scripted scenes, character voices, or original narratives inspired by the figurines while participating in theater workshops focused on confidence-building, public speaking, empathy development, and creative expression. These sessions are expected to culminate in small-scale theatrical performances, with recordings shared either with families or within the facility. In this way, the act of recording becomes a multidimensional literacy and personal development experience. By integrating dramatic arts into the existing family-connection model, the project aims to deepen emotional engagement, provide meaningful skill-building opportunities, and further strengthen family bonds central to the initiative's goals.

This collaboration exemplifies how the tonies® project continues to attract diverse partners who recognize its potential not only as a literacy intervention but also as a platform for holistic rehabilitation and family reconnection. What began as a serendipitous encounter at a national conference has evolved into a multifaceted initiative that unites educators, correctional professionals, nonprofit organizations,

corporate supporters, and performing arts faculty. What began as a serendipitous discovery evolved into a collaborative network united by a shared vision of leveraging innovative, screen-free technology to foster literacy development, empathy, and enduring family connections within justice-involved communities.

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