

Learning to read

Alphabet soup

How women inside are teaching fellow prisoners to read

Women in prison tell us they read this magazine aloud to friends inside, who can't read themselves. If you are reading this article then you are OK but many women in prison struggle with their ABC, and may be too embarrassed to say so.

Prison education departments run reading classes, but some women may not be ready for these, or feel like going to education.

But the good news is you can learn to read in prison without sitting in a classroom.

Women who can read are teaching fellow prisoners to, one to one, on the Toe by Toe scheme. It is called Toe by Toe because students learn to read by taking very small steps, one toe at a time.

Pairs – a mentor (teaching reading) and a mentee (learning to read) - meet up for 20 minutes four or five times a week, usually in each other's cells, for tuition.

Every woman learning to read gets a red book, which she works through, supported by her mentor, at her own pace. Learners start with the alphabet and move on slowly, to words then sentences then paragraphs then short stories.

Anyone who knows how to read can be a mentor. You will need enthusiasm, patience and commitment. It is a big responsibility but teaching someone to read can make you feel really good.

Toe by Toe is a good way of using your time in prison productively.

The scheme is organised by a charity, the Shannon Trust. Each prison – surprise, surprise - has a slightly different scheme. Sometimes mentors are paid and sometimes not.

So what is it like to be a mentee (learning to read) or mentor (teaching reading) inside?

Sally and Tina, Downview

Sally

I had problems at school with reading and writing and when I came to prison I couldn't read anything. In prison there are lots of forms and notices to read and I had to keep asking people for help, which I didn't like. I became friends with Tina, who introduced me to the Toe by Toe scheme and is my mentor.

I can now read all the letters sent to me by my family and boyfriend and I can even write letters back. I also made a story tape for my son, which was very special

I can write my own applications and fill out my own menu.

I found working on a one to one basis great, as I have always found group work difficult.

Tina

I have worked with several women including Sally and have enjoyed it. Working with Sally was special as we became good friends and I could see how much improving her reading helped.

Toe by Toe has also helped my own confidence, as I can leave prison feeling I've contributed something useful.

May and Susie, Downview

May

I am from Sri Lanka and my first language is Tamil. I lived in London for seven years before coming to prison and could understand and speak a little English but could not read or write it.

I found prison very scary at first and I found it difficult to communicate with the officers. I have now been working on the scheme with my mentor Susie for eight months and I am so happy and grateful to her.

Susie

I became involved with Toe by Toe after seeing posters displayed around the prison. I thought "I could do that" and asked in the library about becoming a mentor. After a short training session and introduction to the scheme I was ready to start and got paired up with May .

She was very shy and quiet at first but after eight months I have got to know her and it is fantastic to see how much her reading and confidence have progressed.

I feel fortunate in being able to read and write well and enjoy the satisfaction of helping others. I have also done some peer advising and an NVQ course and all of these have helped my own self-esteem. I feel I am "giving something back".

Alison, Styal

When I came into prison I could skim a magazine and look as though I was reading but I didn't understand most of it. I dreaded someone asking me what I thought about what I was reading. Mainly I looked at the pictures.

Then I started Toe by Toe.

Now I'm dead chuffed. I'm really delighted that I can now finish a book, as I have never been able to before.

Claire and Nina, Styal

Claire

I am a Toe by Toe mentor. I have an A level in English language and am doing a degree in early childhood studies.

I help out one morning a week in a skills for life class. There I help to encourage and support students who may be struggling with reading and spelling. It was in that class that I first met Nina, a lady I now mentor. We seem to get on well and we meet on her house on a regular basis.

Toe by Toe has given me a focus during my stay in prison and a real sense of achievement.

Nina

When I first came into prison I could not read or write and did not want anyone to know. After much encouragement I decided to give Toe by Toe a go.

I now feel very proud of myself.

I don't like it when other prisoners make fun of me because I need help with my reading. They should mind their own business.

One day I would like to be able to become a mentor and help others.

Marie, Send

One of my mentees completed the course just before she was released. She was from Colombia and her English was extremely poor before she came to prison. I was able to give her more confidence in speaking, reading and writing English and her development over the five months as she did Toe by Toe was incredible.

I am now working with a woman who has severe dyslexia. The steps are very small but we are making good progress.

I feel really privileged to be part of such a worthwhile scheme and hope that it is available in more prisons in the future.

Find out more

Want to learn to read?

Learning to read may not be high on your list of things to do if you have lots of other issues to deal with but why not consider doing Toe by Toe?

Want to teach others to read?

Mentors say it is really rewarding and helps improve their own confidence - as well as the confidence of the women they are teaching to read.

Toe by Toe is available at Askham Grange, Bronzefield, Downview, Drake Hall, Eastwood Park, Foston Hall, Low Newton, Morton Hall, New Hall, Peterborough, Send and Styal.

Get involved by asking in the library or education or look out for posters and for mentors wearing Toe by Toe t-shirts.

If there is no scheme at your prison, then ask your learning and skills manager to contact the Shannon Trust to find out how to set one up.

www.shannontrust.org.uk

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