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Prison program is 'one that works'

## 4-H trying to reach a different audience

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By PAULA BARR Daily Journal Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, July 13, 2010 10:37 am | (2)

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Paula Barr / Daily Journal One of the children's favorite games teaches listening and communication skills and emphasizes the need to listen to the right people when you make decisions.

## Related Video



### 4-H LIFE Families

The 4-H LIFE provides families with a monthly opportunity to interact in a more normal manner.

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## Info

Part two of the 4H video will be available for viewing Wednesday morning.

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***Editor's Note:** This is the third in a three-part series which examines 4-H LIFE, a family-strengthening program developed by the Washington County University of Missouri Extension Office. The program gives prison families a way to interact.*

## It works

**POTOSI** — The three boys fidgeted at a square table for several hours, stretching part way across the top to be closer to the tall, heavy set man with whom they never had enough time. When it came time to leave, the youngest, a pudgy 6-year old with sad eyes stopped at the exit turn, turned around and waved as his father headed toward the door that led to the bowels of the prison.

“I love you, Daddy! I love you!” he shouted. Then he burst into tears.

It was the summer of 1999, and children could do nothing but sit when they visited their dads at Potosi Correctional Center (PCC). The same five children's books kept on a table near the microwave were the only distraction to take the children's minds off the hard plastic chairs and

the rules that kept them from getting an extra hug or a kiss on the cheek – natural touches that parents use to reassure a child he or she is loved and valued.

“We need to do something for these kids,” an inmate sitting in the visiting room said. “Why don’t we start a 4-H club in prison?”

Washington County 4-H Youth Specialist Lynna Lawson jumped at the idea when she heard the proposal.

“4-H is trying to reach out to new audiences,” Lawson said. “Let’s do it.”

### **Breaking the cycle**

Jo Turner was the statewide 4-H director for the University of Missouri Extension. Turner thought the 4-H LIFE proposal for the Potosi Correctional Center (PCC) was an innovative idea to take proven benefits of 4-H to reach an underserved and largely ignored population of children.

Early research indicated that children who have a parent in prison are six times more likely than other children to end up in prison themselves. Despite the research, there were very few programs in the country at that time that focused on children of incarcerated parents. Girl Scouts had programs in some women’s prisons around the United States, and there were some programs that worked with prison families in the community.

Until 4-H LIFE, no program worked with the whole family inside the prison.

To help stop the cycle of intergenerational incarceration, Missouri 4-H identified three basic needs: Teach the offenders to be better parents and positive role models, provide support to the caregivers, and teach children how to make better choices and become leaders. With the help of a \$100,000 grant from CYFAR (Children Youth and Families at Risk), Extension developed the program with the cooperation of the Missouri Department of Corrections.

Within eight months, the new program, named 4-H LIFE (Living Interactive Family Education), held its first family meeting in the prison’s visiting room.

The program celebrated its 10th anniversary with a Family Appreciation Day at PCC in June. Among the many awards the PCC program has received is the prestigious Annie Casey Family Strengthening Award for outstanding programs that help youth, and the National Priester Health Award. It also has been named a Program of Distinction by the USDA. The work being done in 4-H LIFE has caught national attention from coast to coast.

“The National 4-H Council is working to secure national funding so we can expand into other states that are interested in helping families be stronger despite incarceration,” explained Gillespie, program coordinator for the 4-H LIFE program.

Gillespie, who volunteers with 4-H LIFE in the women's prison in Vandalia, and Shawn Murphy, site supervisor at the Chilicothe prison for women, said 4-H LIFE is just as beneficial for incarcerated mothers as for imprisoned fathers.

"There's a lot more nurturing, more physical contact in the women's prison, but there are a lot of similarities," Murphy said after spending time at the PCC anniversary celebration. "Offenders take strong leadership in the program and make it their own. The caretakers continue to foster the life skills the children learn.

"4-H LIFE is a program that works."

### **Better leaders**

Ina Linville, current state director of 4-H youth development, said research shows that the more caring adults there are in a young person's life, the more likely it is that they will grow to become healthy, productive citizens. Those connections need to be with parents as well as other adults.

Although some people question why convicted criminals should have quality time with their children, children love their parents, regardless of the mistakes or crimes the parent has made.

"A lot of these guys didn't have much parenting or have much of a childhood, to be honest," said Wilkerson, who teaches parenting classes to inmates at PCC. "When we started presenting them with information about ways to interact, ways to communicate, and decision making, I think a lot of them realized that they didn't want their children to be raised the way they were and turn out like they did."

Wilkerson and Lawson noted many changes among the children in the club. Those changes include increased self-confidence, better social skills and sharing of feelings instead of keeping their emotions hidden.

4-H LIFE benefits the whole family. That is important when one considers that 96 percent of offenders will be back in society at some point, and research shows strong family ties help them avoid future criminal behavior, Gillespie pointed out.

"This is not a goodie for the offenders but it is something that has public value," Gillespie said. "It helps offenders become more responsible, loving parents, which helps with their eventual family integration and community integration. That is more beneficial for our children and for our communities."

### **Frequent evaluation**

The 4-H LIFE program included ongoing evaluation by Extension and CYFAR (Children, Youth and Families at Risk), which funded the pilot program in PCC. The first seven years focused on evaluation of life skills outcomes for the participating youth.

Gifford has seen a few children grow up in the program.

“They’ve matured into young adults,” he said. “I think it’s good for them. I really think it helps to have this contact with their families and in classes like today’s where they learn to spend property. It teaches them skills and it helps them grow.”

For the past three years, evaluation has focused on the relationship among family members and the incarcerated parent.

“The caregivers, in particular, experience a lot less stress during the prison visits,” Gillespie said. “They say their children are improving their communication skills and their leadership skills.”

Alexius said 4-H LIFE has helped her whole family, but the best part is, she and her father now talk about important things.

“We can talk and have fun at the same time in 4-H LIFE,” she said. “He’ll know what’s going on and what I can and can’t do.

“This is my father and I want to know what’s really going on. Now, even though my dad is in prison, he’s still with me.”

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