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## Mo. prison program fosters family ties behind bars

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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VANDALIA, Mo. (AP) -- The crayons, construction paper and toddlers scattered on the floor suggest a typical daycare center or kindergarten classroom. The armed guards and surveillance cameras reveal a painful reality.

The handful of inmates gathered for the monthly program at the Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center include some of the state's most notorious female convicted murderers.

But their crimes don't prevent the women's loved ones from calling them Mommy and Grandma, or from needing a hug or words of encouragement. And while the inmates do time, their children and grandchildren often struggle with feelings of anger, resentment and betrayal.

[University of Missouri](#) outreach workers started the family support program in 1999 at the state's maximum security prison in Potosi. Known as the Living Interactive Family Education program, or 4-H LIFE, is now offered in Potosi, Vandalia and the Algoa Correctional Center in Jefferson City.

"There are many education programs for incarcerated parents," said program director Tammy Gillespie. "But not a whole lot that work with the entire family."

More than 1.7 million children in this country have a parent in prison, according to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics. And more than half of the estimated 1.5 million inmates in U.S. prisons last year were themselves parents.

From a loss of custody to emotional damage and financial hardship, those fractured families face challenges even after the missing parent is released, Gillespie noted. The inmate education program is designed to strengthen family bonds while also teaching the parenting skills necessary to survive in the outside world.

"We're not just an activity to keep people busy," she said. "We're trying to build skills that will last a lifetime."

"They get to practice their parenting skills in a safe environment," Gillespie added. "And they get a chance to show their family and their children that they're trying to do better."

Visitation rules during the monthly meetings are far more relaxed than during traditional visits, according to participants and their family members.

Physical contact is allowed, children can play freely, and the environment is more nurturing than punitive, said Carrie Melton, who brought her son and daughter, ages 5 and 7, to visit Patricia Prewitt, Melton's mother.

Prewitt, 59, is serving a 50-year sentence for the 1984 slaying of her husband in Johnson County, a crime she and her family insist she didn't commit.

"Normally, they're walking around yelling at you nonstop," Melton said of the prison guards' conduct during traditional visits. "You have to sit still, you can't move -- they treat us like inmates."

Tonya Blackburn, 30, has served nearly one-third of the 12-year sentence she received for the second-degree murder of an abusive boyfriend. Her son Brian, now 14, just started high school.

"I get angry at myself a lot because I'm not there," said Blackburn, whose son lives with her elderly mother.

Participants in the Potosi program reported improved communication with their children, stronger family bonds and fewer behavioral problems by their children. University interviews with the children, in turn, indicated similar benefits.

The Missouri effort has caught the attention of researchers and prison administrators in other states, and earned the program an award from the nonprofit Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Gillespie said she hopes to expand 4-H LIFE to other state prisons such as Farmington, perhaps through a virtual setting that would enable families to visit remotely without having to travel long distances.

Ruby Jamerson, a 55-year-old grandmother of three serving a life sentence for first-degree murder, is also a participant in the Vandalia program.

Her 30-year-old daughter was 9 when Jamerson was locked up, and long grown by the time the 4-H program was in place. So Jamerson's focus now rests squarely on her grandchildren -- as well as the children and grandkids of other inmates.

"They're not alone," she said, describing the sense of comfort some children experience at the monthly meetings. "They see there are other kids who have relatives in prison."

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On the Net:

<http://extension.missouri.edu/fcrp/lifeevaluation>

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