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4-H program helps family stay bonded despite prison bars

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Cora Hall congratulates her son Caleb after his school band concert on Dec. 15. While she was able to visit with her children more often through the 4-H LIFE program, the holiday concert was the first time Cora saw her son perform. | [Benjamin Zack](#)

BY [Amanda Del Buono](#)

CHILLICOTHE — At first glance, there's no signs that she's been gone for four years. As Cora Hall sits on the living room couch in her small home, her two boys jump on her and joke with her, and she looks at her husband as if the two were never separated.

Hall recently finished a four-year prison sentence for embezzlement. With the help of the [4-H LIFE program](#), she was able to spend time with her sons outside of the prison's visiting room. It allowed her to maintain a relationship with them while she was in prison.

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Missouri's 4-H LIFE program has seen such great success that the national 4-H council has awarded \$577,000 to the University of Missouri Extension-4-H Department to replicate Missouri's program in 11 other prisons around the country.

Through the program, Cora Hall's boys, Caleb, 12, and Corom, 17, were able to visit their mother once a month in a less restrictive environment than the prison visiting room. Each month when they came, the boys were able to do crafts and other activities with their mom.

"Over the years, Caleb especially got tired of the regular visits. They were fairly restrictive. I mean, you sit at a table, you can have a meal together, you can sit and talk, but that's about it," Cora Hall said.

But in the room outfitted especially for the program, Cora Hall and her kids made pillowcases and gardened, among other things.

"We made dog beds for the Puppies on Parole program at the prison one of the times," Corom said.

In October, the children did Halloween-related crafts. "We got a burlap knapsack full of random stuff and candy," Caleb said.

The boys enjoyed the activities with their mother, while she took classes during the week for anger management, parenting and other life skills.

"With 4-H, there's actually a lot of work that goes into the visit before the visit occurs, and it really helps teach the offenders how to organize and have leadership skills," Cora Hall said.

The 4-H LIFE program's curriculum was developed by MU's Building Strong Families, a strengths-based family curriculum, said Lynna Lawson, 4-H youth development specialist. There are 13 modules in the course, and some institutions use all of them while others select a few.

"The primary ones we use are communication, understanding families, positive discipline, financial planning, decision making and goal setting," she said. "We want it to be driven by the families and kids as much as we can."

Enrollment in the program is dependent upon each institution, however all participating institutions follow specific guidelines. The offender must be violation-free within the institution. The offender cannot be serving time for sex offenses or crimes against children, and the family members who visit must be on the approved visiting list from the institution, Lawson said.

Cora Hall said she recommended the program to several mothers in prison. "It just expanded a lot of things for us," she said. "It changed the way I saw my kids, and it did change our relationship. I looked forward to those visits probably more than the kids did."

Cora Hall said she's in favor of any kind of program that helps keep families together while one member is in prison. "There is not a lot of support for families remaining intact while going through the prison experience," she said.

And still, there are many families in this situation. A [survey](#) taken by the [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#) in 2007, found that over 800,000 prisoners in state and federal prisons combined had children under the age of 18. The study estimated that there were about 1,706,600 children with a parent in prison nationwide.

The benefits for Hall's family went beyond the fundamental goal of family cohesiveness. "It let me see my family in more of a whole and not just the parts that I saw," she said. "The 4-H visits allowed me to see more of who they are. I mean honestly, who sits with their 4-year-old child and talks for four hours?"

Changes

When Cora Hall was sentenced, her family decided to move away from Springfield, where they lived, and go wherever she would be incarcerated.

"When we found out she was coming to Chillicothe, we had already made up our minds that whether she was going to Vandalia or Chillicothe we were moving there," Cora Hall's husband, John, said.

For Corom and Caleb, that meant leaving their schools and activities. It meant leaving their friends. It meant giving up their large home and settling for something smaller so they could be closer to their mother.

"It was difficult," Corom said. "It was moving again, giving up old friends and getting new ones."

At first, Cora Hall didn't want her husband and sons to uproot themselves. "I thought, at the time, that they didn't need to be wasting their lives trying to take care of me in prison," she said.

But Caleb told his mom that they moved not to take care of her but for her to take care of them.

That taught Cora Hall an important lesson. "They needed me, and they needed a mother in any capacity that I could be and a wife in any capacity that I could be," she said. "Once I understood that and how different their motivation was, I was completely behind it."

The [Cambridge Study on Delinquent Development](#), though done from 1961-1981, is still considered to be one of the most accurate studies of the effects of a parent's incarceration on a child.

The study observed children who had a parent in prison versus those that didn't from childhood through their adult life. It found that children with a parent in prison were more likely to have behavioral and psychological problems. Programs such as 4-H LIFE hope to lower the odds that the children will develop problems during and after their parents' imprisonment.

Life in prison

For Cora Hall, prison was "horrible and mind-numbingly boring." She had to be away from her kids for four long years. "I hated watching them grow up from a distance, but they are such amazing young men," she said.

She worried about her kids and how her incarceration would affect them socially. At one point, she was on a road crew cleaning up trash right outside her oldest son's high school. She worried that when school let out the other kids would see Corom's mom picking up trash.

"I didn't want him to be embarrassed — not for my sake, but for his own," Cora Hall said.

Though she missed watching her sons grow up, Cora Hall saw an upside. "I think my absence from them strengthened them," she said. "I see the maturity in my children that I don't think they could have gotten with me at home."

Cora and John Hall spent a lot of time reading together during the four years. John Hall would buy a book, and Cora Hall would rent it at the prison library. "It gave us something to talk about besides prison," she said.

"We (Cora and John) didn't ever spend time alone together, it didn't work that way. And that's part of the control of the prison system. We would have never been alone together," Cora Hall said.

"It was a long four years. I'm complete now, my life is full. Before half of me was missing," John Hall said.

While Cora Hall has a few things to get used to at home, like figuring out whose clothes are whose on laundry day, the boys seem to feel that they are back to normal.

Corom refers to his dad as "second-in-command" and argues with his mother when she takes his cellphone away.

"I think we learned what my strengths are and what John's strengths are and what the kids' strengths are and how we complement each other in weak spots," Cora Hall said.

Sitting in the living room, her husband jokingly tells her that she can have the kids now. "I've had them for four years," he said with a smile. "It's her turn."

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