

Parenting Connection

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Children's Literacy Foundation Opens Books, Opens Minds, Opens Doors

The Children's Literacy Foundation (CLiF) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to nurture a love of reading and writing among children throughout New Hampshire and Vermont. CLiF's motto is "Opening Books, Opening Minds, Opening Doors."

Since 1998 CLiF has served more than 125,000 children in nearly 400 communities across every region of these two rural New England states. CLiF targets two groups of children from birth to age 12:

1. Children in rural communities where resources are limited
2. Children who are at high risk of growing up with low literacy skills

Through 16 free programs, CLiF serves young readers and writers who have the greatest needs, including children in shelters, children in low-income housing, children of prison inmates, refugee children, migrant children, children from low-income families, children in Head Start, children in communities undergoing severe economic challenges, and many other at-risk youth.

CLiF does not receive any state or federal funds. Their programs are supported entirely by donations from individuals, companies, foundations, and social organizations.

Children of Prison Inmates

CLiF has designed a powerful program to serve children of prison inmates and their families by creating on-site libraries in prison visiting rooms, giving books for children to take home and keep, supporting prisons' Storybook Programs, and offering literacy seminars for prisoners to help them read with their children.

Children of prison inmates, for a variety of societal and economic reasons, are at extremely high risk of
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growing up with low literacy skills. There are approximately 5,000 male and female inmates in 16 prisons across New Hampshire and Vermont. CLiF has sponsored all of these prisons at least once. There are hundreds more inmates in various jails across New Hampshire. Roughly 70% of these inmates perform at the lowest literacy levels and many of them have children of their own.

The Children's Literacy Foundation provides the following support to each prison and jail they sponsor:

- **Books for a Family Visiting Room Library:** CLiF donates a total of \$2,000 worth of new, high-quality children's books to each prison or jail for an on-site library in a facility's family visiting room for use by children on family visiting days, or by family members and volunteers to read aloud with children. Representatives from each sponsored facility select these books from the CLiF Booklist.
- **Storytelling Presentation:** A CLiF representative visits the prison or jail to meet with the children of inmates and their families, deliver the new books, tell stories, and talk about the joys of words, books, and reading. The presenter also performs interactive storytelling, talks about many of the books being donated to the family visiting room, and reads aloud from some of the books. These events entertain the children and stimulate young minds, but they also model to the adults in the audience -- many of who have had little experience with storytelling -- effective ways to tell stories and read books to children.
- **Books for Children to Keep:** CLiF donates a selection of new children's books for the children of inmates to take home and keep. Some children select their books at a special storytelling and book delivery event held at the correctional facility and others their books when they come to visit their mother or father at the prison or jail.
- **Storybook Program:** A program offered at many of the prisons and jails in Vermont and New Hampshire, the Storybook Program gives inmates the opportunity to record a book on tape and send it along with the story home to their children. CLiF donates books towards this initiative and helps start the Storybook program in interested facilities.
- **Seminars for Parents:** A CLiF representative visits the prison or jail to conduct seminars with inmates who are parents on the importance of reading with their children, and how to make reading with children fun and easy, even if an inmate has low literacy skills.

"I would like to thank you and the foundation for the generous donation of books for both our children's library, and those we have been able to give away as gifts. As you can imagine, having to visit your father in prison is not an ideal situation. The addition of the library has certainly been a great gift! I am told many of the fathers are taking advantage of the books, and use them every week. I would also like to thank you for taking time on Father's Day to visit our facility and read to the families. On behalf of the Department of Corrections, I would like to thank the Children's Literacy Foundation for recognizing the needs of the families of inmates."

You can find out more about the Children's Literacy Foundation and view other comments from individuals in prisons and jails where CLiF has awarded sponsorship by going to www.clifonline.org. There you can also find out how you can support the Children's Literacy Foundation's important work.

Need Help?

Do you have any questions or need some advice on starting or improving your parenting classes, parent/child literacy program, or parent support group for offenders?

We have an email list of almost 200 parenting educators from 29 states who are eager to help. Just send an email to jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com with your question or request and I will forward it to our email list. Then wait a few days and the helping responses will be sent to you.



Mothers, Infants and Imprisonment

A National Look at Prison Nurseries and Community-Based Alternatives

In a May 2009 report, Women's Prison Association (WPA) highlights two different responses to women who give birth while under criminal justice supervision: prison nurseries and community-based residential parenting programs. The report provides an overview of both types of programs, reviews the literature on the subject, and offers recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

Between 1977 and 2007, the number of women in prison in the United States increased by 832 percent. According to data released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), in 2004 four percent of women in state prisons and three percent of women in federal prisons were pregnant at the time of admittance. In 1999, BJS reported that six percent of women in local jails were pregnant at the time of admittance. As the number of women in prison has skyrocketed over the past 30 years, states have had to consider what it means to lock up women, many of whom are pregnant or parenting.

Child development experts, academics and policy makers debate what is best for mothers and children when a mother gives birth while under criminal justice supervision. According to the WPA report, there is no national policy that dictates what happens to children born to mothers who are under correctional supervision. The overwhelming majority of children born to incarcerated mothers are separated from their mothers immediately after birth and placed with relatives or into foster care. In a handful of states, women have other options: prison nurseries and community-based residential parenting programs.

Prison nursery programs allow a mother to parent her infant for a finite period of time within a special housing unit at the prison. Community-based residential parenting programs allow mothers to keep their infants with them while they fulfill their sentences in residential programs in the community.

Up to the 1950s, prison based nursery programs for children born in custody were common in correctional facilities across the country. By the early 1970s every state, except New York, had closed their nursery programs. Costs and lack of need, along with the fact that most babies could be placed with family members, were cited as reasons for the closures. Now, with more women being incarcerated than ever before – and a growing recognition of the importance of the family bond to both maternal and child success – several states are taking steps to keep mothers and infants together.

The rationale for investing in prison nurseries and community-based residential parenting programs rests upon evidence that early mother-child bonding results in positive future outcomes for both mother and child. Research published by the American Psychological Society found that infants who bond securely with their mothers become more self-reliant and have higher self-esteem as toddlers. Later in life, this translates into successful peer relationships and the ability to better cope with life stressors. Allowing infants and young children to stay with their incarcerated mothers may also improve outcomes for the mothers. According to a report by New York State Department of Correctional Services, when a person has strong ties to their family during incarceration they have a much lower risk of recidivism than those who lack those strong ties.

Critics of these parenting programs argue that prison is not an appropriate environment for children and that living in prison may have harmful effects on the child later in life. Others have expressed the view that women who have broken the law are unable or unwilling to be mothers to their children and therefore should not have the privilege of parenting.

In the course of writing their report, WPA interviewed officials at existing or soon-to-open prison nursery programs in nine states: California, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Nebraska, New York, South Dakota, Washington, and West Virginia.



Findings

The number of prison-based nursery programs is growing, but such programs are still rare.

- Though every state has seen a dramatic rise in its women's prison population over the past three decades, only nine states have prison nursery programs in operation or under development.
- All of the current prison nursery programs, with the exception of the program at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York, have opened within the last 20 years.
- Of the nine prison nursery programs existing or in development, four were created within the last five years.

Research shows that these programs benefit mothers and children.

- When adequate resources are available for prison nursery programs, women who participate show lower rates of recidivism, and their children show no adverse affects as a result of their participation.
- By keeping mothers and infants together, these programs prevent foster care placement and allow for the formation of maternal/child bonds during a critical period of infant development.

Many women parenting their infants in prison nurseries could be doing so in the community instead.

- The profile of women in prison nurseries is nearly identical to that of participants in community-based programs. Women in both types of programs are serving relatively short sentences for non-violent offenses, and will continue primary caretaking responsibility for their child(ren) upon release.
- Most women in prison nursery programs present little risk to public safety. The issues that bring most women in contact with the criminal justice system – drug addiction, lack of education, poverty – are better addressed in a community setting than in prison.

Characteristics of Prison Nursery Programs

Prison nurseries are a reemerging trend within correctional facilities. Most of the programs identified in this brief were developed within the last ten to fifteen years, during a time when the female prison population has increased sharply. The exception is the nursery at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility of New York, originally opened in 1901, making it the oldest in the country. This program has served as a model for many of the other prison nursery programs.

There are currently seven states that allow women who are pregnant at the time of sentencing to keep their infants with them inside a correctional facility after the baby's birth: Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Nebraska, New York, South Dakota, and Washington. Two other states, California and West Virginia, are in the process of creating prison nursery programs. The WPA research found only one jail in the nation that has a prison nursery, Rikers Island in New York City.

Many similarities exist among programs. All states with prison nursery programs consider applications only when the child is born in state custody. As a general rule, the mother must not have been convicted of a violent crime or have a past history of child abuse or neglect. Often, mothers are required to sign waivers releasing the facility from any responsibility if their children become sick or injured. The stated purpose of these nursery programs is to facilitate bonding between mothers and their children. As a result, in most facilities, the duration of the child's stay and participation in the program is dependent upon the length of the mother's sentence.

The maximum allowable duration of a child's stay varies between the different facilities. At the South Dakota Women's Prison, infants are only permitted to stay for 30 days. In contrast, the Washington Correctional Center for Women allows children to stay with their incarcerated mothers for up to three years. The average maximum allowable length of stay for a child at most facilities is between 12 to 18 months.

The capacities of prison nursery programs differ considerably. The Decatur Correctional Center in Illinois, started in 2007, has space for five mother/child pairs. Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York, on the



other hand, has the largest program in the nation with the capacity for 29 mother/child pairs. The manner in which mothers and children are housed is determined by each individual facility. In most facilities, the nursery program is in a wing or unit of the prison separated from the general population.

All of the prison-based programs provide educational programming in child development and parenting skills. Several facilities have structured their programs modeled on the prison nursery at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York. In addition to the nursery, the Children's Center at Bedford Hills offers a parenting center, prenatal center, infant day care center, and a child advocacy office. Through these programs, incarcerated mothers are able to participate in support groups, gain support and information about breastfeeding and learn about infant growth and development. Bedford Hills is also dedicated to supporting the mother-child bonds for women who do not participate in the nursery program. The visiting room at Bedford Hills has a special children's area where mothers can read to their children and play games. During the summer, a camp is held where children with incarcerated mothers stay with local host families at night and spend the day at the prison participating in activities with their mothers.

In addition to parenting and child development classes, the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women requires all women in the nursery who do not have a high school diploma to attend GED courses. The Washington Correctional Center for Women, due to the extended period (up to three years) a child is allowed to stay at the facility, offers Early HeadStart to all of the children who reside with their incarcerated mothers.

Recommendations

Informed by interviews with 25 experts across the country and WPA's review of available research on the topic, WPA offers the following recommendations:

Increase use of community corrections and reduce reliance on incarceration.

- Whenever possible, custodial parents and pregnant women under criminal justice supervision should be housed in community-based, non-incarcerative settings.
- Community corrections programs have been shown to protect public safety and reduce recidivism at a fraction of the human and economic costs of prison.

Enhance program features that promote overall family wellbeing in prison nurseries and community-based residential parenting programs.

- On the whole, prison nurseries and community-based residential parenting programs could better reflect the range of women's family needs, which often include children born prior to the mothers' current sentence.
- Programs should operate according to prevailing community child health and development standards.
- Mothers should be able to access educational and vocational services while participating in a mother-child program, as they will be expected to serve as both mothers and employees after their release.

Fund scientific research, participatory action research, and program evaluations of prison nurseries and community-based residential parenting programs to reveal best practices and the potential benefits of system reforms.

- There have been very few evaluations and scientific research studies conducted of prison nursery programs and even fewer of community-based mother-child programs.
- Through research, best practices and needed reforms can be identified and implemented.

To join CEA go to: www.ceanational.org



Miss Wisconsin Offers Inmates Hope

She is known for her poise and beauty, but last week Miss Wisconsin shared much more than that with nearly 200 inmates at Racine Correctional Institution (RCI).

Miss Wisconsin 2011 Laura Kaeppler, a contestant for the Miss America 2012 Pageant, spoke eloquently as she detailed her life as a child of an incarcerated parent.

Ms. Kaeppler visited RCI on November 2, a day that marks the start of a new chapter for her and her statewide platform "as an advocate and mentor for children of incarcerated parents."

In the 90-year history of the Miss America Pageant no contestant has ever had this platform, let alone visited a men's prison. Ms. Kaeppler chose RCI to present her program to the incarcerated parents themselves or "the other side", as she calls it.

During her year of service as she holds the title of Miss Wisconsin, Ms. Kaeppler will focus on a program she developed and is promoting throughout the state called Circles of Support – Mentoring Teens of Incarcerated Parents. According to Ms. Kaeppler, Circles of Support was created in an attempt to reduce the cycle of crime by mentoring children of incarcerated parents.

A total of 194 inmates at RCI registered to attend the Miss Wisconsin event and were not disappointed. The only requirement was everyone in attendance had to be a father. During her presentation, Ms. Kaeppler talked about the feelings children go through when their fathers are incarcerated and shared her own personal story.

Her father was sentenced to a year in federal prison when she was in high school. The presence of her father as a guest created a powerful impact. Her story included not only the ripple effect of crime but a message of hope and encouragement. She told the inmates that many relationships between incarcerated parents and their children have the potential for positive development.

Ms. Kaeppler demonstrated professionalism and confidence, especially when she answered the inmates' questions at the end of her talk. She is an accomplished public speaker and demonstrated her vocal talent by singing the National Anthem and a closing song.

Warden John Paquin said RCI staff and inmates were greatly enriched by Miss Wisconsin's presentation which he . He said it includes a "very positive, motivational and essential message that should be shared with other incarcerated parents."

Reprinted from: Department of Corrections Intranet Site posted 11/08/2011

Brain Blog: Love Is a Primary Need

On her blog <http://braininsights.blogspot.com>, Deborah McNelis posts information on the importance of brain development in the early years and how easy it is to provide stimulating activities for children. With Deborah's permission, in issues of this newsletter, we are including Brain Blogs from her blog. For the complete information, go to Deborah's blogspot.

For more Information on brain development or easy activities you can do with your child to promote brain development visit www.braininsightsonline.com.

This issue's Brain Blog by Deborah is:

Did You Know...?



- Feel good chemicals are released in the brain through loving interactions.
- Families and cultures that express warm physical affection have fewer issues with anger and aggression.
- Researchers who examine the life histories of children who have succeeded despite many challenges, have consistently found that these children have had at least one stable, supportive relationship with an adult early in life.

Of course the holidays are special because we take time to really focus on those we love. This season provides us the pause to focus on how important it is to give love and attention to children.

It is valuable to realize how much the brain has to do with relationships and the love we experience in our lives. Love is one of our primary needs throughout our lives.

Warm, responsive care-giving not only meets a child's basic day-to-day needs, but is also about responding to the emotional needs of children. Predictable and loving responsiveness is not only comforting, it plays a vital role in optimal mental health. The way that parents, families and other caregivers consistently relate and respond to young children, directly create influences learning and relationships later in life.

This all begins in infancy but does not end there. This is why I love to share the writing of Mark Brady, Ph.D. on what he calls, "Big Brain Question". Below are some pieces from his contributions on this topic.

Big Brain Question

The healthy brain is an anticipation-prediction machine. When we operate in environments where there is little predictability and we have little idea what to anticipate from one moment to the next, chronic stress results.

There's ONE question that all brains want answered, and they want it answered, "Yes." Parent's brains, children's brains, all brains. And they don't want a lukewarm "Yes," or a "Maybe Yes" or a "Getting-to-Yes Yes." They want a substantial, resounding, unequivocal, "YES!" Yes. When the answer is something other than "Yes," if the answer is "Maybe," or "I'm not sure," a confusion and uncertainty begins to take shape in our brains.

The Question our brains ask is Are you there for me?

Do I matter enough that you'll put me first when I need you to? Can I count on you to attend to me in the ways I need you to? Do I truly and deeply matter to you?

These questions are being asked – non-verbally through behavior often, and when they get answered "Yes," we can relax and begin to feel safe in our relationships. The self-preservation structures of the brain continually monitor our environment and the people in it for safety. Our survival depends upon it. We generally love the people we feel the safest being around, and the emotional responsiveness often identified as love arises out of this safe "felt sense."

My dream is for all children to grow with this loving safe and secure experience!

..... I also hope you and all those you care about have a holiday season and new year filled with the opportunity to both give and receive this wonderful feeling!



Editor's Musings:

There is a quote by William Butler Yeats that says, "Education is not filling a pail but the lighting of a fire." With the advent of a new year, it's time to light a fire. I find it all too easy to procrastinate, because my fire is merely smoldering. It's time to take stock of what has or has not worked in the past and figure out what could be done to change it. It's time to stoke the fire, whether it be through reading some interesting articles, reviewing curriculum, or just doing a little more positive self-talk. This sounds perilously close to a New Year's resolution, but research has proved that those who actually resolve to do something have a much better success rate than those who do not make any resolutions.

Stay warm, and light your fire.

Barb Rasmussen

For past issues of the *Parenting Connection* newsletter, go to www.ceawisconsin.org

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