

Nursery Programs in Prison

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Prison nurseries has proven to have less of a recidivism rate for women inmates in the nursery programs. The programs are for women with non-violent and non-child abuse crimes, and who do not have a criminal record of arson crimes as well. The main purpose of the prison nursery programs is letting the women inmates bond with their children for up to 24 months (Brown & Valiente, 2014). Medical professionals say that the baby does not realize they are in prison at such an early age. The experience is for bonding purposes which has been proven to be a success for mothers and their infants in the nursery programs. Since recidivism decreases for the women inmates after their prison sentence and they are released, they save the state government money because it costs less to have an inmate in the program, than to have them return back to jail. The cost of having a baby supported in a nursery program is \$24,000 a year, that is less than \$30,000 for each woman that returns to be incarcerated who did not participate in the program (Brown & Valiente, 2014). In addition to lowering the recidivism rate for women inmates who were in the nursery programs, those women also learn to be better parents since they are required to attend parenting classes and take care of their children. The goal is to stay with the child so when they are released they are still together, and not separated by sending their infant to the foster care system or have multiple separations afterwards (Carlson 2009).

The bonding rate is higher for the women in the nursery programs that are incarcerated than women bonding without criminal records. A study showed that there was a 71 percent higher bonding rate. There is debate about having nurseries in prison for the mothers, because some say it should be punishment and not pleasure for them. There is enough punishment that the women go through when they are doing their regular inmate work and not living in freedom (Carlson 2009). If doctors have said it is okay for children up to two years to be raised in prison than let the children be with their mothers and teach them how to be responsible parents. If the mother has a chance at raising their child and staying with them and not be separated and avoid the foster system, let them have that chance. The experience helps them think they are a regular

person who is a mother and not think of themselves as a criminal. However, there is a risk that the drug addicted women inmates could go back to using drugs and get back into jail or prison, but so far the chances are less than them being their mother and having custody of their child after they are released from prison and graduated from the program. I do have to look at the small percent that go back to abusing drugs and end up in prison again, their child that they bonded with are now separated and know they are separated and will be in the foster system. Something that could have been avoided from the beginning if the child was not in the nursery program. Deborah Jiang-Stein, was a baby that was born and raised in prison for a year, and then was separated multiple times after the year being sent to foster care, and then to an adoptive family who lied about who her parents were to her. She also says that the prison nursery program is not for every women and it is best to not have multiple separations like hers. Today, Stein is the founder of a women inmate mentoring program and tries to help women inmates with life skills and to be productive after they get released from prison (Gydesen 2014).

Ten states in the Unites States currently have prison nursery programs. They have all proven to have lower recidivism rates. Some state prisons are higher than others. Generally, the infants can be in prison raised by their mother from 12 to 24 months of age (Carlson 2009). In a 10 year study of Nebraska Correctional Center for Women (NCCW), there was a 50 percent recidivism rate for mothers that were not in the prison nursery program. Those in the nursery program had a 16.8 percent recidivism rate. The support prison nurseries provide decreases the percent of the women returning as inmates by 33.3 percent. The studies also showed that the women were behaving better than the general population of the other women inmates, less misconduct charges were reported. The motivation for good behavior was that the mothers feared their babies would be taken from them and separated to relatives or in foster care, resulting in them returning to the general population of the prison (Carlson 2009).

New York State has the oldest running prison nursery at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, it established their nursery in 1902. The average age of women who are in the nursery program is 28 years old. The average stay is seven months. A three year study that

was specific to that prison showed that it had a lower recidivism rate of 13 percent compared to the rest of the women inmates not in the nursery program that had a recidivism rate of 26 percent after the third year they were released from prison (Carlson 2009).

In the NCCW nursery program, the most common reasons that the mothers are removed from the program is for misconduct, fighting with another inmate, and sometimes they chose the work-release program instead of finishing their prison sentence and raising their child. Those situations would cause multiple separations and send the child to a relative and/or foster care, not providing for a stable environment for the child. If they finish their sentence in prison raising their baby, then the baby will not need to be separated and they will be released together, hopefully continuing the bond. The nursery programs main goals are to provide a bonding experience between the mother and infant for up to 18 months of age in NCCW. They have succeeded by 95 percent in accomplishing that goal. Another goal is to teach the women inmates to be responsible parents. The women who were in the program and finished it agreed that they were better parents because of the program. They also agreed that the parenting classes should be required (Carlson 2009).

In general, it seems like a good idea to have the nursery programs in women correctional facilities, it gives the women support and creates a bond with their child. It works for most women, but there are the few that get removed from the program for misconduct or choose to have their baby sent away because they do not want to finish their sentence in prison and would rather work. I would be interested to find out from a medical professional if breaking the bonding for the first two years of an infants life is detrimental later in life. Being removed from the program, would send the baby in foster care and have multiple separations. This can be true for the few former women inmates that do return to their criminal lifestyle and abuse drugs, their children that they bonded with in the program is separated and the child could have emotional and behavior issues later in life and have a high risk to continue with the generational cycle of crime and drugs in their family. I also agree with what Stein said, that some women needed to be separated from their babies at birth and not be in the nursery program, to avoid the multiple

separations and trauma it creates for the child later in life (Gydesen 2014). If the infant would not have bonded with its biological mother the first year or so, and just be sent to a responsible relative, foster care or be adopted, the first two years would not be interrupted as an infant and they will bond with the guardian mother. Currently, there doesn't seem to be a way to screen the mothers before entering the program to predict if they will have misconduct charges or if they will go back to the criminal life they had before. It would be interesting to see if the program could use statistics and analyze a women's inmate criminal, emotional and addictive patterns and determine if she would be a high risk to recidivism based on the patterns. The qualifications didn't seem strict enough to enroll women in the nursery program, it covered the main issues of the women not having child abuse and violent crimes, but no drug history may be another qualification they can add, unless they show signs that they cope with their stresses in a healthy way. That seems to be hard to measure especially in prison since a lot of their needs are being taken care of by the prison. It seems that there is a high risk of trauma for the infants who do have multiple separations. Later in life they can have emotional and mental issues and then get addicted to drugs like their mother to cope with their feelings of anxiety, PTSD, and other issues that could develop from foster care due to having multiple care givers. The first two years are important to a child and it's important that the prison gets it right or it could go in a traumatic direction for the child later. Risking the child so that the mother is in the program just to have their child separated after they have bonded with them for 2 years in prison, is putting the few children at risk. I do commend the nursery programs for giving the women a chance to be mothers and to create and keep a bond with their infant, it gives them a joy and reason to finish their prison sentence. Even though that the program is meant well and is preventing criminals from returning back to incarceration, it is a big responsibility to choose the right women to be in this program, and who has control of how people will act? I understand there is not a certainty to know who will be criminals again after being released or if inmates will have misconduct in prison. At this time, there is not a solution I can think of that will take care of the risks of multiple separations for the infant.

## References

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