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Bedford Hills jail program unique in state

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BEDFORD HILLS - The philosophy of the Children's Center at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility is that people can change.

"With support, the women become very positive influences in their children's lives," said Bobby Blanchard, the center's director. "I have seen kids do incredibly well and mothers step up and take responsibility. They aren't left off the hook. They have to be accountable to their kids."

The center is funded by the state Department of Correctional Services and administered by Catholic Charities out of the Diocese of Brooklyn.

Each summer, it reunites about 100 children with their incarcerated mothers for seven, five-day sessions where they can play, talk and share lunch together.

The program, which began in 1980, is unique in the state, said Linda Foglia, a spokeswoman for the Department of Correctional Services. The other five women's prisons offer family visits and programs to help inmates - most of whom will eventually return to the community - prepare to resume parenting, Foglia said. But none are as community-based as Bedford Hills.

"While other facilities offer extensive parenting programs that strengthen family ties," Foglia said, "no other correctional facility has a community support group that welcomes the children of incarcerated parents into their home for an extended stay, for the sole purpose of assisting with the creation or maintaining of a family bond through visiting,"

The host families who welcome the children into their homes, and drive them to and from the prison each day, make the summer program and weekend visits to Bedford Hills possible, Blanchard said. Private donors pay for children who live miles away or in other states to stay in the community. Most of their guardians could not afford it, she said.

"The thing children do here is play and their mothers play, too," Blanchard said. "The kids feel very safe. They will sit in their mother's lap or suck their thumb. At home they have to be tougher. They don't get to have this innocence."
