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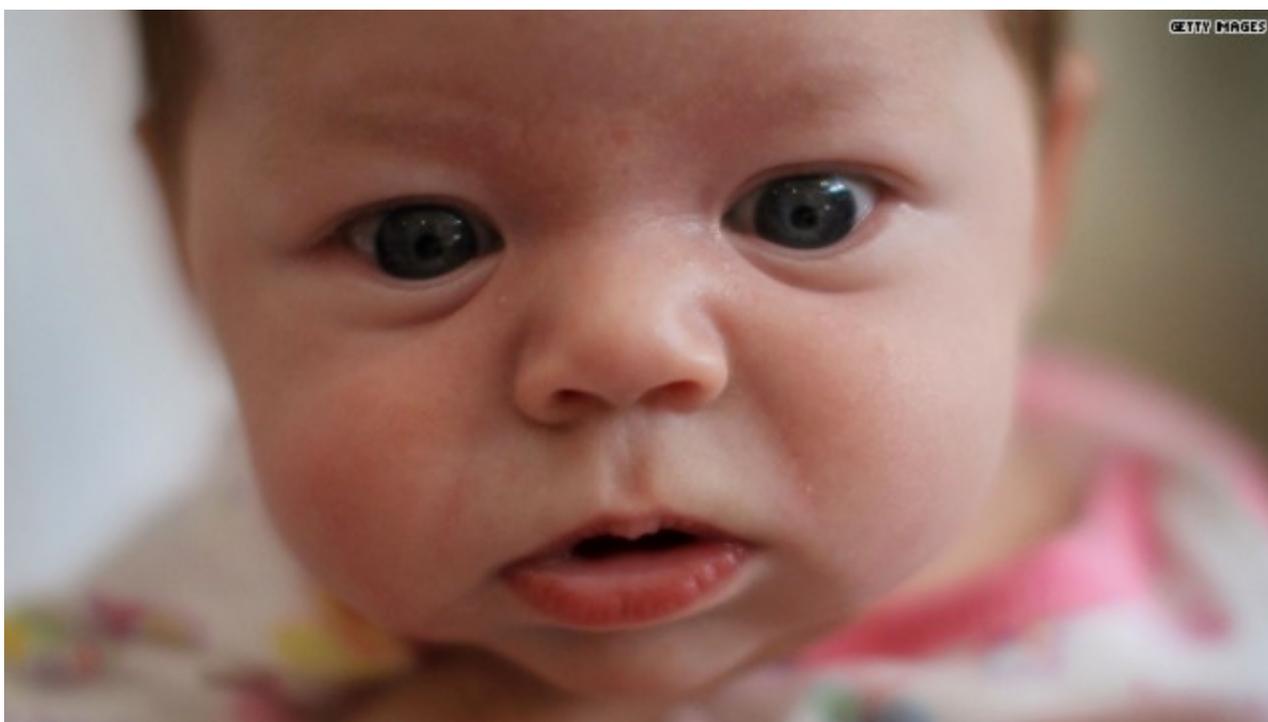
Babies behind bars: Motherly love or abuse?

By Kisa Mlela Santiago

updated 3:09 PM EDT, Mon June 03, 2013

NEED TO KNOW

- **Supporters:** Prison nursery programs lower mothers' recidivism rates
- **Critics:** Programs violate children's constitutional rights



*Editor's note: All this week HLN is taking you **behind bars**. From the fear and despair to the hope, we are taking a first-hand look at America behind bars every day at 12 p.m. ET.*

Forty miles outside of New York City, you will find the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Razor wire-wrapped fences and imposing-looking guard towers surround



the sprawling grounds of the state's only women's maximum security prison. Inside its walls, you will find murderers, drug dealers... and babies.

Bedford's tiniest residents haven't committed any crimes. They were born inside the prison to their pregnant, incarcerated mothers.

The women are permitted to keep their children with them as they serve their sentences because of a special

program run by the prison. Bedford's nursery program is the oldest in the country, dating back to 1901.

Eight other states (California, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota, Washington and West Virginia) have similar programs with several other states currently considering implementing their own.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons also allows pregnant inmates to spend a period of time living with their newborns. "Gossip Girl" actress [Leighton Meester](#) was born while her mother began a federal prison sentence. After giving birth, Meester's mother was allowed to spend three months with her in a halfway house.

There are many requirements the women at Bedford must meet to qualify for entrance into its highly-coveted nursery program. If admitted, the babies are allowed to remain up until their first birthday. If the mother is scheduled to be released within the next six months, she may apply for an extension, making the maximum length of the child's stay 18 months. Other states allow children to reside in prisons for as long as three years.

While in the program, the women and their children are housed in a special section of the prison. The mothers must participate in parenting and prenatal classes and adhere to strict rules in order to stay in the program. If the rules are violated, the child is removed from the prison and the mother is returned to general population.

[Sister Teresa Fitzgerald](#), founder of [Hour Children](#), is an ardent supporter and says the benefits of nursery programs are immeasurable. "Sister Tesa," as she is affectionately known, has committed her life to helping thousands of previously incarcerated women and children over the past 27 years. She says these programs are a "win-win" for mother, baby and society.

Fitzgerald and Jane Silfen, Director of Bedford's Children's Center, claim prison nursery programs allow mothers and children to bond during a crucial early attachment period. They also say the children are a powerful motivating force that help the women stay off of drugs and away from crime.

However, not everyone thinks prison is a place for children – even if it is with their own mothers.

Critics say it is harmful and dangerous for children to live in the stressful and restrictive environment of a prison. In addition, they question whether the women are being adequately punished while residing in the relatively more home-like environment of the nursery. Some hypothesize that women facing incarceration may take advantage of these programs by purposefully becoming pregnant in order to qualify for more comfortable accommodations.

One outspoken critic, [William & Mary Law School](#) professor James Dwyer, was the first person to challenge the legality of prison nursery programs. Dwyer argues that keeping infants in prisons violates their Constitutional 14th amendment due process rights as well as laws against housing minors with incarcerated adults.

Dwyer also states there have been no substantive long-term studies performed on the effects of children who have been raised in prisons and, therefore, no concrete proof that nursery programs produce positive outcomes. He believes the programs are putting the mothers' needs ahead of the best interests of the children.

So what happens to children brought up behind bars? Next week, we catch up with two moms, Angelina and Anael, who raised their infants in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility nursery program. [Angelina](#) and Anael ([part 1](#) and [part 2](#)) were profiled in a documentary by [CafeMom.com](#) two years ago. Where are they now? How are their children doing? What are their thoughts on the prison nursery program? Watch [Raising America](#) next week at 12 p.m. ET on [HLN](#) to find out.

What do you think of the nursery program? Tweet [@KyraHLN](#) with the [#RaisingAmerica](#) hashtag or leave your thoughts on [Facebook.com](#).

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Mary Derricotte · Top Commenter · Marshall University

Good for the mothers and children. No matter how bad a mother is children who grow up with out there don't like it. no matter what adoption gives, a child is better off when young with the love of the birth parent. These are ties that not easily given away.

Reply · 5 · Like · June 1 at 11:56am



Cynthia Beattie · 22 Year Old



I have seriously mixed feelings about this program. I believe in the importance of early bonding, of which these mothers and infants are being given the opportunity. I also feel a sense of loss for the babies to be taken from their mothers suddenly severed at 12-18 months. Does this program work better for babies when their mother's sentences are short and they will have that bond restored soon? I have watched in horror as babies who were bonded from birth to adoptive parents were wrenchd away and returned to biological parents. Will all love and care for these infants when they are removed from the auspices of their biological mothers? Whomever is given the care-taking of the toddler, and the toddler her or himself, have not had the benefit of mutual early bonding. What kind of trauma is the result? Do the benefits outweigh the risks? I do not know the answers...

Reply · 1 · Like · June 3 at 12:02pm



Herb Brady · Top Commenter · U.O. TOUGH LIFE

HELL NO.. Prison is no place for kids. If they are allowed to live with criminal mothers they will learn to depend on the system themselves. Where is the punishment for the crime. If women are allowed this, there must be special considerations given for men. This is going down a very crooked road. STOP THIS BEFOR MORE HARM IS DONE.

Reply · 1 · Like · June 4 at 6:58am



Kimberly Ware · Top Commenter · University of Southern Mississippi

This sounds like a wonderful program; I'm all for it!

Reply · 1 · Like · June 3 at 12:07pm



Robin Tulis VonKleist · Academy of Art University

I don't believe any baby should be raised in jail. what a way to start a life. These moms should have thought about their babies before they decided to get into trouble. In life we have choices and we can't keep saying it was a mistake. It was a very wrong choice on their behalf but a baby should not be in prison with mothers. They deserve better in a home and raised in a safe environment.

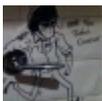
Reply · Like · June 3 at 8:49am



Nina Lewis · Top Commenter

Sad reality but these women should not be having babies!!! I feel sorry for the babies in that situation.

Reply · Like · June 1 at 11:05pm



Lindsay Liz-Lemon Freitag · Top Commenter · Houston, Texas

Texas also has a program like that for pregnant women. BAMBI.

Reply · Like · June 1 at 2:34pm