Mothering behind bars

Does it really take a village?
Disciplining other people's kids

PLUS:
Motorcycle Mama
Bedrest: Pregnant, horizontally
The booze blues
Mothers Behind Bars
A NEW WAY FOR PRISONERS AND THEIR KIDS

by Robyn Pforr Ryan

RENEE MANTZ IS A BRAND-NEW MOM.
Her dirty-blond hair is done in a mane of tiny cornrows, pulled back from her round face. Her hazel eyes are giant. As she gazes at her three-week-old son's head, her expression alters between worry and a look of awe. She's dead tired. She has worn the same sweatshirt for days. Above the spot where her son's head rests is her inmate number: 99G1095. Mantz and her son are residents of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York State's only maximum security prison for women.

Until now, Mantz never felt like she had anything to lose. Now she has Nazayah. His tiny body is hidden in a quilted onesie, his cheeks splotched with baby acne. Under a thatch of dark hair, his eyes strain to focus. Mantz caresses his doll-sized fingers; each of her own fingers is covered with a blurred blue-green tattoo spelling out FAZE—her nickname from when she started drinking and smoking marijuana. When she added angel dust, that's when her life really fell apart.

Although she's just twenty years old, this is not Mantz's first time behind prison walls. She stopped going to school in the seventh grade. At fourteen, the year her father died from alcohol abuse, she was sent to a juvenile detention center as a teenager out of control. She ran away. For the next two years, she lived out of hotel rooms, selling drugs in Virginia, South Carolina, Florida. Drugs were almost part of her family's legacy. Her mother sold heroin; her brother died of an overdose. At seventeen, she was sent to prison for burglary. That's where she got the tattoos on her wrist, neck, and arms.

Once outside on parole, Mantz got caught with drugs. By the time she went back to prison, she was a few weeks pregnant. She gave birth in a local hospital, arriving there in heavy labor, handcuffed.

"I've got to be with my son," Mantz says now, starting to feed Nazayah a bottle. "My mom went to prison three times while I was growing up. I was passed around from relative to relative. I don't want to leave him."

Mantz is one of the lucky ones, relatively speaking; she won't have to. That's because she committed her crime in New York, one of only four states where prison mothers are allowed to keep their babies with them. After nearly a generation of harsh drug laws sent the number of women in prison through the roof, and punitive policies that removed even the youngest babies from their incarcerated mothers, the tide is turning. A handful of new programs around the country—many modeled after the one at Bedford—now allow female inmates who give birth in prison to keep those babies with them behind bars for up to eighteen months.

These programs, combined with new prisoner advocacy organizations and
some high-profile volunteers, have an ambitious goal: to break the cycle of neglect, abuse, and ignorance that makes a female prisoner's children far more likely to end up behind bars themselves.

Such programs are not without their critics. Some say that losing touch with her kids is just part of a felon's punishment. But can society punish a parent without punishing her children too? Should prisons help inmates maintain, or even, in some cases, create a bond with their children? Is it in the best interest of the children to do so, even when the parents have made mistakes, even when they're serving a sentence that means being away from their children for years—sometimes for an entire childhood?

The number of U.S. prisoners who are mothers could populate a city the size of Daytona Beach, Florida. Although they still represent less than ten percent of the U.S. prison population, the female prison population is exploding, up 114 percent in the past decade. There are now over ninety-four thousand female prisoners. At least seventy percent are mothers of young children.

For the typical female inmate, prison is just another stop on society's poorly-lit fringes. More than half are victims of sexual or physical abuse. Most are poor. Nearly two-thirds are minorities. About one-fifth were homeless. Many are addicted to drugs. One-fifth suffer from a mental illness. They are poorly educated. At the country's biggest women's prison complex, in Chowchilla, California, the average reading level is just below the sixth grade.

"These women are [in prison] because their life's experiences have steadily undermined their ability to cope," says Carolyn Demarest, a state trial judge in Brooklyn, New York, who is chair of the women-in-prison committee for the state's association...
of women judges. "They need support and opportunities. It has been shown to help them and their children, who depend on them."

For Mantz and many of the prison moms, it took coming to Bedford—a place bordered by a nine-foot-high fence topped with three feet of razor wire—to gain access to parenting resources, a safe place to sleep, good child care, regular medical attention, and decent jobs—the kind of resources taken for granted in a middle-class home.

"It's insane. We should be addressing their needs long before," says Dr. Denise Johnston, director of the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents in Pasadena, California, a non-profit advocacy group founded in 1990. "We only start paying attention when they get to this point, where their families are dissolved and they're in dire straits. In our society, we have not focused on families and children."

When mothers go to prison, versus fathers, the impact on children is greater. More female inmates are the primary caretakers of their children. And once behind bars, women's support networks are thinner, which translates into greater disruption for the children. While almost ninety percent of the male inmates' children remain with their mothers, the vast majority of female inmates' children go to live with grandmothers and relatives, some elderly, many already overwhelmed with responsibilities.

For some children, a mother's prison term can mean the end of their family. A child whose mother goes to prison is five times more likely to end up in a foster home than if it's his father behind bars. Finding someone willing or able to take care of the children is not always possible. In California, courts generally will not place children with family members who have felony convictions, no matter how long ago or unrelated to child care, such as drunk driving or writing bad checks.

Since 1997, federal law requires states in most cases to begin terminating parental rights when a child spends fifteen out of any twenty-two month period in foster care. The law, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), added a first-of-its-kind financial incentive for states, granting them $4,000 to $6,000 in federal funds for each child that is adopted, over a state-specific baseline number. Such incentives, the lawmakers believe, help prevent children from languishing in foster homes.

For some children whose mother's ability to parent may be irrevocably torn apart by years of living on the streets, this may be the best result. But ASFA also breaks apart families that could have survived the parent's prison term, some prisoner advocates say. Chances of keeping families intact can be greatly improved if the foster parents work with the incarcerated parent, and if the inmate participates in parenting and substance abuse programs. Whether a family is restored depends largely on the willingness and determination of a county caseworker, who usually is juggling many cases with few resources. Babies generally are quickly adopted out, while older children go into group homes, many of which do not provide a better home than the one they left.

"The love these children feel for their mother is unbreakable, whether or not she's made mistakes," says Cassie Pierson, a staff attorney for Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, based in San Francisco.

The organization gets thirty to forty letters a week from inmates trying to hold onto their children. "A fourteen-year-old just told me that if they're terminating his mom's rights, he's going to find her. By leaving his foster home, he's going to be in runaway status. He said, 'That's my mom.'"

Maternity and prison seem a whirlwind contrast. To get to Bedford I leave one universe and enter another. My visit is on a perfect spring day. I leave my two preschool children, still asleep in their pajamas, with a stay-at-home friend in a neighborhood of expensive houses, where lawns are dotted with bags of mulch and blooming forsythia. Bedford Hills Correctional Facility is a compound of concrete, brick, and steel on 130 acres nestled in the hills of Westchester County, one of the most affluent areas in the country. The prison is less than a mile off a wooded commuter parkway packed with SUVs and high-end cars on their way to Manhattan.

Waiting to go through the first security checkpoint at Bedford, I read the list of forbidden objects taped to the concrete wall. "No thong, fishnet, g-string bikinis, no knitting needles permitted, no food cooked, nothing over $50. Have to have receipt, nothing blue, gray, black, orange." Those are the colors used in guard uniforms, a clerk explained. A female correctional officer chats with me as she runs the metal detector over my body.

There are fifty-nine buildings at Bedford. Older brick buildings dating from Bedford's days as a reformatory sit alongside block housing units. Small slatted windows dot their expanse of concrete. I wait as my escort gives the okay to the guard.
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doors opening.

When I first enter the nursery

ward, I see Renee Mantz standing

with Nazayah in the hallway of the

South Corridor, painted with

Dalmatian puppies. Here new moms

begin their stay, two to a room. A
diaper over Mantz’s shoulder is
drenched with spit-up. She’s talking

with Liz Hamilton, the head of the
daycare center, who is stroking

Nazayah’s head and asking Mantz

how much he drinks and when he

stops to burp. Hamilton gives Mantz

some pointers on how to avoid indi-
gestion by feeding the baby slowly, an

ounce or so at a time.

Mantz joins a group of mothers
talking in the day room, a low-

ceilinged space with well-worn

leather couches and a TV. Inside, it

sounds like a mother’s group any-

where. Overlapping strands of con-

versation are interspersed with a

baby’s hungry cry, a toddler’s exuber-
ant yodeling. Except that these

women, dressed in a mix of materni-
clothes and the prison’s green uni-
form, are swapping birth stories that

include a correctional officer in the
delivery room. They talk about only

being allowed to see their babies in

the hospital for two one-hour periods

a day. They compare Bedford’s nur-

sery to the one at the Rikers Island

jail, where prisoners keep their chil-
dren in strollers at all times because

the floor is concrete.

“The officer did not care at all.

She was just watching the TV. She

rolled her eyes when I screamed. I

felt completely alone. I was scared to
death," says Mantz.

"Giving birth is a fifty-fifty risk.

Your life is in danger," says Louise

Meyers, 38, as she steadies her
eleven-month-old daughter, lurching behind a plastic walker. Since her mother's death last month, Meyers' ten other children are being cared for by her brother in a public housing apartment. "There are officers that care and some that don't care. Some care because they've got kids."

Babies have been at Bedford since 1901. Back then the women—mainly petty thieves or runaways—lived in small cottages, each with a flowerbed out front. Today, the nursery and daycare reside in a 1930s gabled brick building, formerly the medical unit.

Bedford's inmate childcare programs grew out of a collaboration between its superintendent, Elaine Lord, 54, and a Catholic nun, Sister Elaine Roulet. Lord arrived at Bedford in 1982 with a mandate from the governor's office: enhance the parenting programs. When she first came to Bedford, prison mothers were allowed to keep their babies for up to one year. Newborns were housed in a different wing from their mothers. Each baby slept in an individual glassed-in cubicle with its crib, dresser, and changing table. During the night, it was the job of the correctional officer to wake the mother of a crying baby and escort her to the nursery. Prisoners' older children visited their mothers in a stark room where they were forced to sit at a table. If a toddler got antsy and walked around, correctional officers ended the visit.

Upon her arrival, Lord met Sister Elaine, a former grade-school principal who came to Bedford in 1970 to teach prisoners to read and later transformed her ministry into teaching them to be parents. The women quickly found that they shared the same philosophy: enhanced parenting programs can be an important tool for helping women stay out of prison and helping their children keep growing while their mothers are behind bars.

"What we're focusing on is breaking the cycle. I don't want to see the women come back and I also don't want to see their children. The mother-child unit is of vital importance," says Lord, a sturdy woman whose short red hair is peppered with gray. Lord is the daughter of a barber and a homemaker; she dropped pre-med when a professor challenged her to spend a summer working with juvenile delinquents. She never looked back. She's known for listening to inmates, and laughing often, a deep, easy laugh.

Before Lord and Sister Elaine got to work, the nursery program was bare-bones. Now, Lord calls it a program with a "thousand arms." Much of the program's equipment, including cribs and strollers, are donated. Prisoners learn to knit and crochet baby blankets, part of a program to teach them positive habits. Every new arrival gets a baby shower.

The women have full responsibility for their babies, sleeping and living in a locked-down, dorm-like setting. The women take six weeks of prenatal and parenting classes. Along with the standard fare of attachment and discipline, they talk about parenting and addiction and the spread of HIV and AIDS. The women also look into their childhood and talk about what they want to do differently. For some women, the answer is everything.

In an inmate-run program, women talk about why they made choices that led them to parenting behind bars. This program was developed by inmate Kathy Boudin, 59,
the infamous 1960s Weather Underground radical who was denied parole for the second time last spring after serving twenty-two years of her twenty-to-life murder and robbery sentence for an armored car heist. When Boudin was arrested in 1981, she had a one-year-old son, who has since been raised by her friends. In a manual she wrote, Boudin guides inmates to talk about changing bad patterns, putting their children first, and the complex relationship inmates have with their children’s caretakers, fraught with guilt and anger.

(Boudin isn’t the only high-profile person who has taken up the prisoners’ cause. The playwright Eve Ensler, of The Vagina Monologues, does volunteer theater and writing workshops, occasionally bringing along friends like Glenn Close, Marisa Tomei, and Rosie Perez.)

Once their babies reach about a year, the inmates move into single rooms on the North Corridor. “Breastfeeding please knock” signs hang from two doorknobs. During the day, mothers leave their babies in the colorful, toy-filled nursery with a two-to-one ratio of children to trained inmate staffs. The mothers then go to work at jobs throughout the prison, mostly as clerks and janitors.

Babies can stay at Bedford up to eighteen months. At about that age, Lord says, the drawbacks for the child begin to mount, as toddlers need more space and varied experiences, and also become more aware of the prison environment.

Inmates with older children are able to visit with them in Bedford’s Children’s Center visiting room, decorated with a rainbow mural, and carpets of roads and dinosaurs. There, parents and children can do arts and crafts, read in a cozy nook, watch videos, or share a snack. Prisoners’ older children can also stay with host families and have extended weekend visits with their moms.

“Parenting is learned. I don’t think it’s an innate thing,” says Lord, one afternoon in her office. “These women are like sponges. Whatever we throw at them, they want more.”

She pauses to look out her window onto the gray stretch of prison.

“They come from families that are so . . . so torn apart in every sense of the word. You learn parenting from your parents. For many of these women, they didn’t learn these skills, they just never had the chance,” she says. “Just because they are in prison it doesn’t mean they are bad mothers. They committed a crime. That’s an act. It’s not one we condone, but it doesn’t mean they didn’t care for their kids. It’s complex.”

Not every mother at Bedford is afforded the luxury of participating in the nursery program. Bedford officials look carefully at each case. For the most part, they choose mothers who will be the primary caregiver for the child soon after the child has to leave the center. Some women with longer sentences have been allowed to participate when they had a strong family network outside willing to bring the child in for routine visits. (By contrast, the newest nursery program in Ohio takes only non-violent offenders with sentences short enough to ensure that mothers leave the prison system with their children.)

Four out of five babies at Bedford will leave with their moms. The rest are cared for by relatives or in a foster home established by Sister Elaine called My Mother’s House, where nuns regularly bring the toddlers in to prison for visits. A follow-up study completed this year of Bedford’s nursery participants in the 1997-1998 period found that sixty percent of the babies were living with their mothers (a third of those families were living in a halfway house or shelter). A third lived with a grandmother or other relative; the rest were in foster care.

The U.S. holds the distinction of being the only industrialized country in the world that routinely separates women inmates from their children. (Surname, Liberia, and the Bahamas are the others, according to a 1987 United Nations study.)

In the U.S., about half of state prisoners never see their children during their imprisonment. A large part of the problem is distance. More than half of all prisoners do their time more than a hundred miles from their home.

The situation is often worse for women than for men. There are fewer women’s prisons, and they’re generally built in remote rural areas. In California’s men’s prisons, wives, girlfriends, and children wait in line for hours to visit inmates; there is a month-long waiting list to use the rooms set aside for overnight family visits. But the bulk of California’s women prisoners—about seven thousand out of almost ten thousand—are housed in Chowchilla, about two hundred miles from Los Angeles. Greyhound buses don’t even stop there. The visiting rooms are never packed. There has never been a waiting list for overnight rooms, so two were converted to office space. Many of the men in these women’s lives have dropped them. Some guardians are unwilling to bring the children to prison. Others can’t make the trip on their own.

Seventy-three-year-old Bonnie Cowan is one such guard. Cowan
is raising ten-year-old Angelique "Annie" Robinson while Annie’s mother serves a twenty-five-year-to-life sentence in Chowchilla. Annie’s mother, Sheri Robinson, is Cowan’s former neighbor. It's been years since Cowan has been able to take Annie to Chowchilla for a visit. The last time she did, Cowan and her husband rented a car and paid someone to drive it, and paid for a hotel room and restaurant meals, all on a retirement income. Since her husband died, it's become more difficult. Cowan herself recently had a heart attack and now has trouble walking. This spring, Annie saw her mother for the first time in two years, thanks to a program run by nuns from the Los Angeles archdiocese who cart eight busloads of children up to Chowchilla every year on Mother’s Day. On the bus was a child who saw his mother for the first time in seven years.

"My Annie knows I love her, but she needs that connection to what she calls blood family," says Cowan.

"She’s my best friend," says Annie about her mother.

Annie will be almost thirty by the time her mother is eligible for parole. Her mother will be close to sixty. Robinson, 32, is a three-strikes offender: burglary, robbery, and receiving stolen property. She got two-year terms for her first two convictions. Her rap sheet also includes five years’ probation for child endangerment. When Annie was eleven months old, Sheri was drunk and strung out on drugs, and Annie fell out of a fourth-story window.

Annie's attachment to her mother, whose parenting was discolored by drug addiction, is typical of young children of incarcerated parents, experts say. "That's the nature of attachment, whether its secure or insecure, children prefer their mothers," says Denise Johnston of the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents.

There are now an estimated 1.7 million children with a parent in prison. For at least 200,000 of them, that parent is their mother. The average age of these children is eight, though twenty percent of them are under five. This fall, alongside Blue's Clues coloring books, Wal-Mart will begin carrying Visiting Day, a new picture book designed for preschoolers showing a little girl in braids and her grandmother making their monthly bus trip to visit her father in prison. "Grandma says it's not forever going to be like this," the little girl says.

Studies show children of incarcerated parents are having trouble. Their parent's incarceration is usually only one of a set of problems, including family instability, parental drug abuse, and poverty. These children are five times more likely than their peers to suffer depression, do poorly in school, and engage in risky behaviors, according to the Child Welfare League of America, a non-profit children’s advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. They are six times more likely to end up in prison themselves; and daughters of women prisoners are more likely to become teenage moms.

"Absolutely the best way to help children is to help their parents become more effective, nurturing parents," says Arlene Lee, director of the Child Welfare League’s new Federal Research Center for Children of Prisoners.

Until about 1990, the number of female prisoners in the U.S. stayed below ten thousand. Prisons for women were rare. Most women were simply folded into a system built for the more violent male prisoner. Thirty states had small nurseries where prisoners could keep infants born in prison, generally for up to a year. In Virginia, up to ten inmates could keep their babies in the prison nursery for up to two years, but visitation was restricted to Sundays; by 1964, babies could stay only three months. By the mid-1970s, most of the prison nurseries were closed. State legislators grew concerned with cost, and with whether prison was a good environment for children.

In the 1980s, with the erosion of the welfare safety net and a dramatic increase in the number of female-headed households, the number of female prisoners began to skyrocket. At the same time, a wave of tough-on-crime legislation—steep mandatory minimums, three strikes laws—made it more likely that women arrested on even non-violent offenses would go to prison, and go there for a long time. The war on drugs ensured a disproportionate number of women, mostly low-level cogs in the drug trade—secretaries, mules, and small-time dealers. Once arrested, these women had very little to offer prosecutors, who have the power to recommend shorter sentences for those with information to help build a case.

"It's not that women's criminal activity changed significantly [since 1980]," says Meda Chesney-Lind, professor of women's studies at the University of Hawaii. "Rather, the criminal justice system became more willing to imprison them."

While most female prisoners are doing time for non-violent offenses—and very few for harming their children—a national survey of state
inmates has revealed that sixty percent of women admit to being daily drug users before going to prison. And drug addiction is linked to neglectful or inadequate parenting, says Johnston.

Given that statistic, it’s not surprising that programs like the one at Bedford Hills run up against a deep-seated desire to punish criminals. In Nebraska, a unique program allows children of inmates to spend whole weekends with their incarcerated parents in home-style wards, baking cookies, reading, and playing together. But last fall, one father balked at his son’s planned overnight visit with his mother, who was convicted of killing her estranged husband’s girlfriend and a passerby. Following a newspaper column on the father’s objection, the governor received more than one thousand e-mails, faxes, and phone calls opposing the son’s visit. Now, inmates who face no possibility of parole can no longer participate in the program. Similarly, California Governor Gray Davis recently vetoed a bill that would have allowed overnight visits for children of incarcerated parents who have no fixed release date.

California State Senator William “Pete” Knight was one opponent of the bill. He fears that programs that shore up inmates’ bonds with their children coddle the prisoners at the expense of the children, especially when the mother has a long prison term.

“These women need to understand that there are consequences for their actions,” says Knight. “If a mother is going to get out in a couple of years, [parenting programs] may be a good idea. Hopefully when they get out they won’t make the same mistakes again. But in most cases, it’s better off for their kids to get on with their lives.”

On the other side, child and prisoner advocates argue that, perfect or not, these women are their children’s mothers. And their children need them. Helping them become better parents and maintain contact with children are opportunities to break the cycle of crime.

“Nothing is going to change the fact that this is going to be the child’s parent,” says Lee, of the Child Welfare League. “In most cases, by helping develop a healthy relationship with her, it is only going to help the child as she moves through life, giving her a solid foundation, even under these circumstances.”

Outside Bedford’s Infant Center, a sheriff’s car is idling, its doors open. In the back seat, a baby is strapped in its child car seat, topped with several pastel baby blankets. His mother stands by the car, still in maternity clothes, hands cuffed and legs shackled. She is the nursery program’s newest arrival. She watches as one of the officers hands her baby in its carrier to a volunteer. She is crying.

I, along with my escort, wait inside the door of the nursery building as the sheriff’s deputy guides the mother back into the car. She is being taken to a several-hours-long processing, where she will get her inmate number and the rules of living in a prison. I watch as an inmate helper flings the mother’s diaper bag over her shoulder and picks up her belongings, jumbled together in a clear trash bag. The volunteer walks by us grappling with the awkward weight of the baby carrier. The baby is awake, little eyes peering up.

Nationwide, about six percent of female inmates are pregnant when they enter prison. In Renee Mantz’s room on the South Corridor, her
baby's foggy ultrasound photo is taped next to pictures with some girlfriends, posing like a teen rock group. Mantz shares her room with another new mom, Leona Archer, 22, who has the soft features of a prom queen, her auburn hair pinned out of her face. At Bedford, Archer is taking classes toward her high school equivalency diploma. She dropped out in the tenth grade to spend more time with her then boyfriend, who was twelve years older. She became addicted to drugs. She was living with one of her siblings in a foster home, her third since she was four, when her own parents, alcoholics, gave up on parenting.

"I want for my son what I didn't have growing up. And that's everything. He's going to have a mother and a father," says Archer, as she feeds Javeed a bottle in a rocking chair in her room. "I want him to be spoiled."

The mothers at Bedford exude the energy of rebirth. Tracy Brown Murphy, 32, learned to breastfeed her daughter Tyrica, something she never did with her five other children. "I can't gather the words to explain what this has meant for me. I just hadn't bonded with my children like I've done here," says Brown, who is serving a drug possession charge. "I feel like a different mom."

Today, fewer than three hundred female inmates participate in residential programs, either in prison nurseries or in community-based programs. Many prisoner advocates hope to increase that number dramatically. They point to growing evidence that the programs are worth the time and effort—and the extra expense. Housing a female prisoner in one of California's community-based programs costs about $31,000 per year versus the $26,894 it takes to keep her in state prison. In these community-based programs, which exist in at least four states, non-violent female offenders live with up to two children aged six and under. The children attend day care or neighborhood schools. The mothers undergo job training, drug treatment, and get help with parenting and literacy. Leaving the program is punishable as felony escape. California's program was started in 1999, and now has 140 beds for mothers and their children in five sites. A 1998 UCLA study found that, over a two-year period, participants had a ten percent recidivism rate versus a fifty-two percent rate for the general female inmate population.

"I think any program where we have success, where you don't have reincarceration, where you give them a footing, is well worth it," Lord says. "When a mom comes back [to prison] it fractures that family again and the costs are very high, not just in imprisoning her but in services for the children and their future. The costs increase geometrically."

In New York, plans for a new community-based program for female prisoners with children come from a surprising source: the prosecutors whose job it is to send criminals to prison. Mary Hughes, chief of the crime prevention unit of the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office, is trying to raise $10 million to build a residential program to house ninety women and their children. Half the women will be non-violent offenders doing their time in the community and half will be new releases transitioning back to the world outside bars. It would be the first program where an inmate could keep all of her children with her, regardless of their age. Hughes has bi-partisan support, but so far, little money. "What benefit is there for these non-violent women to go to prison? Where is she going to be when she gets out? Only worse off," says Hughes. "We want to make these women whole again and break the cycle for their children."

The Bedford Hills nursery is viewed as a model for other programs around the country. Only thirteen percent of inmates who participated in the nursery program at Bedford and at a second one at the neighboring medium-security Taconic Correctional Facility returned to prison within three years, versus a 25.9 percent recidivism rate for the general female population, according to the New York State Department of Corrections. And the babies at Bedford also do well. A study of sixty children conducted by Mary Byrne, a Columbia University professor of nursing, documented that the babies and toddlers in Bedford met all the expected developmental milestones; in some areas, they fared better than low-income children on the outside.

In most prisons, without help from volunteers or prison programs, the parent-child bond undergoes a slow rot. Phone contact is sporadic for prisoners who earn between ten and twenty-five cents an hour; a collect call can hit their family with a five-dollar connection charge. While some prisons have created a child-friendly visiting area, sometimes in trailers, visitation can still be intimidating for children at most prisons. Sometimes prison rules make it hard to accomplish. In Michigan, children can only visit accompanied by their legal guardian, who cannot always make the trip. In California, under
proposed rule changes, drug felons would be unable to hug or hold their visiting children for the first year of their prison term; their visits would be conducted with a glass partition between parent and child so children would be unable to pass along contraband.

"I would trade all the mother-child programs just to make visitation routinely accessible for children and their parents," says Johnston. "Prisoners and their children need to see each other to keep up the parent-child bond."

On their way out of Bedford, babies get swooped up, their naked foot planted on a rainbow-colored inkpad. Their moms lift them into the air, and make a footprint on the wall behind the nursery ward director's desk. Getting a good footprint is not easy. The babies squirm and their feet are almost all baby fat. When the women leave, they get $40 in spending money from the state and the nursery staff makes sure the mother and baby get home safely, either giving them a ride or buying them a train ticket. (Inmates without babies get a bus ticket home.) When there is no home to go to, a volunteer places them in the residential program set up by Sister Elaine.

Nationwide, about fifty-seven thousand women are released from prison each year. Sometimes their older children, who may have seen little of them, don't want to live with them. Their families may be ambivalent about making room for them in their lives.

Once outside, the odds are stacked against them. Jobs—the kind that pay health benefits and allow them to support their families—are hard to find for ex-felons. The law prohibits drug felons from getting federally subsidized loans for college for at least the first year of study. Federal law prohibits drug felons from ever receiving welfare or food stamps. Drug felons are prohibited from living in federally subsidized housing for up to three years.

"It's virtually hopeless. The barriers are so high. Add to it that most of these women are minorities, and I fear that we are creating a major underclass," says Ellen Barry, founder of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, a non-profit organization that advocates policy changes and also provides prisoners with information about custody and child support.

At Bedford, however, the mothers are mostly optimistic. When she finishes her one- to three-year sentence in a few months, Manzi is going to live with her aunt, who has a teenage daughter willing to help babysit Nazayah. She wants to go to cosmetology school, she says, shaking her cornrows out of her face. Archer hopes to get a job at a convenience store, splitting shifts with her husband to take care of her son. Another mother is afraid to move back home, because her sisters' boyfriends sell drugs. "I can't afford to violate," she says.

The first to leave will be Barbara Cutler, 34, who has spent eighteen months on the ward, raising her youngest daughter, Johanna, and finishing up a drug sentence. She's counting down to her release date. "Forty days," she says, beaming. Above Johanna's crib are orange and red construction-paper stars, each with the name of one of Cutler's four other girls, scattered now among relatives. Until just before giving birth to Johanna, Cutler was doing her time in another prison upstate; which did not have the parenting programs of Bedford.

"I put them in the back of my mind so I did not have to cry," she says, helping Johanna out of her crib. Johanna's legs squirm, her arms outstretched. Below her crib, Johanna's two pairs of shoes, sandals and pink sneakers, sit on a small crocheted carpet Cutler made. Her older children are four and a half hours away. She's seen them twice since coming to Bedford. Cutler, who was unemployed before prison, will be going home to a job refinishing furniture, alongside her siblings. She is grateful that she's been able to raise her daughter.

Asked if she thinks prison is a good environment for a baby, she doesn't hesitate. "I don't think it matters to a baby where they are as long as she knows she's loved. She's happy and loved here," Cutler says. "This is home to her. It's all she's known."

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Before starting my research, I didn't have much sympathy for the female inmates. My focus then was almost solely on what was in the best interest of their children. The more I learned, however, the more I was struck by how few resources these women had had in their lives. During a time of stress in my life, a friend told me that it's hard to be a caregiver when you're depleted. As I've thought back on the Bedford mothers, I've often wondered how much harder it must be for them, when some had never been filled up. I believe now that by helping the female inmates parent, the benefits for them and their children are great.