

# 'I'VE LEARNED ... TO BE A BETTER PARENT'

**■ An Early Head Start program gives imprisoned mothers a chance to bond with their children**

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It's no secret that women in prison still have children.

But it's an easy fact to overlook amidst the often-grim reality that landed those women behind bars. It's easier still to view women sentenced to years at a stretch for manslaughter, assault or drug crimes as all-too-deserving of their fate.

But it's the children in this equation, many born after their mothers were incarcerated, that too often are an afterthought. They are sent to live with relatives or foster parents or forgotten altogether. But they still have the same needs and desires as those with mothers living normal lives.

At Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, however, a groundbreaking Early Head Start program has been offering young women behind bars a second chance at becoming a mother at the same time as they pay their debt to society.

"I love it," said inmate Shanun Corron. "You get different training, and you learn how to read your baby's signals. Everything I didn't know with my daughter, like communication and learning to parent."

Offered through Washington-County based Community Action, the federally-funded program currently has space for up to eight inmates and their children at Coffee Creek's purpose-built facility outside the prison's two main wings.

Although it has been on offer to eligible inmates since the prison opened in



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Coffee Creek inmate Shanun Corron and her son Brennan (above) were enrolled in the prison's Early Head Start program prior to her release in May. Below is 20-month-old Emma Meier, daughter of inmate Emily Meier and another Early Head Start participant.

2002, the Early Head Start program has operated largely outside the public eye, with the exception of Community Action's 2008 "contractor of the quarter" award from the Department of Corrections.

Around 65 children and their mothers have gone through the program since it started.

"It was my job at the time to liaise with the DOC," recalled Sharon Bollmeier, a family support teacher for Community Action who has run the program at Coffee Creek from the beginning. "And when they lost \$200,000 in state funding, we (Community Action) were able to step in."

Bollmeier runs things as she would a similar Early Head Start program on the outside. It is aimed at low-income families with infants or toddlers, as well as pregnant women. Inmates, up to eight of whom may take part at any given time, certainly qualify.

The program's aim is to promote healthy outcomes for pregnant women and their babies, as well as enhancing the development of



young children and families.

In practice, the routine usually means that twice a week mothers meet their children at the Early Head Start building, the mother a half-hour beforehand in order to set up classrooms for the day.

Mothers work with Bollmeier and others to set up child development and family goals before they start the program. The twice-weekly sessions go on to encompass child development, health, nutrition and social services.

There also are obvious differences between Early Head Start at Coffee Creek and similar programs on the outside.

dren.

"They earn the right to stay here," Bollmeier said. "In terms of the women that we get here, it's not always easy."

"She's always over there looking for babies," said Jana Wong, Coffee Creek assistant administrator. "Coffee Creek works with mothers and families to plan ahead for births, and the DHS (Department of Human Services) if there's no family."

Much of the time, however, one or more of the eight slots go unfilled, mainly because of the difficulty in arranging transportation for a child to and from Coffee Creek twice a week for the half-day sessions.

"It's hard to get that many," said Bollmeier, adding the average length a participant is enrolled falls just shy of a year.

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

When these barriers fall, however, the rewards are well worth the sweat and tears.

Corron, 28, was serving a 15-month sentence for the distribution of a controlled substance - methamphetamine - when interviewed for this article.

She was released on probation at the end of May and has since been reunited with her year-old son Brennan, as well as her nine-year-old daughter. Early Head Start, Corron said, has given her a second chance at raising Brennan as her own.

On this day, she watches as Brennan interacts with guest Keren Joshi, former children's librarian at the Wilsonville Public Library. Joshi straps on her acoustic guitar and leads the three children and their mothers in a round of songs and accompanying claps, steps and other motions.

It's all part of helping the children adjust to having their mothers around in a relatively normal setting. For Corron, it seems to be work-

ing.

"He (Brennan) is building relationships here," she said. "That's the biggest change."

Corron gave birth to her son not long after being sentenced to prison for her role in selling methamphetamine. She described the experience as difficult.

"It was really hard," she said. "It's stressful and it's just not the same. My parents took him home the same day and that was really hard. I can't imagine what it's like if the DHS (Department of Human Services) was taking him away."

Over the course of the next year, however, Corron was able to bond with Brennan in a way she never would have been able to without Early Head Start.

"I've learned everything that I didn't know with my daughter," she said.

Corron is certainly not alone.

"This program is really ..." said inmate Emily Meier, her voice trailing off as she searched for the right words.

"It's really changed my life," she said.

Currently serving out a 46-month sentence, also for distribution of methamphetamine, Meier is 27 years old and the mother of Emma, a 20-month old girl with a sunny personality.

Like Corron, Meier gave birth to Emma just months after being sent to prison.

"I actually had her while I was here," Meier said.

Emma is more fortunate than some children in similar straits; Meier's parents live in Salem and were willing to take custody of Emma. They also have provided faithful transportation for Emma to attend Early Head Start at Coffee Creek.

"This here is a lot different than just visiting," Meier said. "We get hands-on training, coaching. I've learned how to be a better parent. It's helped me build a future because everything here is so supportive." ■