

# Federal Prisons

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female offender

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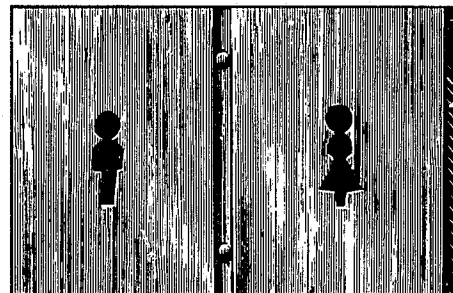
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# Linking Inmate Families Together

The L.I.F.T. program at FPC Alderson

*Bobbie Gwinn*

The parenting program at Alderson has deep historical roots. The facility was dedicated in 1927 as the first Federal institution for female offenders. Throughout Alderson's history, management has attempted in various ways to strengthen family ties and promote parenting skills, and the children of inmates are central to that concern.

Earlier in the prison's history, babies were delivered in the institution hospital and remained in a nursery on the institution grounds until age 2. During the early 1970's, expectant mothers began to be sent to maternity wards at community hospitals; the practice of bringing the

infant back into the institution was discontinued at the behest of social service agencies, which regarded the presence of children in a prison as unhealthy. Today, concerns for bonding, parenting, and related matters are ever-present for incarcerated mothers. The attempt to resolve these concerns has been evident in Alderson's past programs and policies, which have evolved into our present program—Linking Inmate Families Together (L.I.F.T.).

One concern regarding inmate management has been how to determine what services and facilities are appropriate for incarcerated mothers and their children. The issues surrounding male inmates

as parents are not unimportant, but major traumas involving bonding, parenting, and separation are much more common among incarcerated mothers. Some correctional practitioners support the theory that the resolution of issues surrounding parenting is important to rehabilitation and may promote a decline in recidivism.

In 1986, the U.S. Congress appropriated funds for the continuation and development of parenting programs at four Federal Correctional Institutions housing female offenders—Pleasanton, Fort Worth (the only such program for males), Lexington, and Alderson. Prior to that funding, Alderson operated a "Sesame Street" program in a small trailer adjacent to the institution visiting room.



Photos: Craig Crawford/DOJ

Although small, the program was popular with the inmates and their family members. Upon receiving the parenting funds appropriated by Congress, Alderson constructed a Children's Center.

In January 1987, prior to program startup, the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Office of Research and Evaluation conducted a survey to determine the likely usage of the Children's Center. The survey was voluntary; 256 inmates (30.5 percent of the population) were selected at random. Analysis revealed that 75 percent of the inmates using the visiting room felt that their children were not comfortable and that the visiting room was too crowded, restricting privacy and activities for children. Sixty-one percent of the inmates surveyed were from 400 miles away or further; two-thirds of these were not receiving visits. With the survey completed, the parenting program was developed to be sensitive to the needs of both inmates and their children, as well as correctional services staff.

From the beginning, the organizational structure has centered on an advisory staff committee and an inmate steering committee. The inmate committee represents the various ethnic groups at the institution, and remains active with 10 members. Trained inmate volunteers, from a list of 25, work in the Children's Center during Center hours. In addition to the Center itself, a playground area was constructed; its design included areas for imaginative play and fitness.

The parenting program includes not only Children's Center activities, but social service and educational courses. The education component has always been



*Top: Michael Vincent, Project Director, Catholic Community Services, with the author. Left: The outside visiting area has play equipment for the children. Right: An inmate volunteer, one of 35 to donate time during weekends.*





popular and well attended, with many classes offered on a regular basis. Exploring Parenting and Parenting From a Distance are the two core courses; other workshops include prenatal care information, diet, nutrition, family nutrition, parenting skills, and community resources for family life. Also included are skills for family support—budgeting, setting priorities, coping with change, and other life skills. The social services component deals with crisis intervention and helps address such concerns as facilitating visitation, child placement, legal issues, and support services.

L.I.F.T. has successfully operated since September 1987. Alderson's Education Department coordinates the program and contracts with a local social services agency to staff it. Careful selection of qualified staff has made L.I.F.T. activities almost problem-free. An early-childhood educator is responsible for classes and training, while a licensed social worker handles crisis intervention.

The program has benefited hundreds of short- and long-term inmate mothers and their children. Visits occur in less crowded surroundings, and the area allows parents to participate in more constructive activities with their children. While incarceration is a fact of these women's lives, communication skills and projects help reduce their isolation and separation. The Alderson program has proven to be a very positive link in getting inmate families together. ■

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*Bobbie Gwinn is Supervisor of Education at the Federal Prison Camp, Alderson, West Virginia.*



*Top: Sherry Dasher, staff member of Catholic Relief Services, counsels an inmate. Bottom: Three generations unite on a visitation day.*

## My experience with the L.I.F.T. program

*Norma Zambrana*

I am a native of Bolivia. I arrived at FPC Alderson in March 1989. For the first year, all I could do was cry over the 8-year sentence I had received for distribution of drugs. I am a naturalized citizen of this country with three children—two sons and a daughter. My youngest son was just 8, and the family had suffered financially throughout the conviction process. Thankfully, he was living with relatives in Alabama. The possibility of visiting with my little boy wasn't even a consideration due to the distressed financial circumstances of the family.

I was so devastated by my incarceration and the concerns over my family that I was placed under a "suicide watch" in the county facility. That was a difficult year in which self-pity ravaged my waking hours. After absorbing my grief for those many months, I had no more tears—only a new determination to *do* something positive with my situation at Alderson. I marched to the Education Building and signed up for every available course. "Growing Up Again," offered by the L.I.F.T. (Linking Inmate Families Together) program, was the first course I was able to attend.

I entered the class skeptical of learning much, viewing the opportunity as more entertaining than productive. Much to my amazement, I realized that some things about the way I had raised my two older children were wrong. I came from the old school, the Spanish heritage providing strict guidelines for my children's upbringing. I didn't even allow my daughter to date!

Now I was learning about situations of abuse and ways to guide children, offered in a positive light. Intrigued, I began to put into practice the principles being taught and found that my small son responded beautifully to the creative offerings his mom was producing as a result of her classes.

Armed with renewed spirit, I attacked several projects. But what was the most rewarding was the blessing I received as a volunteer in the Children's Center. On weekends, I was able to work with other incarcerated mothers' children, using the skills I learned in the parenting classes. The L.I.F.T. program sponsors and staffs this center to accommodate the many children of inmates and offers an opportunity for the visits to be great fun for both children and moms.

Birthday cakes are prepared in the small microwave oven—made especially for and by the child. Creative juices flow while painting, working with modeling clay, playing with building blocks, listening to music, and watching carefully selected videos. Sometimes, there are small animals or items of similar interest, such as turtles, to amuse the children.

It is not unusual to see the little families grouped around tables working with beads or string art. One mother of a very small son enjoyed giving the 6-month-old a bath in the sink in the bathroom and then reading to the sleepy, powdered, and sweet-smelling baby in the Center's version of "Granny's rocking chair." There is a changing table, a fresh supply of diapers, and paraphernalia that would

normally be found in the nursery at home. The Center provides high chairs, cribs, playpens, and a multitude of toys to appeal to all age groups.

I realized that this opportunity was helping me blossom in my trials, and I began telling others. I became a leader to the women at Alderson, encouraging them to "get involved" and do something constructive with their time. I began working at the Federal Prison Industries garment factory, where I started out sewing, but graduated to repairing the sewing machines. It is a skill that I plan to take with me back into the community.

My work at the Children's Center helped my emotional attitudes immensely, but in the background there was always the longing to be with my small son. Finances would not permit the expense of a trip to Alderson, West Virginia, from Alabama. Last summer, my son was picked as one of 10 children to participate in the L.I.F.T. Summer Camp Program. My joy knew no bounds as my son was transported to the camp with all the costs fully underwritten by Catholic Charities. The week-long camp gave both of us the opportunity to renew our bonds and share in many delightful activities. Laughing, hugging, sharing special treats: the experience has carried me through many, many days with wonderful memories. I am a new person, a better mother, and a more worthwhile human being. I attribute these qualities to the work done for me, personally, by the training and caring I have received from the L.I.F.T. program. My life will never be the same. ■