Mom and Me program promotes parental bonding behind bars

By: Jason Nevell
August 4, 2016

LINCOLN, Ill. (AP) — Precious Perry and her daughter Zakia stood on opposite sides of a volleyball net and smiled as they batted a beach ball back and forth Tuesday.

Normally, a table occupies the space between them in the visitors room of the Logan County Correctional Center.

The 28-year-old mother from Bloomington, serving a four-year sentence for a drug conviction, was one of 18 inmates at Logan participating in the three-day Mom and Me camp that ended Wednesday.

In its 15th year at Logan, Mom and Me is aimed at helping incarcerated women build stronger relationships with their children and transition to life outside of prison.

Perry wasn't taking the extra time with Zakia for granted. It's the little moments, she said, that she misses the most, like volleyball or just being able to brush her daughter's hair.

When she is released on parole next month, Perry promised she isn't going back.

"I do not want to be away from my children again," she said.

Reducing recidivism

In addition to Logan, Mom and Me is in its 10th year at Decatur Correctional Center, where 11 inmates participated.

The faith-based program is run by more than 60 volunteers and is paid for through private donations.
Maggie Burke, acting warden at Logan, said all participating moms have to be on good behavior and not have committed a crime against a child. Most are minimum-security inmates - in prison for non-violent crimes like forgery, drugs, prostitution or other Class 4 felonies.

Logan is a multi-level women's facility, but 65 percent of the roughly 2,000 inmates are there for lower-class crimes, Burke said.

The kids — between the ages of 7 and 12 — spend eight hours with their moms during the day at the prisons and then go back to a campground in Bloomington for the night, where they throw water balloons, swim in a pool or do other fun activities.

Spending time with their children, even if it's brief, Burke said, can help the women better transition to life after prison.

The program helps strengthen the bond between the mother and her child, which gives them even more incentive to not return to prison, Burke said.

In Illinois, nearly half of offenders released from the Illinois prison system each year will be reincarcerated within three years, according to a 2015 Illinois State Commission on Criminal Justice and Sentencing Reform report.

"One of the cornerstones for a female offender is that you try and make sure they maintain and develop bonds with their kids," Burke said. "It helps reduce recidivism and connects them to the community so they can return home and be good mothers and good citizens."

Mom and Me also benefits the kids, she added, because they get to see the prison behind the scenes and meet other children with similar backgrounds.

"They can make lifelong friendships with other kids who are going through the same thing," Burke said.

'Not coming back'

Amanda Taylor, 37, of Monticello wound up at Logan because she said she was involved in a burglary to support a heroin addiction.

Taylor is serving a 3 1/2-year sentence and could be released four months early in October if she earns her high school equivalency diploma, she said.

The toughest part about prison, Taylor said, is being away from her children. Her 7-year-old son, Wesley, spent time with her this week. On Tuesday, the two designed a scrapbook together with pictures taken during the camp.

Still, going away turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to her, Taylor said. She is sober now and has no plans to be around drugs when she gets out.
"It has made me a stronger person, and I know that when I get out I'm not coming back," she said. "I want to live life and enjoy him."

There's no doubt Wesley misses his mom. Asked how much he wants her home, he shouted, "Infinity!"