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A Portland program teaches former prisoners the family skills needed to help their children thrive



By Sara Hottman, [The Oregonian](#)

on January 18, 2013 at 1:00 PM, updated January 18, 2013 at 8:56 PM

Michelle Newell, 37, has been a mother since she was 14 years old.

She's also been on and off of methamphetamine, in and out of jail and working the minimum-wage jobs her fifth-grade education allows.

"I wasn't really a mom," says Newell, of Portland. "I'm not the same person I was on methamphetamine. Now I'm accountable for my children."

That's the mantra Newell learned in her parenting class at [Center for Family Success](#), a Portland program through the nonprofit [Pathfinders of Oregon](#) that teaches an array of classes for parents who were just released from prison.

The center [focuses more on parents than children](#). It operates on the philosophy that parents are their children's best teachers, mentors and advocates, so teaching them to be proper parents will improve their kids' lives, says Glenna Hayes, director of the center. In 2011, the center served about 400 families with 1,000 children.

According to Pathfinders, in the six to nine months after the parenting class, 91 percent of the parents report no contact with law enforcement, and half the parents had regained custody of their kids -- one of Newell's goals.

At the parenting class, instructors teach basic skills students likely didn't learn from their parents, such as appropriate discipline and reward and childhood stages of development.

Students like Newell, who grew up in a drug house and was doing meth with her mother by fifth grade, genuinely don't know proper parent behavior.

"I was a baby when I had a baby," says Newell, who has four kids, ages 8 to 23. "I didn't even know what I didn't know."

That's the case with most of the students who take the 12-week class, parent advocates say. The class usually starts with 25 and graduates half after students drop out, usually for job conflicts or re-incarceration. Classes are twice a week and provide child care, bus passes and snacks.

"Parents teach what they're taught," says Diane Holmes, a parent advocate with the center. "So when it comes to parenting stuff our students have no clue."

Trying to get kids back

For most parents, attendance is a condition of parole or court-ordered to get their kids back from foster care. Those who stick with it are determined to be good parents, say advocates.

"My mom's mom was an alcoholic, my mom was an addict, I'm an alcoholic and an addict. I don't want my kids to be that," says Newell, who in August was released from Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville after serving 24 months of a 38-month sentence for identity theft convictions in 2010.

Beyond basic skills, the class teaches parents how to talk to their children about their time in prison and how to cope with the guilt and shame they feel for leaving their kids.

At the week 11 class in December, instructor Victory Hall talks to the class about overindulgence, a typical reaction for parents recently released from jail.

"Should you be your child's friend?" she asks the class.

"No," says Jayson Osborn, 37, with the rest of the class. He adds, "My mom bought all the kids in the neighborhood beer when we were 13 years old."

Problem solving, communication coaching, and emotional regulation are all jargon the class teaches and students say they use daily as they practice parenting.

Rayona Sherman, 21, sitting in class with an organized binder decorated with pictures of her 3-year-old son, tells the class about disciplining her son during a visit at his foster home. He was rude to her, so she practiced "privilege removal and timeout," she says. "I was nervous, but I did it."

Learning to cope

Every class teaches students to overcome guilt and shame.

Osborn talks to the class about allowing his daughter to get away with forging his name on a school slip; he told the teacher his wife had signed it.

"I felt like, 'you don't know what my daughter's been through, and now you're going to pick on my kid?'" Osborn says. Then, he says, he used a problem-solving method taught in the class and realized feelings of guilt and shame shouldn't allow his daughter to avoid discipline.

"That's how she turns out like I did," he says.

Parents in the class used drugs and have criminal records, Holmes says.

"They've been beat down so long they think they don't have the right, and people in the system treat them like that," she says. "But what they did is their crime, not who they are."

The parenting class continues the many programs available to Coffee Creek inmates -- if they make it past a long waiting list. The women's medium-security prison offers 112 classes or activities, most of them religious, with 10 parenting classes including Parenting Inside Out, the curriculum used by Center for Family Success.

According to the Oregon Department of Corrections, their facilities provide such classes to encourage successful family life after release.

Newell didn't get past the waiting list for Parenting Inside Out in prison, but through another class learned about the parenting and drug treatment programs available to her on the outside.

She graduated from the parenting class last month. She plans on taking more Center for Family Success classes that provide the support system she didn't have -- she didn't know existed -- before prison, when she relapsed to drug use in 2009 after nine years clean.

Then, "it was more abstinence than recovery," she says. "This time I didn't want to go back to prison. This time I did it for me. I did it for my kids."

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