

Program Helps Prisoners Learn To Be Better Parents

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Being a good parent is a tough job, especially from inside a jail cell. But an educational program in Dauphin County aims to help inmates get closer to their children as they learn what it takes to be a good parent.

child, boosting the child's self-esteem.

At the same time, parents attend class for two hours a day, five days a week, studying CPR, fire safety, children's literature and toys, discipline, self-esteem, the importance of playing with children, illnesses, and nutrition. The inmates also receive information about family support programs available after release.

Parents and Their Children at Home, or PATCH, helps inmates maintain contact with their children while learning parenting skills in the classroom. A joint effort of Penn State Cooperative Extension in Dauphin County and the Dauphin County Prison in Harrisburg, PATCH will be offered three times in the first six months of 1994.

Then the parents get to apply what they've learned during two supervised contact visits with their children. "Very few prisoners actually see their children, so this is a rare opportunity for them," Laeger-Hagemeister says. "They usually must communicate by telephone or from behind glass."

Since it started in 1990, 36 parents and 50 children have completed the program. "These parents need counseling in parenting skills because many don't know what good parenting means," says Mary Laeger-Hagemeister, extension agent and program coordinator.

The first visit is planned by PATCH program staff and includes practicing skills the parents learned in class. Parents themselves plan the second contact visit, with staff supervision.

"In general, they had a bad home life. They may have come from abusive homes or their own parents may have been in jail. Children of incarcerated parents are six times more likely to be incarcerated themselves. By helping prisoners learn to be better parents, we hope to stop this cycle from repeating itself in the next generation."

Laeger-Hagemeister documented the PATCH program on a videotape, which she has shared with the Pennsylvania Association of Adult Education, Penn State's Celebrate the Family Symposium, the National Association of Extension Home Economists, and the National Association of Correctional Officers. She has received several requests for assistance in establishing similar programs in other communities.

The program also aims to reinforce the children's sense of continuity and security. "These kids need to know that mommy or daddy still loves them, even if that parent made a mistake," Laeger-Hagemeister says. "PATCH staff will meet with the children as a group throughout the program to teach them skills and try to boost their self-esteem."

In 1993, Laeger-Hagemeister received one of six national Florence Hall Awards presented by the National Association of Extension Home Economists. The award is granted to home economists who involve people in outstanding programs that address new concerns of families. She also received the DeWitt Wallace Reader's Digest Youth-At-Risk Award, which recognizes extension agents who conduct programs for youth and families at risk. Laeger-Hagemeister was recognized for the PATCH program's impact on children.

The program lasts two months. Parents start by sending their children worksheets or project papers, which the children fill out and return to their parent. The parent writes comments or places a sticker on the page and returns to the



Fasnacht Day on Tuesday found these women busy preparing hundreds of fat, plain fasnachts for folks to enjoy. From left, Joyce Reiff, Lorraine Hoover, and Ruth Weller display a tray full of golden brown fasnachts — fresh from the fryer at Minnich's Bakery of Litz. According to tradition, fasnachts were made to use up the lard and yeast the day before Lent season, which marks fasting and self denial. Photo by Connie Buckwalter.

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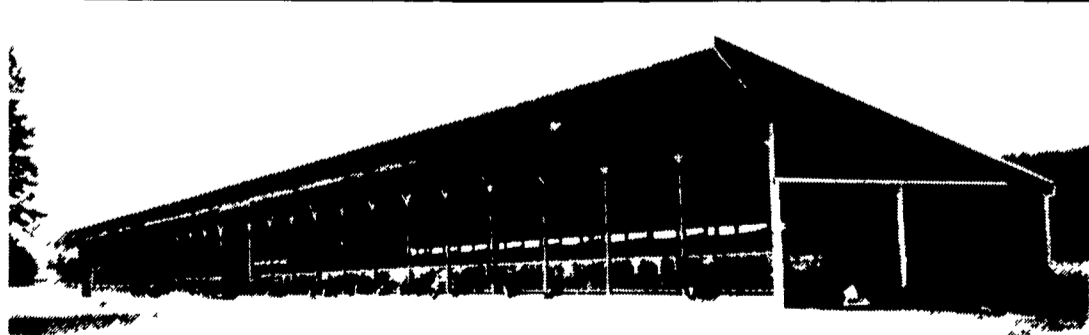
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