

Government

Bringing Elmo to Juvenile Hall

Program looks to help teen parents behind bars learn basic skills and form bonds with their children.
By [Cody Kitaura](#) | [Email the author](#) | November 30, 2010

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Some residents in [Sacramento County Juvenile Hall](#) improve their reading and writing skills, some earn their GEDs and some learn to play peek-a-boo.

The Sacramento County Probation Department is one of about six agencies in California participating in a [Georgetown University](#) and [Youth Law Center](#) study on a possible way to improve the relationship between incarcerated teen parents and their children: through counseling and Sesame Street's "Sesame Beginnings" video series.

Dubbed the "Baby Elmo Program," the 10-week session involves working with a counselor and watching videos that teach basic parenting skills, like how to praise a child. Each visit is videotaped and sent to Georgetown University as part of the study.

Chief Probation Officer Don Meyer said the program teaches participants to be better parents by communicating with their children "instead of yelling or smacking them."

"We've seen some pretty dramatic changes," he said.

Joseph McDowell was the first participant in the Sacramento County program when it was launched in February. His son was just a month old when McDowell, who is now 18, was sent to juvenile hall for an armed robbery conviction.

"At first he didn't know who I was," McDowell said. "Then he started getting more confident with me, letting me feed him and change his diaper."

The South Sacramento resident said the weekly classes gave him something to look forward to during his yearlong sentence, and taught him new parenting skills.

"It actually changed me a lot," he said of his new relationship with his son. "I got something to live for now."

Professor looks for a way to improve relationships

Rachel Barr, the Georgetown University professor overseeing the project, studies developmental psychology and the way infants learn from television and their parents.

"So far what we're really seeing are changes in the things we think are really important," Barr said in a phone interview. "The play exchanges that are going back and forth between the parent and the child are becoming more extended and more positive."

She said she hopes the program will lead parents to be more involved with their children's lives than they would have been otherwise.

"There's a possibility they would be absent later on if they're denied this ability to meet with their children," she said.

Barr said the study is moving in the right direction and will likely be published next year, but the main obstacle keeping it from expanding is a lack of funding.

A unique funding source for local program

Sacramento County, [devastated by recent budget cuts](#), solved that problem by letting the friends and family of juvenile hall residents foot the bill.

The Baby Elmo Program in Sacramento hasn't been running for a full year, but has an estimated annual cost of \$9,000 and has had 15 participants so far. It is paid for entirely by money from collect calls made by residents. Part of that money is given back to the department and is used for magazines, athletic equipment, anti-gang programs and other uses. The department also gives out bus passes to help relatives or caregivers bring babies to juvenile hall.

Naomi McCormack, a deputy probation assistant who is the main facilitator of Sacramento's Baby Elmo program, said it's rewarding to watch the interaction between parent and child.

On Saturday, a resident saw his son for the first time.

"All he did was look at his son and rock him to sleep," McCormack said in an e-mail. "All he said after the visit was, 'Thank you.'"

What do you think of this program? Do you know someone in it? [Tell us in the comments.](#)

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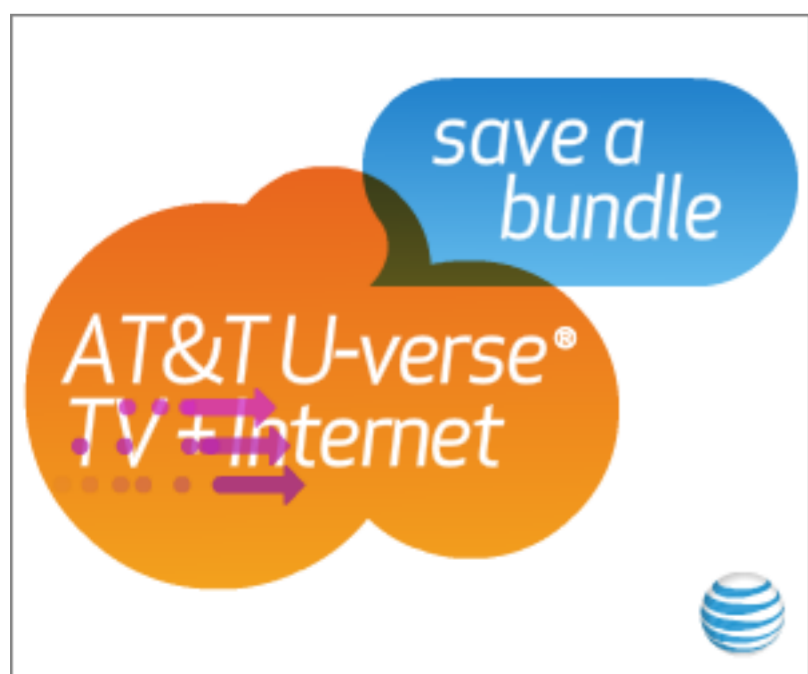
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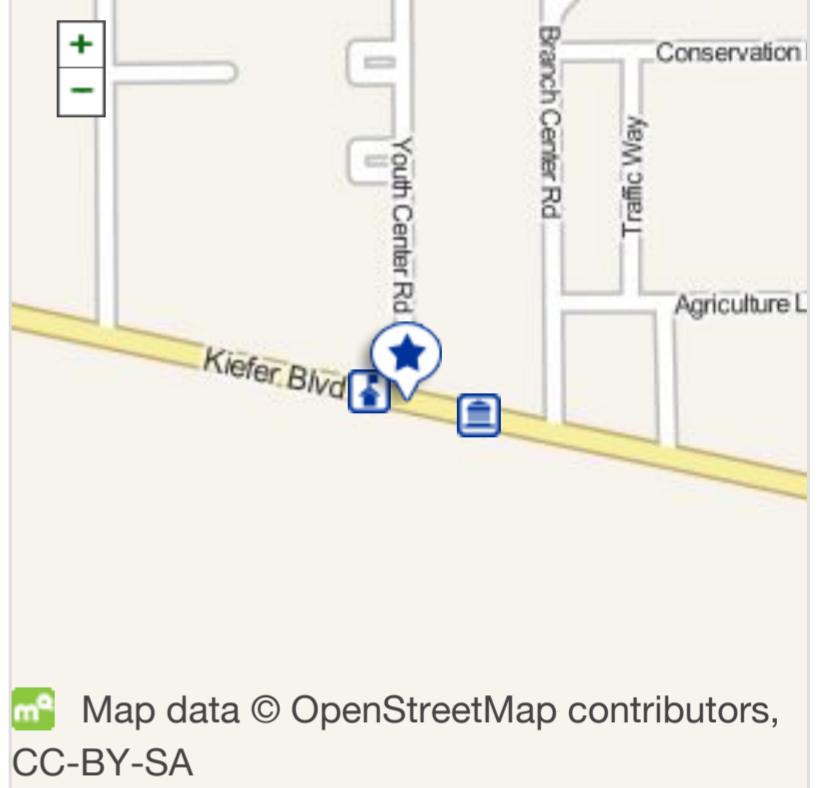
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