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# Baby Elmo Program: Teen dads at Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility learn parenting skills

Ohio juvenile detention offers dad program

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Posted: 06/13/2013



By: Dave Arnold, newsnet5.com

HIGHLAND HILLS, Ohio - Ashley Taylor traveled to Highland Hills on Cleveland's east side to the Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility with her daughter, McKensie, Thursday.

Taylor, 21, was one many mothers, grandmothers and family members joining in on a program targeted at educating young men behind bars for crimes committed before their 18th birthday who are



also fathers.

According to a report written by Georgetown University's Natalie Brito and Rachel Barr, incarcerated teen fathers in the 14 to 18 year-old range in the U.S. tallies near 75,000 at residential detention facilities. The report goes on to say, "...offer little opportunity for contact with outside friends and family, making parent absenteeism an unfortunate reality."

Enter The Baby Elmo Program. Since 2005, the program has blossomed into an active, successful tool for detention facilities in California and Ohio.

At the Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility, youth specialist Francois Smith has seen it at work, making his decades-old job that much easier. However, Smith said the family visits at the beginning of the program are slow at first for these young fathers.

"When they first come in the program, it's about seeing the girlfriends. A lot of them want to see their children, but more so the girlfriends," Smith said. "And then when you talk to them, they have certain skills they have to learn every week, and about the sixth visit you see a lot of these young men starting to really understand that it's not about 'me', it's bigger than them."

Taylor has seen the father of her daughter grow into a man and can't wait for his release in less than a year.

"It's made him a very strong man and he's an amazing father. He's the best thing that's ever happened to me," Taylor said.

The Highland Hills facility is hoping the program will also translate into a life-long approach to fatherhood upon their exit from juvenile incarceration. Many of the teen fathers in the program were originally jailed for violent crimes.

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The Baby Elmo Program has succeeded in maturing many of them, where other programs have failed, according to Smith.

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