

Parenting In Prison

A prison sentence can be just punishment for women guilty of breaking the law, but experts are taking care to ensure that their children don't pay the price for their mother's crimes. MiNDFOOD goes behind bars to find out more.

Words by **Joanna Tovia**



PRISON PLAYGROUND

Children live with their mothers at Emu Plains Correctional Centre in Sydney's outer west.



The night before Renea* went to prison was like any other. She read a bedtime story to her 16-month-old daughter, gave her a bottle of milk warmed to just the right temperature, and cuddled her off to sleep. In court the next morning, Renea was sentenced to four years' prison time. Numb with shock, she was led out of the courtroom and down the stairs, where she was locked in a cell for the first time.

"It just didn't seem real. None of it seemed real," Renea says. "I was waiting for someone to charge in and say 'It's all been a mistake; let's get you out of here.'"

It wasn't until her hands were cuffed and she boarded a truck bound for prison that it began to sink in. This wasn't just a bad dream, and she had no idea when she would see her baby again.

After handing over everything but her wedding ring, Renea was stripsearched and issued a set of prison greens. Talking to *MiNDFOOD* in the same bottle-green track pants and T-shirt nine months into her sentence, Renea's eyes well with tears when she remembers those first few nights without her daughter.

"It's quite raw to think about that," she says, her tears falling freely. "Gutted is the only word I can come up with. I was everything to Honor every minute of a 24-hour period, and you go from that to a six-minute phone call or a two-and-a-half hour visit a week. It's hard."

Honor stayed in the family home with her dad and Renea's other children, an 18-year-old son and a 24-year-old daughter. Renea pled guilty to stealing from her employer, a crime for which she had turned herself in six years earlier (the investigation took five and a half years). Renea was a compulsive gambler who would do anything to keep gambling; at the height of her addiction, she would spend about six hours a day feeding as much as \$2000 into poker machines in a single session.

"My addiction was really out of control for a good three years. I lived and breathed

it," Renea says. It wasn't until she forced herself to go to a Gamblers Anonymous meeting that her life began to turn around, and she spent the next six years in intensive therapy. It wasn't the money that drew her into gambling, she says, but the escape it provided her.

"I grew up thinking I was just no good," Renea explains. "I've had a lot of trauma in my life, a lot of trauma that was unresolved. My oldest daughter is a rape baby, and I never dealt with that. I had a lot of sexual-abuse issues as a child, and my mum left. I thought I wasn't good enough, and that's why all these bad things kept happening to me. It's not until you really learn about yourself and deal with things that you can say 'I am okay. I am okay.'"

Renea knew she had to pay for her crime, but having to abandon her baby girl when she herself had been abandoned as a child was the biggest punishment of all. "I'm the most important person in her life, and I'd worked so hard at overcoming my own abandonment issues – that's been my main focus, that she will never have any of those issues."

Renea is one of the lucky ones, however, because two months after saying goodbye to Honor, she was accepted into the Mothers and Children's program at Emu Plains Correctional Centre in Sydney's far west. When she was finally able to curl up in bed with her daughter again, she had the first good night's sleep she'd had since losing her freedom.

UNCONVENTIONAL PRISONS

About 60 per cent of women who are imprisoned are mothers, although only half were living with their children before going to prison because the kids have either been taken away by community services or are being cared for by other family members.

The most common reason for women to be in prison is for illicit drug offences, followed by property offences and acts intended to cause injury. ►



HOME BEHIND BARS

Renea sits in the kitchen of her prison home where she lives with her two-year-old daughter Honor.

Jacaranda Cottages provides mothers with what many other imprisoned parents around the world will never have: the chance to live in a relatively normal environment with their children while they serve their sentence. Not unlike a caravan park, neat white cottages with simple bedrooms rather than cells house as many as 40 women and their children, and surround a grassy expanse with playground equipment and paved bike paths. The high fences and sirens coming from the mainstream Emu Plains prison across the road are obvious reminders that this is prison, but a pool fence is all that marks the confines of Jacaranda Cottages.

Most of the children here believe they are living on a farm, that this is just where mum works. But each day from noon to 1pm, uniformed officers lock inmates and children in the cottages, and the doors are locked again at 6pm for the night.

They patrol the perimeter and conduct random bedroom searches every day, and the inmates have to gather in the cottage family rooms each morning for muster, or “headcount,” as the women here prefer to call it in front of the children.

In Renea’s room, little blonde-haired Honor, now two, is fast asleep on her mum’s bed for her afternoon nap, her own bed and soft toys abandoned for the comfort of Mum. She spends most weekends with her dad.

“I’m very humbled that I’m here; I’m lucky,” Renea says. “I was judged on the things that I did wrong, but I haven’t been judged as a mother ... this program is a gift.”

As for Honor, Renea says she is thriving. Honor is likely to avoid many of the issues facing the thousands of children across Australia and New Zealand whose parents are behind bars and deemed too old to live with them inside. There are several residential programs in Australia in which preschool-aged children are allowed to live with their incarcerated mothers if it’s in the best interest of the child. In New Zealand, self-care units have been established for approved women to care for their babies, but only until they are two years old.

There is a lengthy assessment process for acceptance into Jacaranda Cottages, and only women who had custody of their children before going to prison are considered. According to Mothers and Children’s program coordinator Belinda McInnes, women know how lucky they

are to be with their children in prison, so problems with drugs or violence are virtually nonexistent. An infra-red barrier around the perimeter at night is all that stops women from walking out.

Living here isn’t always easy, however, and conflict does arise. “Communal living is challenging,” explains McInnes. “When you throw a group of women together who are used to being the head of their household and then you throw children in on top of it ... it never escalates to violence, but it’s an abnormal environment.”

KEEPING KIDS IN MIND

Experts widely acknowledge the negative impact on children who are separated from their mothers. As one University of South Australia study points out, many children can suffer more pain from the separation than their imprisoned parent and often imagine prison to be a far worse place than it actually is.

Children left behind can suffer acute traumatic stress, with symptoms including excessive crying, bedwetting, anxiety, and depression. Disciplinary problems and aggressive behaviour are common and, as the kids get older, truancy and drug

and alcohol abuse rises. There is also a significant risk that children of imprisoned parents will end up in prison themselves.

“If we can get the kids in and they can form a secure attachment with their mums, that’s an extraordinary gift we’re giving them right there, and the potential for intergenerational change is incredible,” says Emu Plains Correctional Centre psychologist Rebecca Merz.

Disturbingly, about 40 per cent of female inmates will reoffend and be back behind bars within two years, but Merz says the recidivism rate in the Mothers and Children’s program is far lower. Women living with their children are free from the distress that comes with separation, so are more able to address some of the issues that led them to prison. Exploring what kind of parent they want to be is a useful starting point for many women.

“If you don’t have an experience of being parented, it’s hard to be a parent. A lot of the women don’t have a lot of positive experiences to draw on,” Merz says. “When we start talking about parenting and where they got some of their parenting ideas from, that can be very difficult for the women, particularly when there is a history of abuse or trauma. But it can be good for pinpointing what we need to work on in their own journeys.”

BECOMING A BETTER PARENT

Parenting programs further help women develop their skills. For those who were living a drug-impacted, chaotic life outside, prison is the first time they’ve been able to offer their children structure, safety, and routine. Women learn to budget and prepare nutritious meals, and can take their children to swimming lessons, playgroup, and kindy gym accompanied by officers in plain clothes. They are also allowed to visit the supermarket every two weeks.

Phones, computers, and electronic games are banned from the prison, but Merz says parents soon learn that their children need them, not a stream of new toys and the latest games. “Some of them start out not knowing what to do with their child, and to watch them over the months really enjoying their child ... it’s just working. It’s wonderful.”

Sandi has been in prison for nine months for fraud and is due for release the week after talking to MiNDFOOD. She

Child Rearing From A Distance

Inmates who can’t have their children with them in prison are encouraged to minimise the distress of separation by finding ways to maintain a connection with them, regardless of whether they had custody of them before going prison.

One such program available to mums and dads in Australian or New Zealand prisons aims to improve parent-child relationships through the sharing of stories. The parent records a bedtime story onto a CD, which the prison sends, along with the book, to the children so they can hear their mum or dad reading them the story.

Emu Plains Correctional Centre psychologist Rebecca Merz helps inmates come up with



other ways to share in their children’s lives and also assists mums to enrich visits with their kids through games, activities, and conversation.

“Success tends to breed success. If they start having some positive interactions with their kids, they start to embrace that even further.” These tools also present an

opportunity for parents who have had their kids taken away to reconnect. “Kids want to know their mums – even kids who have had difficulties with that relationship – so if they can start feeling more safe and secure with their mums, and also start to feel a bit more like their mums are available to them, I think that’s really important.”

has five children and a stepson, aged five to 14, who can stay with her on weekends and holidays. She misses the little things, like getting them off to school and looking after them when they’re sick. When her six-year-old came to visit for the first time after Sandi was imprisoned, she said she wanted to tell her a secret. “You broke my heart,” she whispered into her mum’s ear.

Although devastating to hear, it was a turning point for Sandi. “At that point, I knew I had to use this experience to make sure I never do that to them again,” she says. “I haven’t been an honest person for a long time, but I can say that I am now.”

Like most women behind bars, Sandi had a traumatic childhood. “I didn’t have basic foundations in life – basic morals and values that normal families give their children. “My mother was a prostitute, my dad was a drug dealer,” she says. “I’ve been molested, I’ve been raped, I’ve been gang-raped. I’ve lived a very colourful life.”

Trying desperately to give her children the happy childhood she never had, Sandi would focus on buying what she thought they needed. “It got me out of the house, and when I spent money on my kids, I felt

good,” she says. “It wasn’t until I delved within myself that I thought about why I did it, why I was stealing this money. It was a form of escapism.”

Sandi has learned valuable coping mechanisms in prison that she never learned as a child. “To me, my coping mechanism was to jump in the car and go and feed up on junk food or go shopping,” she says. “That was how I dealt with anything negative.”

She knows she has taken only the first steps in her healing journey but plans to continue to get the help she needs upon release. “My kids are making me want to change my life,” she says. “I have to be that role model. I can’t pretend to be that role model and on the side be doing something else. The realisations and epiphanies I’ve had in this place have been unbelievable. I feel like I can walk out of this place and things are going to be different.”



MiNDFOOD.COM

Visit us online for more beauty tips and expert advice. **KEYWORDS: TIPS, BEAUTY**