

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/connecting-young-fathers-behind-bars-with-their-children>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The [Baby Elmo Project](#) provides parenting education for incarcerated teen fathers through the use of media and experiential learning to develop and strengthen relationships between young parents and their babies. Each educational session is followed by a visit between the incarcerated teen parent and his child. Below, a young father incarcerated at Cuyahoga Hills describes his experience with the Baby Elmo program at the facility, piloted by the [Ohio Department of Youth Services](#).

My daughter was born on June 30, 2011, after I had already been locked up for two months. I saw my daughter for the first time through glass and was unable to hold her, so I held her for the first time in October 2011. Before I was transferred to Cuyahoga Hills, I was only able to see my daughter the last Saturday of each month for 1 hour. It didn't seem like enough time because as soon as she would warm up to me it would be time for them to go.

I was transferred to CHJCF in January 2012. Things were very different there: I only saw my daughter once between January and May 2012 because visits with children required a special visit request. I wanted more time.

Then, a new program called The Baby Elmo program came to Cuyahoga Hills. It was for young parents and their children. It sounded like a good program. One of the staff at Cuyahoga Hills had a program at CHJCF for fathers, but the visits were only once every five months. She now oversees the Baby Elmo program.

Fast forward to May 2012: I helped paint the Baby Elmo Room and prepare it. It was important to be involved. I also cleaned the floors and the walls and helped set up toys. The day of my first visit in the new Baby Elmo Room, I was scared. Truthfully, it felt like I didn't know my daughter because it had been five months since I last saw her. She didn't take to me for the first 30 minutes of the visit, and this made me feel bad because I had waited so long to see her.

Now I see her every Saturday through the Baby Elmo program, and our relationship is good. She knows her daddy! Before I even see her I can hear her saying, Daddy! all the way down the hallway, and when she sees me she gets that surprised look on her face and that big smile. I even keep a journal now. It's not about me; it's about her. I write in it every time I think about her.

This program means a lot to me because it's my opportunity to have my daughter experience how much I love her. A phone call could not do this, but seeing her does.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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