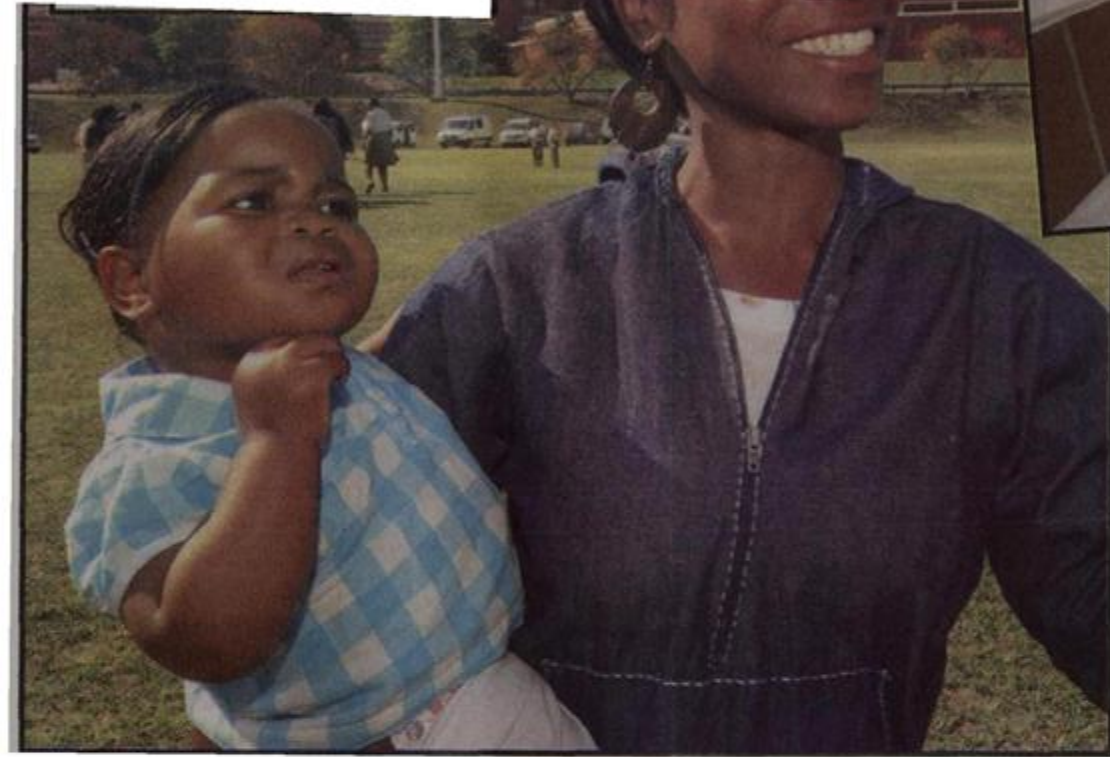


Offender Sanele Ntuli with her daughter Olwethu Zondi at the opening of the new mother and child unit at the Westville Females Correctional Centre. Right: The cells have been revamped to make them attractive and homely.

Pictures: SANDILE NDLOVU



A HAPPY PLACE FOR JAIL BABIES

The launch of a new mother and child unit at the Westville Females Correctional Centre will radically change the lives of infants living behind bars, writes Charmel Bowman

THE SIGHT of grass proved too much for young Olwethu Zondi, who tearfully clung to her mother Sanele Ntuli, 25, at the unveiling of the new mother and child unit at the Westville Females Correctional Centre last week. While toddlers her age usually revel in the joys of the outdoors, this proved too much for Olwethu, who was seeing grass, trees and sky for the first time. The toddler, who was born behind bars 18 months ago, is one of over 170 babies who live with their mothers in communal cells.

But now these children will no longer have to pay for their mother's crimes, thanks to the roll-out of mother and child care facilities at prisons across the country. The unit was launched by Correctional Services Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula with the aim of providing a conducive environment for the development of children behind bars. The first centre was opened at Pollsmoor Prison in Cape

Town last month. The second is at Westville.

The unit can accommodate 20 mothers and their children in the newly furnished rooms which are painted in bright, cheerful colours. The rooms have beds, cots and drawers made by inmates. There is also a kitchen in which to prepare bottles, a TV room, nursery and play area with a small secure playground.

The revamp was done by second-year interior design students from the Durban University of Technology as a community outreach programme.

Ntuli believes the unit is going to drastically change her daughter's six remaining months behind bars.

Children are allowed to stay with their mothers until they are two before being placed with a family guardian or in foster care.

"I was pregnant when I was sentenced. Raising a child behind bars is horrible. It was difficult to make bottles when she wanted them because I didn't have access to hot

water after lock-up. She couldn't play outside. It is hard living in a cell as there was no room for her to play. I still have over three years left to serve of my sentence for theft, but at least her time here will be comfortable now," said Ntuli, who made the difficult decision to keep her daughter with her because she had no one she trusted enough to care for her.

Mapisa-Nqakula said: "The new generation mother and child units are not intended to have mothers and babies live in house-like structures, but to ensure that children receive the optimum opportunity to develop like their peers on the outside."

But is it in the child's best interest to remain with their incarcerated mother in the first place?

Education psychologist Felicity Tonkinson said one of the most important things that can be done for a baby is to have a strong and healthy relationship with his or her parents and the forcible separation of mothers and their babies is

highly undesirable.

"The early months following birth is when the neural pathways in the brain are developing. Once a child feels safe in a relationship, the world can be trusted and their cognitive skills and emotional well-being grows from that foundation."

However, she also said that research revealed that while living in prison provides the children with their basic needs, prison protocol takes precedence, to the detriment of the children.

Mapisa-Nqakula said they are going to help mothers by facilitating the process of selecting a suitable guardian when the children left prison at the age of two.

"Many children are taken after the two years and because the relative doesn't visit them, the mother doesn't see her child until her sentence is completed, which can be after 10 or 15 years. The unit negotiates a tight balance between creating normality for children without compromising the necessary security standards. This programme is

based on the principle that there is no need to punish the child for the mother's mistake," she said.

Mapisa-Nqakula said studies have shown that children benefit from the bonding with their mothers and are generally better off staying with them and that they were trying to strengthen family structures to prevent reoffending by the mothers.

Acting national commissioner for the Department of Correctional Services, Nontsikelelo Jolingana said that women have to be pregnant when they are sentenced and give birth in prison to qualify for access to the mother and child units. "Also this is not a permanent facility as they go back to serve their sentence after the two years.

"We understand that the first two years is a very important time for the development of the child's brain. The children will now live in private rooms with their mothers, where their crying won't disturb other offenders."

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