

A Caregivers' Guide:
**How to Explain Jails
and Prisons to Children**

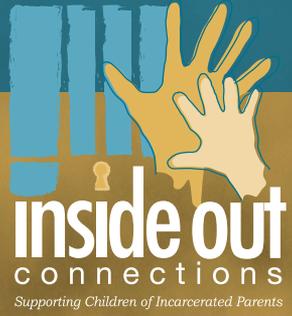


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INTRODUCTION

Parental incarceration is not a rare event. 2.7 million children, or 1 in 28 of American kids, have a parent behind bars. Just 25 years ago this was 1 in 125. Two-thirds of these children's parents were incarcerated for non-violent offenses. These numbers are part of a stunning report by the Pew Charitable Trusts. When parents are arrested or put in jail or prison, their children are often scared, confused and upset. This booklet is designed to help moms, dads and caregivers answer children's questions about jail and prison.

Dealing with this difficult situation can be stressful and scary for the children and adults involved. It is important for you as the parent or caregiver of a child with an incarcerated parent to seek out information and support for yourself as well as your child. When families receive accurate information and have strong community support, they can better understand and cope with some of the stress that goes along with having a family member or close friend in jail or prison.

This booklet was written as a resource to encourage open and honest communication between children and adults. Ideally, a caregiver will read through this booklet and then use it as a guide when talking with a child about his/her parent going to jail or prison. It is important for children to have support as they work through this experience and be able to talk to trusted adults in an emotionally safe, comforting and nurturing way.



Another note to keep in mind is the importance of a child's bond with his/her parent no matter where that parent lives or what behaviors that parent has exhibited. A bond with a parent can be nurtured in many ways. It will not always be appropriate for a parent to keep in contact with their child. It is always important to honor the feelings that child has for that parent. Children love their parents unconditionally and do not always understand issues in the adult world. Keep this in mind as you are helping your child cope.

Please remember that you do not have to do this alone. Seek out friends, family and community support as you and your child work through this difficult situation.

Definitions for words commonly used in the criminal justice system and throughout this booklet are located in the glossary on page 24 of this booklet.

ABOUT FAMILIES

There are all kinds of families. Sometimes children live with their mother and father. Sometimes they live with their mother or their father. Some children have step-parents or foster parents. Others live with grandparents, aunts or uncles, adult siblings or other family members.

When a parent or caregiver is incarcerated, children may change homes to live with:

- The other parent.
- Another family member.
- Another family in foster care.
- A family friend.

In some cases, these changes may mean moving to a different neighborhood, school, town, or even a different state. It is possible brothers and sisters may have to live with different people.

All of these changes can be very hard for children. For children who are able to read and write, it may be helpful to write down where family members are living during this time, using the outline on the next page.

For very young children, you may want to sit down together to fill out the chart on the following page, or you could ask them to draw pictures of family members and where they are living. Teens may feel more comfortable writing in a journal or talking through this information with a trusted adult.

NOTES FOR CHILDREN

About my family

My name is _____

I live at _____

I live with _____

My Mom is _____

She lives at _____

My Dad is _____

He lives at _____

My brother(s) and sister(s) are _____

My brother(s) and sister(s) live at _____

People to talk to

Someone in my family _____

Someone at my school _____

Someone at my place of worship _____

Another adult I trust _____

A close friend _____

FEELING AND EMOTIONS

When a family member goes to jail or prison, it may be very difficult for everyone involved. For some children, the experience can be emotionally devastating. For others it is less serious and for some it is a relief.

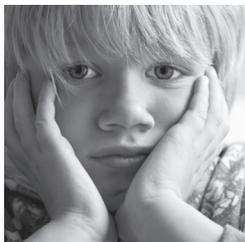
There are numerous factors affecting the overall impact of parental incarceration on a child, including a child's age and understanding of the situation and the reactions of family, friends and their community.

Children may experience a variety of strong feelings, including some they haven't felt before. They may also have several feelings all at once—sadness, fear, guilt, disbelief, anxiety, anger and/or powerlessness. It is important to help children understand and work through their feelings. Giving their feelings a name can be a starting place.

TODDLER EMOTIONS CHART



HOW DO I FEEL TODAY?



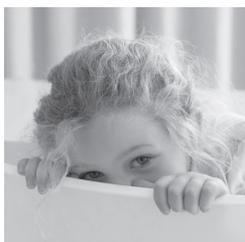
Sad



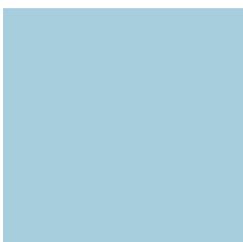
Embarrassed



Lonely



Shy



I feel . . .



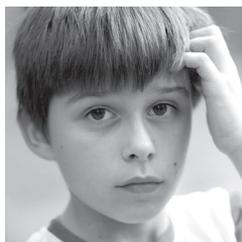
Happy



Overwhelmed



Angry



Confused



IDEAS FOR OLDER CHILDREN

With teens, journaling may be helpful and they may need some assistance with putting names to the emotions they are feeling. Use the terms below to help define more complicated emotions.

List of Words for Older Children

Apathetic: Indifferent and Unenergetic—*Not taking any interest in anything, or not bothering to do anything.*

Inadequate: Not Good Enough—*Failing to live up to expectations of self or others.*

Distant/Rejecting: *Don't want to be connected to or identify with incarcerated parent.*

Disappointed: *Let down by important people in my life, not sure who I can trust.*

Overwhelmed: *Too much happening, too much responsibility and uncertainty, limited control.*

Lethargic: Tired—*physically slow and mentally dull.*

Confused: *Find it hard to focus, disorganized, uncertain about what to do or think.*

SEEKING SUPPORT

Sometimes adults don't talk about the incarcerated parent because they are afraid it will upset the child. However, when the child is upset, hurt or confused, it is better for the child to express those feelings to others than to let the emotions stew inside.

Children are likely to worry and believe things are worse than they really are if a parent "disappears" and no one lets them talk about it. Children should be encouraged to reach out to those they trust.

Sometimes children and families need more help than family and friends can provide. There are county services and nonprofit agencies that can help. Most libraries have Internet access which can be used to get information about available help. United Way's 211 Resource and Referral line is a great place to start to find out how to get connected with local services. On any phone, just dial 2-1-1 and a United Way representative will assist you in finding local resources.

In some communities, groups of kids who have a parent in jail or prison meet to talk about

issues. This is called a support group. It can be very helpful to have peers to share feelings and coping strategies with. County community corrections and social services agencies should be able to help you find an appropriate support group.

It's important to note that children may experience many mixed emotions from the time of the parent's arrest to well after his or her release. While these feelings may be expressed at any time, they are more likely to come to a head at certain stages: arrest, trial, sentencing, incarceration (and often most strongly during and following visitation), and at the time of release.

Often, the most stressful time comes during the weeks and months following the release. It can be difficult for an absent parent to reconnect with a child who has grown accustomed to living without him or her. While reconnecting can take some time, it is very possible if the adults involved are dedicated to this process. The bond between a parent and child is a very special thing and is worth fighting for.

COMMON QUESTIONS

Here are some common questions from families and some suggestions for helping caregivers respond. Remember that these questions can be answered in more than one way, depending on the age and maturity of each child. Everyone's situation is different.

Why did Mom or Dad go to jail or prison?

People are sent to jail or prison because they did not obey the law. Laws are rules that tell us how people should behave.

Children have rules for behavior, too. When children break the rules they may get a time-out or lose privileges. Prison and jail are like long time-outs for adults.

When talking with older children and teens, you can explain that all actions have consequences and jail or prison is a consequence for breaking the law. Talk with your child about what their rules for behavior are, and the consequences for breaking them.



What will happen to me?

Children may have a lot of change in their lives when a parent goes to jail or prison. No one likes to feel uncertain about what will happen to them. The following are some questions that may arise. Caregivers should be prepared to answer them.

- *How long will my parent be in jail or prison?*
- *Will I live in the same place?*
- *Will I have to move?*
- *Will I be able to live with my parent when he or she gets out of jail or prison?*

Is it my fault that Mommy or Daddy went to jail?

Many children feel guilt when their parent goes to jail or prison. They may believe that they caused it to happen.

It is very important to provide children with a nonjudgmental, relaxed, unhurried and safe place to express their feelings, thoughts and beliefs about why their parent is in jail or prison. It is important to help children realize:

- *There are negative consequences when people break the law.*
- *Children are not responsible for a parent's behavior or the consequences of that behavior.*

Will I go to jail or prison, too?

Just because a parent is in jail or prison does not mean the child will follow in that parent's footsteps. As the caregiver, it is important to reinforce the importance of making good choices and to reaffirm with the child that they are a good person.



Where do people in jail or prison live?

People in jail live in dorms or cells that are usually very small and all look alike. They usually have a bed, sink, desk and toilet. Showers are available at each facility.

Where do people in jail or prison eat, and what kind of food do they get?

Most people eat in a dining room that looks a lot like a school cafeteria. Most of the time, people in jail or prison go through a line to choose which foods they want to eat. In some prisons, food is brought to people on trays. If the person has special dietary needs they may be able to get vegetarian meals, pork-free or low-salt diets.

What do people in jail or prison wear?

Each jail or prison is different. A typical outfit in jail is a jumpsuit or hospital scrubs in the colors of orange, tan and dark green.

In prison, people are given denim pants, blue button-down shirts and blue jackets. They can also purchase some other items such as gray sweatpants and sweatshirts. They are not allowed to wear baseball caps or stocking hats inside.

Do people in jail or prison work?

Sometimes, people have jobs. Other times there are special classes to attend. Another program is the Huber work release program, which is a privilege that allows someone in jail to go to work outside the jail while they are incarcerated.

In many jails there is a program called Sentence to Serve (STS). This program allows people in jail to learn new skills and complete court-ordered obligations through the Department of Community Corrections, where the inmates work on community improvement projects.

How do people in jail or prison spend their time?

People in jail or prison are required to spend their time productively. They work or go to school or attend special programs such as alcohol and drug treatment, anger management courses, or parenting education classes. There are libraries in all facilities to encourage learning.

Many also pursue hobbies, especially art, or they can read, write, watch TV, or exercise when they have spare time. In some prisons, people can buy their own TV. Usually there are special TV rooms. The programs may change as different groups of people take turns choosing the channels they like.

Can they go outside?

There is usually a recreation time, or “yard time,” when groups of people can go outside for an hour or two.

People can walk or jog around the yard, play sports or lift weights—different facilities have different activities available.

Are people in jail or prison safe and healthy?

Correctional officers work hard to keep the jail or prison safe. If people in jail or prison get sick or hurt, they may ask to see a nurse, doctor or dentist.

Can I see or talk to Mom or Dad when they are in jail or prison? Do I have to?

There are several ways for children to stay connected with a parent while they are away. Studies show that maintaining contact and allowing children to visit can be beneficial to the children and parent. Children who want to maintain close contact with their incarcerated parent should be encouraged to do so in whatever way is best for them.

In some cases visiting may not be possible. For example, the child may prefer to avoid contact, or distance may be a problem. Also, a restraining order or a Department of Corrections (DOC) rule may prevent the parent from having any type of contact with the child.

Letter writing is a great way for children to communicate with their parent. It is less costly than other methods, and gives children the opportunity to share what is happening in their lives. Photos can often be enclosed. Young children who cannot write a letter can be encouraged to draw pictures with markers. Crayon drawings are not allowed in jails and prisons due to security issues. For information about incoming mail for the Minnesota Department of Corrections, please visit their website at doc.state.mn.us/pages/index.php/family-visitor/how-send-mail.

Phone calls are a nice option for children to communicate with their parent in jail or prison. Hearing a parent’s voice can be comforting for a child. You will want to let the child know ahead of time how long they will be able to talk, so they are not caught off guard when the call ends. Some things to keep in mind are:

- Phone calls are more costly than letter writing and need to be initiated by the parent in jail or prison.
- There may be restrictions on who inmates can call.
- The inmate will need to have a list of numbers approved by jail or prison personnel. This can be difficult if your phone number changes.

Visiting policies are different at each facility. Visiting can usually be arranged and requires some time and preparation. In some cases, visiting may not be possible: for example, due to a restraining order, a Department of Corrections (DOC) rule, or a child’s preference.

What do I tell other people?

Many people are ashamed to talk about having someone close to them in jail or prison. It may reassure children to tell them that:

- *“There are other children in this situation, too. You are not alone.”*
- *“You didn’t do anything wrong. People should not try to make you feel guilty or ashamed.”*
- *“It might be easier not to talk about a parent who is incarcerated, but then you may never learn that there are other kids in the same situation. Talking about it with people you trust may help.”*
- *“It’s okay to love your mom or dad who is in jail or prison, even if some people don’t understand.”*

Others outside the family (including other children) may judge or tease the child due to a lack of understanding of the situation. You can tell your child that they don't have to talk about this with everyone. It is up to them if they want to tell people. Reassure your child that you are always available for them to talk with, and you want them to share their feelings. Refer to the list of trusted people in this booklet and encourage your child to talk with those people.

How can I learn when my parent will come home?

People in jail or prison usually know the approximate date they will be released.

Sometimes, decisions regarding a parent's release can change. For those in prison, the Minnesota Department of Corrections has an online Offender Locator (coms.doc.state.mn.us/PublicViewer/main.asp) that will give you the person's anticipated release date and location. You will need to know his or her first and last name and date of birth, or their offender identification number.



Children of Incarcerated Parents **BILL OF RIGHTS**

I have the right to be kept safe and informed
at the time of my parent's arrest.

I have the right to be heard when
decisions are made about me.

I have the right to be considered when
decisions are made about my parent.

I have the right to be well cared
for in my parent's absence.

I have the right to speak with,
see and touch my parent.

I have the right to support as I
face my parent's incarceration.

I have the right to not be judged, blamed or
labeled because my parent is incarcerated.

I have the right to a lifelong
relationship with my parent.

TAKEN FROM: SFCIPP.ORG

*This Bill of Rights was developed by the
San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership.*

VISITING TIPS

Visiting a parent in jail can be a positive experience that can bring up strong emotions for all involved.

Though challenging and often difficult, visits are important for children because:

- Children love and miss their parents, and they worry about their parents.
- Visits can reassure children that their parents are okay.
- Visits maintain that unique and special bond that parents and children have.

However, some of what children see while visiting and the fact that they have to leave their parent behind at the end of a visit can be upsetting.

Preparing children for visits is crucial. Make sure to call or visit the jail or prison ahead of time to find out what security measures the child will have to go through, as well as other details about the facility. Describe this to the child and explain that the security is there to keep everyone safe. Prior to a visit, it is important that children have answers to all of their questions.

Before you visit, make sure you tell the child where you are going and what the room may look like.

It is important to be honest with the child in an age appropriate way. You know your child and what he/she can handle. Keep in mind their age, knowledge of the situation and their emotional maturity as you decide how to explain this. Give your child enough details so they feel prepared for the situation, but not so many details that they are scared or overwhelmed.

Visitation happens differently at each facility. Explain what the visit will be like for the child. Having information is reassuring—for the child and for you. It is a good idea to explain to the child:

- How the visit will take place (in person, with glass in-between or on a television monitor).
- What can and can't happen during the visit (hugs, the incarcerated parent cannot leave with you).
- Whether there are toys or games to play with, a table to sit at, vending machines, etc.
- Their parent will be wearing a “uniform.”

Can my Mommy/Daddy leave with me?

It is very important for the child to understand that the parent cannot return home with them at the end of the visit. Young children may need to hear this more than once. While it is hard to say and to hear, you can emphasize that the visit is a special time and that the parent loves them and looks forward to these visits. It can be helpful to acknowledge that children and adults may feel sad at the end of the visit, and this is normal.

When the Visit Ends

It is important to talk to your child before the visit about how the visit will end. While the end of a visit can be painful, difficult and sad, there are some things you can do to help make the good-bye time easier:

- If you know how long the visit will be, tell the child ahead of time in terms they will understand. Let them know you will be telling them when the visit is 10 minutes from being over. This way they have time to start getting ready to say good-bye and are not shocked when they have to leave the parent.
- Plan ahead and ask the child how he/she would like to say good-bye to the parent (keep in mind the rules of the visit regarding physical contact). The child may wish to give a hug, sing a song or simply say good-bye.
- Bring a photo of the parent for your child to look at on the way home after the visit. While not the same thing, this helps children feel the parent's presence.
- Resist the instinct to make the child feel immediately happy after a visit. Give them time to feel sad and then help them to move on to something positive.



Often the best thing to do is to ask your child how he/she is feeling and provide some time to experience that feeling. You can offer to talk about the visit and their feelings if they want to. You can help them name their feelings and allow them to feel these feelings. When given the space and support they need to feel sad and talk about their parent, children will feel that their connection to their parent is supported.

- Encourage your child to draw or journal about the visit and their feelings.
- It is important to support a child by not saying bad things about the parent in front of them (even if you are frustrated or angry with that parent).

For information on Department of Corrections visiting rules, visit doc.state.mn.us/pages/index.php/family-visitor/visiting-information

ADAPTED FROM THE NYC INITIATIVE FOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS: VISITING TIPS. THE OSBORNE ASSOCIATION (WWW.OSBORNENY.ORG).

RISK FACTORS

As a caregiver of a child with a parent in jail or prison, it is important that you are aware of a few increased risk factors that could possibly impact your child. You have great influence over the development of your child and the choices he or she makes. Maintain open and honest communication in order to minimize these risks to your child.

Emotional Distress

Children with a parent in jail or prison may have a hard time dealing with their emotions, and this may begin to show in their actions. It is possible that children could have:

- Nightmares or trouble sleeping.
- Temper tantrums.
- A hard time concentrating.
- Anxiety.
- Fears about being away from you.

As a caregiver it is important to pay attention to how these difficult emotions could be causing behavior issues. Be supportive of your child and, if necessary, ask for help with working through these emotions and behaviors with your child.

Criminal Involvement

Some studies suggest that a child who has a parent in jail or prison is more likely than other children to become criminally involved. This does not mean that your child will end up breaking the law. It means that, as the caregiver, it is necessary to be aware of this added risk. Talk often with your child about rules and consequences, let them know that they can talk to you no matter what, and let them know that they are a good person.

School Difficulties

The stress of having a parent in jail or prison may affect a child's school performance. Strong emotions and the actions that go along with them can result in classroom challenges, social isolation and other acting out behaviors.

Work closely with trusted adults at school to help your child have more success. Many times, teachers do not know about a difficult family situation. Having information about the home life of a student can help teachers be more understanding about difficult behaviors, and can help them plan for what a child needs to help them learn.

It is important to be aware of these risk factors and to know that these do not define your child.

THIS IS HARD WORK! WHAT ABOUT ME?

Caring for a child with a parent in jail or prison is hard work!

One of the most important things you can do as a caregiver is remember to take care of yourself.

It is important for you to create a good support network which may consist of:

- A support group.
- Private counseling.
- Family physician.
- Clergy.
- School social workers.
- Family and friends.

Also remember to take time for yourself by journaling, maintaining hobbies and getting regular physical activity.

The following stress management skills are a few simple things that can make a big difference.

- Breathe. When you feel tense, take 10 slow, deep breaths.
- Communicate. Be honest with yourself and others.
- Be human. Let up on yourself. Forgive yourself and others. Slow down and enjoy being alive.
- Find humor in life. Laugh at yourself and life. Have fun and “play” at life.

RESOURCES

Organizations

Circle of Parents A support group for parents, caregivers, grandparents, aunts, uncles and others who care for children. Free childcare is provided. For information about a group in your area, go to pcamn.org.

Help Me Grow MN: HelpMeGrowMN.org

The National Resource Center on Children and Families of Incarcerated.

NRCCFI is the oldest and largest organization in the U.S. focused on children and families of the incarcerated and programs that serve them.

- Disseminating accurate and relevant information
- Guiding the development of family strengthening policy and practice
- Training, preparing, and inspiring those working in the field
- Including the families in defining the issues and designing solutions

nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu

Books & Publications

A Terrible Thing Happened: A Story for Children Who Have Witnessed Violence or Trauma, by Margaret M. Holmes, Sasha J. Mudlaff and Cary Pillo.

Let's Talk About When Your Parent is in Jail, by Maureen K. Wittbold

Lots of Feelings, a story by Shelley Rother.

Dealing with Feelings Parents Guide, online at kidvision.org/feelings/guide.pdf

Other Resources

Minnesota Parents Know provides information on child development and parental support. mnparentsknow.info

Central Minnesota Re-Entry Project: cmnrrp.org

United Way 2-1-1 is a free and confidential community helpline available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. 2-1-1 helps people access information they need to navigate the ever increasing and complex array of human services. The first step to finding help is knowing who to call. Dial 2-1-1 or 1-800-543-7709.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The words used in the criminal justice system are often confusing because they can mean different things in different places. Some definitions listed below may help you if you are not used to the criminal justice system.

Jail: a place where people who have been accused or convicted of crimes are confined or incarcerated. Generally, people stay in jail if they are sentenced for less than a year's time or if they are waiting for their trial.

Prison: a place where people who have been accused or convicted of crimes are confined or incarcerated. If people receive a sentence for more than a year, they go to prison.

Incarcerate: to restrict the ability of a person so that they are not allowed to leave a jail or prison.

Inmates: people who are incarcerated.

Conditions: rules that a person must follow that are set by the court. If the conditions are not kept, a person may have to go (or go back to) jail or prison.

Visitation: time set aside for people who have a friend or family member that is incarcerated, to visit with them at the jail or prison.

Sentence: the length of time of a person is incarcerated.

Warden/Visitation Supervisor: a person, in a uniform (like a police officer/guard) who is in the visiting room, to be sure all rules are followed and the visit is safe.

A list of current **Inside-Out Connections**
Coalition contacts can be found at ifound.org 

THIS IS A PUBLICATION OF
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A PROGRAM OF THE



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