

Supporting Children Who Have a Parent Incarcerated



Tips, resources, and
conversation starters



The incarceration of a loved one impacts everyone in the family, especially children.

This information was compiled in partnership with people who are formerly incarcerated and their loved ones, to provide support and information to families currently impacted by incarceration. Every situation is unique, and you know what is best for your family. **This resource is meant to offer practical tips and ideas for helping your child through this experience in supportive and healthy ways.**

Parents and caregivers likely share the hope that their child isn't negatively impacted by the incarceration. You may also share feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, worry or depression at different times and for different reasons. That's normal. Everyone, especially kids, should feel safe and supported in expressing those feelings.



Visiting

Whether you're traveling 15 minutes to talk behind a glass barrier or driving more than three hours for a one-hour visit, visiting a loved one in jail or prison is hard. It can be tough to see a loved one locked up and in a uniform. For parents who are incarcerated, it can be difficult to bond with your child and help raise them from behind bars, or trust that they'll be safe visiting you there. Some families cannot or choose not to visit in person and that's ok, too. There's no right or wrong way to think about visits. Do what is best for you and your loved ones.

If you are undecided about visiting, here are some questions to ask yourself and your loved ones to help decide:

- How does your child feel about it? If they are apprehensive about in-person visiting, it can be helpful to let children know it's okay to feel confused with part of them wanting to visit and part of them feeling angry or nervous.
- Will your child feel comfortable with visiting? If they do not, ask if they would like to try writing more letters or sticking to phone or video calls for a while.
- If you might need help with transportation to get to the facility, are there agencies, churches, or other people in your life that could help?
- If the visiting times do not work for your schedule, is there someone who might be able to take the child to visit?
- Are there concerns about staying safe during visits? If yes, is there someone you can talk with about those concerns?





If you have not visited, there are some things to think about:

- Many jails and prisons have websites where you can find out the visiting schedules and rules (like what clothing can be worn and who needs to bring an ID). You can also contact the jail or prison to get answers to any questions or clarify anything you do not understand.
- In most facilities, you and your children will have to walk through a metal detector and may be subject to a search.
- All visits are supervised by jail or prison staff.
- Not all facilities have family-friendly spaces or toys and books for young children in the waiting or visiting areas, and many places will not allow you to bring those items into the facilities with you.
- Visits can be cancelled without notice for many reasons, including a facility lockdown or for disciplinary reasons.
- Some jails and prisons have long wait times and also limit the toys, food, and/or drinks you can bring into the facility for children. Having a simple activity to keep your child engaged could help pass the time.





Whether it's their first visit or something they've done many times before, it is important to prepare children for what to expect when visiting a loved one in jail or prison:

- Before the visit, you can ask your child how they are feeling and help them come up with ideas about what they want to discuss during the visit. It can be as simple as talking about their favorite activities, school, or a new friend.
- You can help prepare your child for the end of the visit by letting them know when visiting time is almost over and that it's normal to feel like it's hard to say goodbye. You can remind them of the other ways they can stay connected, like asking your child to draw a specific kind of picture, sending a letter with an update on something important to them, or reading a couple chapters in the same book so you can talk about it during your next phone call.
- You can explain what they can and cannot bring into the jail or prison with them, that they may have to wait a long time, and that they will likely have to walk through a metal detector and may be searched.
- It may be helpful to remind them what the rules are on touching the parent who is incarcerated and that other people will be in the same room the entire time.
- After the visit, you and/or your child may feel sad, angry, withdrawn, or a number of other feelings. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to feel, and it's good for you and your child to express whatever you're feeling.

Here are some ways to support your children (and yourself) after a visit:

For parents and caregivers on the outside



- **Listen.** Hold space for your child to tell you how they're feeling and always remind them that whatever they are feeling is normal and OK.



- **Communicate.** It's up to you to decide how much or how little to share with others. It might be helpful to inform your child's teachers, coaches, and school counselors so they can provide additional support if they notice changes in behavior or grades.



- **Support.** Schedule an appointment with a counselor or let your child spend time with a family member or friend who they have confided in about their parent being incarcerated.

For parents who are incarcerated



- **Listen.** Hold space for your child to talk about how visiting you in jail or prison made them feel. Acknowledge their feelings and how challenging it is for you, too. Even though it may be hard, be supportive if your child is unsure about visiting you in jail or prison.



- **Communicate.** You may have family members and friends who are close to your child and who can be a source of support to your child, as well as you.



- **Support.** Support staff may be available to talk with you about your visit and how you might be feeling. If you're comfortable and it is safe to do so, check in with another parent who has gone through similar situations.

Other ways to stay connected

If you cannot or choose not to visit your loved one in jail or prison, you may still want to keep in touch with them through letters, emails, or phone calls. Here are some suggestions for maintaining and strengthening the parent-child relationship.



For parents and caregivers on the outside



- **Tell your child what to expect.** Jail calls are very different from regular phone calls. Their parent has to begin the call from jail or prison, sometimes they can only call during certain times of day, and there are verbal reminders that the call is being recorded and when it is about to end.
- **Offer to help your child prepare conversation starters.** You can help your child keep a list of things they want to tell or write to their parent about. They might need help thinking about things to say, and you can encourage children to write or draw something to send to their parent.
- **Children may have repeated questions.** Incarceration is a tough situation to understand, so it's normal for children to ask about it repeatedly. It's often their way of learning and understanding the situation in a new way.
- **It can be helpful to have realistic expectations.** Parenting is hard, and incarceration makes it even more difficult, especially if a child has not seen their parent in a while. The parent who is locked up might not have any supports in the facility on building, repairing, or strengthening relationships.
- **Put your child first.** Communication is important to children. If you're expecting a call, make sure your child gets a minute to say hello before the call ends.



For parents who are incarcerated

- **Let children know you love them.** Emphasize that you love them and are thinking about them, even if you're unable to call or write for a while. You can be open with your child about what makes it hard to stay in touch while you're away.
- **Ask questions to learn more about your child.** You can talk to them about what they're interested in and their favorite things. What do they want to do when they grow up? What would you like to do together when you get out? If you've been gone for a while, remember that you might need to get to know them again. If it helps, ask family members or friends to give you some insight. 
- **Sometimes children need assurance.** Children want to know where you are, when you're coming home, and if you still love them. They may also wonder if they are responsible for your incarceration. Be direct. Let them know that it is not their fault. You may want to reach out to people you trust for support in these kinds of conversations. Don't worry if you show emotion; your child may want to express their emotions too.
- **Remember incarceration impacts the whole family.** Your child's life has changed, too. Be patient with them. Changes in their behavior or attitude towards you might be coming from increased feelings of stress, loneliness, or resentment. While it's normal for children to feel this way, it's challenging as a parent. It can be helpful to find support to repair the relationship with your child.
- **Put your child first.** Check in with your child. Say hello to them on the phone, even briefly, or send them a card "just because." Your child may be struggling with you being away, so small gestures can go a long way. 

Resources



It can be challenging to find resources specific to your situation, but these websites provide helpful information for people impacted by incarceration:



- Sesame Street: Coping with Incarceration: sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/incarceration
- Youth.gov guides for families dealing with incarceration and a broad list of resources: youth.gov/coip
- Aunt Bertha's list of free or reduced cost resources available within your community: findhelp.org
- United Way 211: Call 2-1-1 or visit 211.org

Local and regional organizations have services and support available to Kentucky families:

- Kentucky Families of the Incarcerated & Convicted Facebook support group: facebook.com/KentuckyFamiliesoftheIncarcerated
- Amachi Mentoring Services in Lexington/Central Kentucky: lexlf.org/amachi-central-kentucky-1
- Y-NOW Mentors Services in Louisville: ymcalouisville.org/youth-development/education-leadership/y-now.html
- Wanda Joyce Robinson Foundation: wjrfoundation.org

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