

# Tip Sheet



## For Caregivers: Helping Children of Incarcerated Parents

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More than 2.7 million minors currently have parents in prison or jail in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The number of children with a father in prison grew by 77% from 1991–2007, and the number with a mother in prison grew 131% during the same period.<sup>2</sup> Children of incarcerated parents are thought to be at an increased risk for mental health concerns, criminal justice involvement, and other difficulties; however, there is no established direct link between a parent's incarceration and a child's development.<sup>3</sup>



Most children benefit from maintaining healthy relationships with their parents, and this remains true when a parent is incarcerated. Yet caregivers of children whose parents are in prison or jail face unique emotional, financial, and logistical challenges, and these challenges can impact children and families.<sup>4</sup> The following tips aim to support caregivers as they help children whose parents are incarcerated.

### How do I talk to children about a parent's incarceration?

Social stigma and families' desire to protect children may encourage adults to hide the truth about incarceration.<sup>5</sup> Children who later discover the truth may become distrustful, so

the Family and Corrections Network (FCN), one of the most well-known organizations working with incarcerated people and their families, suggests that caregivers be honest with children. Here's what you can do:

- Ask parents what they plan to tell their children.
- Answer children's questions simply and honestly.
- Share information appropriate for the child's age and development.
- Do not be vague. If you do not know an answer to a question, say so. If you provide specific information, put it in words the child can understand.
- For additional help, read from the Children of Prisoners Library, created by FCN (<https://www.fairshake.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Children-of-Prisoners-Library.pdf>); or contact The Osborne Association (<http://www.osborneny.org/programSubPage.cfm?subPageID=52>).
- If the child is old enough, he or she might benefit from reading "A Bill of Rights" provided by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (<http://www.sfcipp.org/>).

### Should I help a child communicate with his or her incarcerated parent?

As long as it is safe for the child and he or she wishes to communicate with the incarcerated parent, then you should support this effort.

Research shows that maintaining parent-child contact is beneficial for the incarcerated parent, assists families after prison, and may benefit children.<sup>6</sup> There are many ways you can help children communicate with incarcerated parents. Children can mail letters or drawings to their parents, and most incarcerated individuals are allowed to make phone calls. Some facilities offer video-conferencing.

If you do not have a computer, go to your local public library to find out about communication with prisoners. Most state departments of corrections will provide this information. For example, the South Dakota Department of Corrections tells families how to send mail to inmates in that state (<https://doc.sd.gov/about/faq/mail.aspx>).

Investigate community organizations that work with families of incarcerated individuals. The Brooklyn Public Library helps connect people by video conference to their children (<https://civsourceonline.com/2016/06/23/brooklyn-public-library-expands-telestory-for-children-of-incarcerated-parents/>); in New Orleans the Promise of Justice Initiative helps families write letters to loved ones (<http://justicespromise.org/major-projects>).



Many families remain in touch by telephone, and most states provide information on how you can receive calls or set up a call plan. For example, Virginia provides guidelines

(<https://vadoc.virginia.gov/offenders/prison-life/phoneSystem.shtml>). Help a child make a list of things to talk about beforehand, so he or she does not become nervous. Encourage a child to keep a phone log of things he or she wants to tell his or her parent.

## What do I need to know about visiting prisons or jails with a child?

Research shows that visiting the prison or jail where the parent is incarcerated can be beneficial for children and families.<sup>7</sup> Many children and families never visit, however.<sup>8</sup> Some reasons include the distance to the facility, the expense of visiting, and prison security. Yet if the child you are caring for has a relationship with the incarcerated parent or wishes to have one, then it may be especially beneficial for him or her to visit. Here are some tips:

- Check the facility's website beforehand. You are usually allowed to bring money for vending machines into the facility, but you are not allowed to carry in food. Some facilities have specific dress codes and will not allow you inside if you do not adhere to this code.
- Be sure you are on a prisoner's visiting list before you arrive.
- Most prisons and jails will require a child's birth certificate before he or she is allowed to visit, and you will be asked for your license or other identification.
- Think about travel. Can you drive a car or take a bus to the prison? Does public transportation bring you directly to the jail? For help, contact organizations that work with families on transportation. For instance, Assisting Families of Inmates (<http://www.afoi.org/>) in Virginia provides transportation three Saturdays a month and offers a video visitation program for children. Another organization, The

Promise of Justice Initiative in New Orleans (<http://justicespromise.org/major-projects>), provides transportation twice a year so families can visit Angola Prison.

- Children should be prepared for a visit and allowed to talk about it afterwards.<sup>9</sup>
  - Find out what kind of contact the child will have, so you can prepare him or her. Some facilities provide a visiting room and a play area; others allow open visits but no physical contact; and some facilities have glass partitions that do not allow any physical contact between prisoners and visitors.
  - It may be helpful for children to read books written from a child's perspective. You can read about what to expect at <http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/cipl105-visitingmomordad.pdf>.
  - Prior to the visit, encourage children to think, draw, or write about what they want to discuss. Even if they never discuss these things with their parents, thinking or writing can help prepare them for the visit.
  - Every person reacts differently to a visit. When you leave the prison or jail, ask the child if he or she wants to talk about the experience. Do not force the child to discuss it, however.

## Where can I get help, and why do I feel so tired/angry/confused?

Caregivers of children whose parents are incarcerated often report feeling stressed, worried about money, or conflicted about their feelings toward the child's parent. They sometimes feel stigmatized.<sup>10</sup> For all these reasons it is important for caregivers to take care of themselves and reach out to

organizations and community members that can help.

**Your situation may be unique, but you are not alone. All caregivers need to care for themselves in order to help others. Basic self-care suggestions include to:**

- Eat fruits and vegetables every day;
  - Exercise as you are able;
  - Get enough sleep;
  - Reach out to others who can help; and
  - Make time for yourself every day.
- Accept that you may have conflicted feelings about the incarcerated parent. You may be angry, disappointed, or scared. Try to consider what is in the best interests of the child.
  - If you do not know how to find the information you need, consider talking to a professional social worker or a trusted minister or church member. If you have access to a computer, type the name of your city or state into a search engine and add the words "and incarceration and families."
  - Some states offer financial assistance to caregivers. Visit <http://www.womenshealth.gov/aging/caregiving/raisingchildren-again.html> to learn more.
  - For support from those in your situation, read interviews with caregivers of children of incarcerated parents ([https://www.voa.org/pdf\\_files/saving-grace-full-report](https://www.voa.org/pdf_files/saving-grace-full-report)); if you live in Indiana, Texas, or the Dakotas, contact the Look Up and Hope program with Volunteers of America (<https://www.voa.org/look-up-and-hope>). The program helps families and caregivers.
  - Find out if an organization near you has support groups for caregivers.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Osborne Association New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents (2012). *Parental incarceration's impact on children's health*. Retrieved from [http://www.osborneny.org/images/uploads/printMedia/Parental%20Incarceration's%20Impact%20on%20Children's%20Health%20Fact%20Sheet\\_Osborne.pdf](http://www.osborneny.org/images/uploads/printMedia/Parental%20Incarceration's%20Impact%20on%20Children's%20Health%20Fact%20Sheet_Osborne.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> Glaze, L. & Maruscha, L. (2010). Parents in prison and their children (Publication No. NCJ 222984). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- <sup>3</sup> Sullivan, M. (2016). *Parental incarceration: personal accounts and developmental impact*. D. Johnston (Ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- <sup>4</sup> Nesmith, A., Ruhland E., Krueger, S. (2006). Children of incarcerated parents. Council on Crime & Justice; Hairston, C.R., (2007). Focus on children with incarcerated parents: An overview of the research literature. Annie E. Casey Foundation; Nesmith, A. & Ruhland, E. (2008). Children of incarcerated parents: Challenges and resiliency, in their own words. *Children and Youth Services Review* 30, 119–1130; La Vigne et al. (2008).
- <sup>5</sup> La Vigne, N. G., Davies, E., & Brazzell, D. (2008). Broken bonds, understanding and addressing the needs of children with incarcerated parents. Washington DC: Urban Institute Justice Policy Center.
- <sup>6</sup> Poehlmann, J. et al. (2010). Children's contact with their incarcerated parents: research findings and recommendations. *American Psychologist* 65(6), 575–598.
- <sup>7</sup> Bouchet, S.M. (2008). Children and families with incarcerated parents: exploring development in the field and opportunities for growth. Annie E. Casey Foundation. La Vigne et al. (2008).
- <sup>8</sup> Glaze, L. & Maruscha, L. (2010). Parents in prison and their children (Publication No. NCJ 222984). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- <sup>9</sup> Hairston, C.F. (2007). Focus on children with incarcerated parents: An overview of the research literature. Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- <sup>10</sup> Nesmith, A., Ruhland, E. & Krueger, S. (2006). Children of incarcerated parents. Council on Crime & Justice.

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