



If Incarceration Is Impacting Your Family, We Can Help.

Information for Caregivers of
Children of Incarcerated Parents



You're not alone.



**More than 2.7 million children in the
U.S. have a parent in prison or jail.**

Starting Conversations

Kids will have questions when they have a parent in prison or jail (incarceration).

You may not have all the answers.

Talk openly with them as much as you can. Giving them helpful information about their parent can make the child stronger and more resilient or help them cope when hard things happen.

Here are some suggestions from the **KidsMates' C.A.R.E.S.** approach about having those conversations:

- **C**reate a safe environment for the child to talk freely.
- **A**cknowledge and validate the child's concerns.
- **R**eassure the child that they are not alone.
- **E**ncourage active play and skill building.
- **S**hare honest and age-appropriate information with the child.

Source: KidsMate Survival Skills, kidsmates.org/survival-skills

Be Open and Honest

Children cope best when they are told the truth. It is easier for parents in prison or jail to talk honestly with their children about their feelings on life behind bars in person. Even if a child heard about their parent's incarceration by phone or letter, it brings a sense of calm to the child. Being open and honest can decrease the child's guilt and feelings of responsibility. Research shows this can lessen trauma and loss symptoms.



Answering the Question: Where Are You?

Caretakers often try to protect children by avoiding the truth about the parent in jail or prison. There are several stories often used by parents and family members to answer the question “Where is mom or dad?” or “Where are you?”

Rutgers University-Camden’s National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated offers these suggestions to help you.

Away at school: Sometimes children are told the incarcerated parent is “away at school.” This rarely works with school-aged children. They are old enough to understand that people (even college students) come home from school. Children of incarcerated parents may already have trouble in school. It doesn’t help to compare school with the pain of being away from their parents. It might even lead to a dislike of school or schoolwork.

Working far away: Sometimes children are told the incarcerated parent is “working far away.” This may work at first, especially if there is no financial stress. But it is hard for children to understand why money is tighter if the parent went away to work. Why aren’t they sending home money? Children could think that a parent doesn’t want to see them or they don’t want to come home on their days off.

In the military: Sometimes children are told the incarcerated parent is “in the military.” This can give children a way to explain their parent’s absence to their friends, especially if the parent’s sentence is short. But in times of world conflict, it usually leaves children afraid of war and danger. This can increase their worry and fear.

In the hospital: Sometimes children are told the incarcerated parent is “in the hospital.” This can raise children’s fear of doctors and hospitals. It can increase anxiety over the parent’s health. When parents do not come home in a few days, many children imagine that the parent has died and that no one is telling them the truth.

"Misleading a child is often intended to minimize feelings of shame and stigma associated with parental incarceration. But it increases these feelings by creating a family secret."

The facts become clear to the child sooner or later, and usually sooner if the child is visiting the incarcerated parent. As children read, watch TV and listen to people talk, they quickly learn what prison or jail is. They learn how it differs from work, school or the military. The fact that the prison or jail is not a school, hospital or military base becomes clear to them.

Even if children do not see the prison or jail, they are likely to overhear a conversation that will reveal the truth. If the prisoner calls home, the collect call operator usually says the call is from a prison.

Once children realize the truth, they feel lied to. They begin to develop mistrust that hurts their relationships, especially with the person who made up the story.

Source: Children of Incarcerated Parents Library, Rutgers University Camden, Facts and Issues, CIPL 103:

nrcf.camden.rutgers.edu/files/cipl103-conversations-questionschildrenask.pdf



Ways to Help Kids Cope With Trauma

For children who've had traumatic experiences, there are many ways parents and caregivers can help.

Provide Reassurance

Healthy development in children starts with good relationships. A warm relationship also helps a child feel secure when faced with ongoing stress because it gives them a sense that they are worthy of support and care.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests these tips for your child:

- Use words, touch and one-on-one time. Small gestures such as high-fives or hugs (where appropriate) can establish trust and help relieve stress and anxiety.
- Talk with the child and let them know their feelings are valid. Show empathy by trying to see the world through their eyes.
- Create safe spaces just for them within the home. This can be in their bedroom or a special area where they can relax.

Create Routines and Habits

Maintaining regular, daily routines helps keep a sense of normalcy and safety for the child. Routines are especially helpful if the child has to leave their current environment. When a child must move to a new home, school, daycare or neighborhood, maintaining routines and contact with friends helps them adjust to changes more easily.

As part of creating routines, make sure to set rules and expectations and enforce them consistently. Let a child know what is expected of them and what to expect when they don't follow the rules.

Here are some ways to create routines and habits:

- Have meals at regularly scheduled times and make a nighttime routine that you can complete together every night at the same time.
- Have time set aside for homework, chores and other fun activities.
- Create a visual schedule or prompts as reminders. Search “routines” at [KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org](https://www.kidsmentalhealthfoundation.org) for helpful resources and downloads on routines.
- Explain schedule changes ahead of time. Repeating special activities before or after schedule changes (reading the same story or eating the same meal) can help keep structure. Visual calendars can also help kids understand the schedule changes.



Practice Coping Skills

Self-regulation or coping skills help children manage their emotions, reactions and behaviors. Here are a few suggestions to practice and develop coping skills:

- Participate in calming activities together. The activities can build trust, relieve anxiety and help the child feel connected to you. They can include reading a book before bedtime, mindful breathing when upset or sharing a hug.
- Practice ways that help soothe a child when they are upset or angry.
- Take breaks for exercise or active play.
- Show how to express emotions. Children look to parents, guardians and caretakers as models for behavior, including how they express their emotions. Learning how to identify their feelings teaches children how to appropriately express, manage and regulate their emotions. Help them know when to seek support from an adult.

Managing feelings after an upsetting or scary event can be difficult. It may take time for the child to learn, identify and express their feelings. Stay calm and speak to them in a relaxed tone until the child is more at ease. Be sure to express empathy and not take their actions personally.

For additional resources on routines, coping and handling emotions, visit

[KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org](https://www.kidsmentalhealthfoundation.org)



Planning a Visit to a Facility

Family and loved ones are some of the best ways to fight crime. Children are one of the best allies in making sure parents don't return to prison or jail. Maintaining family ties and being released to a stable home environment will help parents live a productive, crime-free life. Families provide reason for those in jail or prison to grow, learn and change.

Visiting a jail or prison can be stressful for everyone. Use these tips to help plan your visit to the facility.

1. Make sure the first visit is focused on the child. If the first visit goes smoothly, it can set a base for continued positive and meaningful visits.
2. Make sure to know the rules around visiting before you go. It can be disappointing when families are turned away and not allowed to visit. Here are some good questions to ask or know about:
 - What can visitors wear? Many facilities won't permit revealing clothing, sweatshirts with hoods, or spandex-type (tight or stretchy) clothing. Open-toed shoes may also be a problem.
 - What can visitors bring to a visit? Some facilities allow caregivers with infants to bring a bottle, a change of clothes and a diaper. Some places may allow a child to bring a toy or a book while other facilities do not.
 - How many visitors are allowed at one time? Facilities can be strict on the number of visitors and might count infants. If only two people are allowed and there are three young children, make sure your visitor knows that they may need someone to watch the other children while you are visiting.

"PARENTS WHO RECEIVE VISITS FROM THEIR CHILDREN AND LOVED ONES ARE MORE LIKELY TO SUCCEED AFTER RELEASE."

- Who needs to be on the visitation list? Some facilities only require adults to be on the list, while others require children under age 18 to be included. Even if you have already made a request to put someone on the list, it is good to check before they visit.

3. Share as much information as you can with the child(ren) about what the visit will be like. If possible, it's a good idea to visit the jail in advance without the child. If this is not possible, call the facility first and ask questions about what it will be like for the children:
 - Are they allowed to touch their parent?
 - Can they sit on their lap?
 - Can they move around during the visit?
 - How long is the visit?
4. Allow and encourage children to ask questions. Children's fears, concerns or misinformation are often communicated through asking questions. Answer these questions in an open and honest manner. If you don't know the answer, try to find out.
5. Make sure the child knows that the parent cannot leave when the visit is over.
6. Arrive early and bring as little as possible.

At the End of All Visits

- Let children know when the visit is ending. Start about 15 minutes before the end.
- Have a goodbye habit or "ritual."
- Take photos to help children say goodbye.
- Let children leave before the parent returns to their unit or cell.
- Don't criticize the incarcerated parent. Even if you are frustrated or angry with them, it can hurt or upset the child to hear anything bad about their parent.



Signs Your Child May Need Help

It's important to remain aware of any big changes in a child's behavior that could be signs of emotional distress. But how do you know if your child needs additional help to cope with what is going on?

Here are some signs to look out for:

- Unable to sleep (insomnia), restlessness and ongoing sleep troubles
- Depression, anxiety or low self-esteem
- Lack of interest and failure in school and school-related activities
- Ending relationships with family and friends
- Engaging in risk-taking behaviors – drug and alcohol use, fighting or sexual experimentation
- Triggered anger and physically acting out
- Refusing to follow instructions

As a child copes with being away from their parent, some behavioral changes may occur right after their parent's incarceration. Others may be seen months or years later. Some children may have mood changes like increased anger or depression. You might notice a decline in grades and school performance.

If you notice any shifts in behavior or anything concerning, contact a mental health professional for additional support.



Additional Resources:

- Coping With Incarceration – Sesame Street in Communities
sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/incarceration/
- CAP4Kids – Free and low-cost resources
CAP4Kids.org/Columbus
- Big Lots Behavioral Health Services at Nationwide Children’s Hospital:
NationwideChildrens.org/Behavioral-Health
- *Kids Mental Health Foundation* – free mental health and wellness resources:
KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org
- The Center for Family Safety and Healing
FamilySafetyandHealing.org/programs-and-services/

Or scan QR code:



For more information, contact
FamilyJustice@NationwideChildrens.org

Read more at **NationwideChildrens.org/Incarcerated-Parent**
or scan the QR code



**NATIONWIDE
CHILDREN'S®**

When your child needs a hospital, everything matters.



THE CENTER FOR FAMILY
SAFETY AND HEALING