

# Lutheran Social Service Raising Children who have an Incarcerated Parent

## What to tell the children

Research says:

1. Somebody who is close to the child should tell the truth in terms they can understand.

2. *When children can tell the story of their lives- what happened and why it happened- regardless of how crazy or chaotic it might have been- the child is more stable and better able to parent their own children.*

*\*We want them to be able to tell the story of their lives. (i.e. "In first grade, I went to live with grandma because mommy was in jail for stealing." In second grade, I went back to Mommy."*

3. Tell them in a way they can understand.

(for example: It's like a time out for a grown up. One person wrote about using the example of Aladdin stealing and going to jail.)

Okay to generalize about the crime to help little ones not be confused. (i.e. check forgery- just say the parent stole something or took something that wasn't theirs.)

## What to do about visits

Lots of factors to consider:

How much did the parent see the child before s/he was incarcerated?

How far away is the parent?

How does the child feel about the idea of seeing his/her parent?

How does the parent feel about seeing the child?

*Research shows that it is helpful to the child to have visits with an incarcerated parent. It reassures them that their parent is safe.*

**IF you decide to do a visit(s):** If at all possible, go for a visit yourself first. At the very least, find out ahead of time what the rules and procedures are so that you know what to expect and can prepare the children. Check the prison

website or phone them and get the procedures and rules in writing. There are VERY specific rules, and inadvertently breaking one could be quite traumatic for a child. For example, going to the bathroom once the visit starts means the visit is over. Note to self: Go potty BEFORE the visit starts! (See statewide visiting room rules for MN state facilities in folder.)

Although children may have a difficult time right before or right after a visit, this is a normal reaction to a stressful situation, and hasn't resulted in serious emotional disturbances, according to the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents in Pasadena, CA.

**What to do about telling others** (Information gathered from Dr. Joseph Crumbley)

**As the caregiver**

Most likely you've already pro-actively told some key people in your child's life about the situation and may have based your decisions on:

- who needs to know?
- who deserves to know?
- why am I sharing this information?
- Is the person trustworthy? (Will they blab or make fun?)

Now it's a matter of guiding the children in your care to make similar decisions.

**\*Prepare child for potentially embarrassing situations.**

*\*Find out from the child what situations are embarrassing. (i.e. questions about their parents, questions about their parents being "old", questions about who they live with, questions about why their parents are never seen, parent days at school, rumors?)*

*\*Make sure child is getting consistent explanations from all family members.*

**\*Discuss options of how to respond to questions:**

- inform
- ignore
- re-direct the question to relative caregiver
- explain that it's private
- ask relative caregiver or a teacher for help

*\*Discuss with the child things to consider when deciding how to respond to questions or tell even if they haven't asked anything:*

- who needs to know?
- who deserves to know?
- why am I sharing this information?
- Is the person trustworthy? (Will they blab or make fun?)

- Have they earned my trust?
- What to tell the person
- How much detail to tell
- Where do I tell? (preferably in private)
- When do I tell?

## **Supporting the Child's Well-Being**

***-You are already doing the single most important thing by giving them a stable, continuous placement (Julie Poehlmann, PhD, assistant professor of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison).***

***-Daily routines*** are worth their weight in gold -> predictability.

Information up through the row of asterisks was gathered from Dr. Joseph Crumbley:

*-Typically, children's reactions include sadness, worry, confusion, anger, loneliness, fear, sleep problems, and developmental regressions.*

*\*give kids permission to feel their feelings. "It's normal and you have the right to feel sad", angry, afraid, whatever.*

*\*show by example appropriate ways to express feelings. (crying, talking, alone time, listen to music, pray, punch a pillow, stomp feet, etc.)*

*\* **be supportive and nurturing to the children.** (holding, listening, activities together, "let me know when you feel bad", bedtime rituals, reading to, singing to).*

*\* be empathetic: "I'm sorry to know you're hurting." "I wish things could have turned out differently."*

*\* Help the child know they are not responsible for their parent's incarceration. (For example, "It's too bad this happened. It's not your fault.")*

*\* Assure the child of your intentions and commitment to care for them. (For example, "I will take care of you as long as you need me to.")*

*\* Specifically tell the children that they are wanted and welcome in your home. (For example, "I'm so relieved and glad that I can take care of you. You are part of our family and are welcome here whenever you need somebody to take care of you.")*

*\* Help children not feel guilty or that they are a burden. (When tired, make sure child is not present to overhear. Make use of support groups and adult friendships for venting and unloading. Don't discuss feelings about parent – particularly angry ones- with the child. They need for you to be a sounding board for them to discuss THEIR feelings.)*

*\*Identify what children deserve from their parents (love, protection, education, shelter).*

*\*Discuss loyalty and commitment family members should have to help each other through problems and mistakes. (For example: "You're here because you're family. You deserve to be taken care of, and if you can't be with your parents, then you should be with family when possible.")*

*\*Help children deal with feelings of split loyalties and confusion about who to trust.*

*\*Discuss trust and loyalty directly, about it being something that's earned, and how it's a two way street.*

*\*Some kids may advocate for their parents, defending them, and cast their parent in the role of victim, innocent who was framed, or that the system is "bad". It's important for the parent to give the message "You can be loyal without defending me."*

*\*Discuss with the child what s/he could do to show loyalty to his/her parent. (Draw a picture, make something, go for a visit.)*

*\*Discuss with the child that YOU are honestly willing to do to show caring/whatever positive feelings you have, to the child's parent. (Examples: remind child of parent's birthday, mother's or father's day, cards, phone calls).*

*\*Be aware of child trying to sabotage their experience living with you and call in professional help if this is happening at your home.*

***\*Helping a child deal with angry outbursts:***

*-regular exercise is helpful to discharge extra energy.*

*-anticipate situations and help the child contain anger with boundaries (i.e.*

*"We need to talk about something that might make you angry, but I think we can handle it.")*

*-give the child advance notice about things s/he doesn't like- when it will be, how long it will take.*

*-be aware of your own anger. It's not what you say, it's how you say it.*

*(Volume, tone, language, non-verbal expressions, talking more than listening). Stop talking when you're becoming angry and come back to the discussion later.*

*\*Discuss changes directly- undoubtedly things are done differently at your home than they were wherever the child was living previously.*

*-Be clear about rules & chores -perhaps post them on a kitchen cupboard or the fridge.*

*-Be aware of tendency of children to be "parentified."*

*-Discuss how mistakes and disobedience are handled.*

*-Review rules and chores periodically.*

*-Consider holding family meetings.*

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*\*Consider counseling for the children and/or yourself. This is a highly stressful experience.*

*\*People tend to believe that children who have a parent who was*

*incarcerated are more likely to be incarcerated themselves at some point in their lives. There is no reliable research that shows that to be true. (Mumola, C.J. 2000. Children of Incarcerated Parents Fact Sheet)*

*\*What seems to matter most is, what the children think and believe about THEMSELVES.*

*\*The incarcerated parent is KEY to breaking the cycle of incarceration.*

*-They can give messages such as "You don't need to make the same kind of mistakes I made." "You can use the knowledge you have from this experience for good to do things differently."*

### **Upon parents' release...**

*\*Avoid doing the parent's work for them. (the things they need to do for a successful release). They have plenty of time. YOU are busy, busy, busy.*

*\*If you just can't stand not knowing what's available to help them, you can call the prison to inquire or contact the MN Council on Crime and Justice. Michael Bischoff coordinates services for Reentry Programming here in Minnesota. 612-353-3000. [www.crimeandjustice.org](http://www.crimeandjustice.org).*

*\***Legal status of custody** will affect who decides when the children return to the parent.*

*\*Don't back down from your ability to influence the situation according to what you see as best.*

*\*Establish a schedule of visits with increasing length of visits and frequency. Decide if visits will be contingent upon successful completion of other tasks. (i.e. clean drug test at door, place to go you consider safe).*

*\*You've invested a lot of time and energy. Don't let all your efforts be flushed down the toilet.*

*\*Recognize that your adult child will need to **re-earn your trust**, and don't allow yourself to feel guilty for not trusting him/her immediately.*

*\*Typically, **the prison or parole officer wants the inmate to have an address** for where they are going to be living, and may reserve the right to approve the residence. If you are asked to take in your adult child, consider written ground rules prior to him/her moving in.*

### **Summary and Resources**

*To summarize: John Bowlby, a world renowned psychiatrist, did research that shows that the 4 key things that help a child who has experienced any kind of loss of a parent are:*

- 1. Prompt and accurate information from someone close to the child.*
- 2. Chance to ask questions and have questions answered honestly.*
- 3. Time to grieve.*

4. *Access to a trusted person to provide comfort and a continuing relationship.*

## **Resources**

Book: Children of Incarcerated Parents by Katherine Gabel and Denise Johnston, copyright 1995.

### **Children and Families with Incarcerated Parents: Exploring Development in the Field and Opportunities for Growth**

Bouchet, S. (2008). This report summarizes the Annie E. Casey Foundation's findings from consultative sessions with leading researchers, practitioners, advocates, policymakers, and funders on the current state of the field and the opportunities for growth and describes some of the Foundation's recent investments on this issue and synthesizes what it has learned into potential opportunities for the field at large.

[www.aecf.org/childrenofincarcerated.aspx](http://www.aecf.org/childrenofincarcerated.aspx)

### **Understanding the Experiences and Needs of Children of Incarcerated Parents: Views from Mentors**

To better understand the experiences and needs of children with incarcerated parents, Urban Institute researchers collaborated with mentors from Big Brothers, Big Sisters to gather qualitative data through the use of focus groups with the mentors of children whose parents are incarcerated.

[www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=411615](http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=411615)

**Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents** Provides services in four components: informational, educational, family reunification, and therapeutic. [www.e-ccip.org](http://www.e-ccip.org)

**Girl Scouts Beyond Bars** Provides scouting activities for incarcerated mothers and their children. Provides family reunification support, support groups, mentoring to mothers and daughters by volunteers. [www.gscm.org](http://www.gscm.org)

**The local contact person is Carolyn Kolovitz at 763-971-4014.**

[www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org)

[www.cwla.org/programs/incarcerated](http://www.cwla.org/programs/incarcerated)

[www.racialdisparity.org/files/CCJ%20CIP%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf](http://www.racialdisparity.org/files/CCJ%20CIP%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf)

This is a 54 page research paper by the Council on Crime and Justice. See sample copy.

## Closing Quote:

Make a memory with your children,  
Spend some time to show you care;  
Toys and trinkets can't replace those  
Precious moments that you share.  
Money doesn't buy real pleasure,  
It doesn't matter where you live;  
Children need your own attention,  
Something only you can give.  
Childhood's days pass all too quickly,  
Happy memories all too few;  
Plan to do that special something,  
Take the time to go or do.  
Make a memory with your children,  
Take the time in busy days;  
Have some fun while they are growing,  
Show your love in gentle ways.

*-[Elaine Hardt](#), "[Make a Memory](#)" ©1977*

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