

Fostering a Child Whose Parent Is in Jail or Prison

More than 5.2 million U.S. children have had a parent in jail or prison at some point in their lives, according to the Sentencing Project’s report from February 2021. Many of these children live with the other parent or with extended family members during the parent’s period of incarceration. But many others find themselves in the foster care system. One factor is the exponential growth of women in prison and the number of single parent households.

The Women’s Prison Association reports that the number of women in prison has grown by over 800% in the past three decades. Most of the increases in female imprisonment can be traced to the “war on drugs.” More women are being sent to prison for drug offenses; in fact, two-thirds of women in prison are there for nonviolent offenses.

There are also significant racial disparities in the prison population. African Americans are disproportionately represented in the prison population, just as they are in the out-of-home care population.

The events that bring children to foster care—including the very act of being removed from one’s family—create emotional upheaval in most children who enter the system.

Additionally, most studies conclude that the incarceration of a parent engenders a unique grief which compounds that of entering

foster care.

Children of incarcerated women are more likely to be adopted and less likely to qualify for family preservation services. It is difficult enough for parents to establish themselves in an apartment, find employment, and participate in a community, let alone try to rebuild a family with their reunited children.



Suggestions to Help Children Cope

- Examine your own feelings about criminal activity and drug abuse. How can you help both the child in your care, and his or her parent if you find it difficult to accept something the parent has done? Would it help to talk to a leader in your faith community, your case worker, or a counselor to come to grips with your own feelings?
- Children whose parents are incarcerated are likely to be grieving. They may:
 - ♦ Identify with the parent in jail and feel guilt and shame about the crime.
 - ♦ Carry a social stigma and find themselves treated differently at school, in the church, or in the community.
 - ♦ Have intrusive thoughts about the prison or jail where the parent now lives.
 - ♦ View their future as uncertain, and hinge their emotional state on court dates and outcomes which are often slow.

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- ◆ Have flashbacks to the traumatic arrest.
- ◆ Experience embarrassment, fear, and anxiety.
- ◆ Be angry or in a state of hyper vigilance.
- ◆ Show signs of sadness, regression, or eating or sleep disorders.
- Talk with your children about these feelings and reactions.
- Prepare yourself to answer some difficult questions. It will help you to respond truthfully and appropriately if you give some forethought to what they may ask. Some of the issues you may want to address are:
 - ◆ Why the parent is in prison
 - ◆ What happened
 - ◆ What will happen next
- Reassure the children in your care their parent did not leave because of something that the children did.
- Finally, honor and preserve the child's connection to the parent in prison.

Important Relationships

Visits between children in foster care and their parents maintain important family relationships, give social workers a chance to assess and document birth family progress, and are strongly tied to successful family reunification.

This is often a daunting task for foster parents, but here are some guidelines that may help:

- Talk to your case worker about visiting the parent.
- Learn the visitation regulations in the jail or prison you will be visiting. Find out if there will be face-to-face contact, or if the child will have to view his or her parent with glass separating them and talk on phones. Find out if there will be metal detectors or body searches and if the child is allowed to bring any mail or gifts.
- Visit the prison or jail on your own before



you bring the child. It will help you to process your own feelings or reactions, which you may not want to display in front of the child who is already afraid and anxious about the experience of visiting mom or dad in jail.

- Tell the child what to expect at the visit in age appropriate ways. Let them know that there may be only one hug, that they may not be able to bring anything to the parent, or that may long lines and time limits on the visit.
- Some jails and prisons have special family rooms and accommodate children in special ways. Make the appointment ahead of time with the prison to find out about any special accommodations which are made for children. A foster parent tells the story of a jail that videotaped inmates reading children's books and gave the videos and copies of the books to the child's family. The child could read the books at home along with the foster parent while they watched the parent reading the books on videotape.
- Some children want to see their parents and some will have a difficult time dealing with their parents' incarceration. However, most studies indicate that it is important for children to maintain as much contact as possible, and that reunification is more likely to be

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successful if that contact has been maintained.

- If visits are not an option and the child is not able to have contact with the incarcerated parent, you might have the child draw pictures, write letters, or talk on the phone (if possible and appropriate for the child's age and understanding).



Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Wish You Were Here: When a Parent is in Prison*, by Youth Communication
- *What Do I Say about That . . . Coping with an Incarcerated Parent*, by Julia Cook
- *Loving Through Bars: Children with Parents in Prison*, by Cynthia Martone
- *The Night Dad Went to Jail – What to Expect When Someone You Love Goes to Jail*, by Melissa Higgins
- *Let's Talk About When Your Parent Is in Jail*, by Maureen K. Wittbold
- *My Daddy Is in Jail*, by Janet M. Bender

Training & Resources From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [When a Parent Is Incarcerated: Supporting the Child in Your Care](#)

Additional Resources

- [Reaching Beyond Bars: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin and their Families](#)
- [National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated](#)
- [Broken Bonds: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Mothers](#)
- [Children of Inmates](#)