

Caring for 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 or with a relative caregiver.

One factor leading to children entering the out-of-home care system 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 women in jail or prison are there as a result of a drug offense; in fact, two-thirds of women in prison are there for nonviolent offenses.



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 that compounds that of entering foster care.

So, what can caregivers do to maintain the bond between parents who are incarcerated

and their children?

First, it is important to remember that all parents have hopes and dreams for their children even when they are separated from them because of incarceration. Some of these hopes and dreams include things like:

- **Education and personal growth:** Parents may desire their children to excel academically, develop strong character, and pursue higher education.
- **Healthy relationships:** Parents often hope their children build strong, supportive relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners.
- **Future success:** Parents may envision their children achieving personal and professional goals and leading fulfilling lives.
- **Overcoming adversity:** Parents often hope their children can develop resilience and overcome challenges.

As caregivers of children whose parents are incarcerated, a primary consideration is to provide opportunities to nurture the children's bond with their parents. Following are some things to consider and tips you might try.

Open Communication

- Create a safe space for the child to express

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their feelings without judgment.

- Encourage regular conversations about the incarcerated parent and their situation.
- Be honest and age-appropriate when answering the child's questions.

Maintain Connections

- Facilitate regular communication between the child and the incarcerated parent through letters, phone calls, or visits.
- Encourage the child to maintain relationships with other family members and support systems.
- Help the child understand the importance of family bonds and the role of support networks.

Celebrate Milestones

- Acknowledge and celebrate the child's achievements, no matter how small.
- Create special moments to recognize the child's growth and development.
- Involve the incarcerated parent in celebrating the child's milestones, if possible.

Suggestions to Help Children Cope

- Examine your feelings about criminal activity and drug abuse. How can you help the child in your care and their 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, case worker, or counselor to understand your 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 feel they are treated differently at school, church, or community.
 - Have intrusive thoughts about the

prison or jail where the parent now lives.

- View their future as uncertain and tie their emotional state to court dates and outcomes, which are often slow.
- Have flashbacks to the traumatic arrest.
- Experience embarrassment, fear, and anxiety.
- Be angry or in a state of hypervigilance.
- Show signs of sadness, regression, or eating or sleep disorders.
- Talk with the children in your care about these feelings and reactions.
- Prepare yourself to answer some difficult questions. You may find it easier to respond truthfully and appropriately if you spend some time considering what questions children may ask. Those questions may revolve around why the parent is in prison, what happened, and what will happen next.
- Reassure the children in your care their parent did not leave because of something the children did.
- Finally, honor and preserve the child's connection to the parent in prison.

Important Relationships

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

Maintaining these relationships can be a daunting task for foster or relative caregivers, but the following guidelines may help:

- Talk to your caseworker 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 their parent with

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glass separating them and talk on phones. Find out if there will be metal detectors or body searches and if the child can bring any mail or gifts.

- Visit the prison or jail before you bring the child. It will help you to process your 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 there may be long lines and time limits on the visit.
- Some jails and prisons have designated family rooms and accommodate children in unique ways. Make an appointment with the prison beforehand to learn about any accommodations for children. A foster parent tells the story of a jail that recorded 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 with the caregiver while watching the parent read the books on video.
- Some children want to see their parents, and some will have a difficult time dealing with their parents' incarceration. That noted, the benefits of maintaining relationships as much as possible are significant. In many cases, reunification is more likely to be successful if that contact has been maintained.
- If visits are not an option and the child cannot 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).

Caring for a child whose parent is in jail or prison can be challenging. By maintaining open communication, preserving family bonds, and celebrating milestones, caregivers can provide a supportive environment for

these children. Remember that children are likely grieving; addressing their feelings and answering their questions is crucial. Additional resources are available to provide further support and guidance in this journey. We encourage you to contact the Wisconsin Family Connections Center for further support or resources.



Resources

From the [Resource 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 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](#)