

# LA Informational Handbook for Caregivers of Children with Parents in Prison



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# Acknowledgements

With express permission, this handbook borrows extensive language from the *Stronger Together* series written by The Osborne Association of New York, *Reaching Beyond Bars*:

*A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin and their Families* written by the Correctional Education Association – Wisconsin (CEA-Wisconsin), and pamphlets from the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library (CIPL) created by The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated.

The Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections – Corrections Services (herein referenced as “DOC” or “the Department”) is thankful to Tanya Krupat from The Osborne Association of New York, Jerry Bednarowski from CEA – Wisconsin, and Ann Adalist-Estrin from the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library for allowing DOC to adapt content from their handbooks for use in Louisiana. DOC also would like to thank Dr. Kristen Antoine-Morse, a member of Secretary Le Blanc’s Families of the Incarcerated Advisory Board and founder of the organization BELOVED, for her help in editing this handbook.

Additionally, DOC would like to acknowledge the staff, mentees, and caregivers at Daughters Beyond Incarceration (DBI). DBI is an organization led by two women who are directly impacted by parental incarceration working to enhance the lives of girls growing up with a parent in prison or jail. The work they do in the community is essential to developing and enhancing the parent-to-child bond while parents are serving out their sentences.

To prepare this handbook, DOC worked closely with following members of DBI:

- Dominique Johnson, cofounder of DBI
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The Department is grateful for the expertise, contributions, and support of these individuals and organizations, without which this handbook would not be possible.

# Special Considerations and Exceptions

It is important to note that the tips and tools discussed in this handbook are not applicable in all cases of parental imprisonment. Specifically, this handbook does not address cases in which an imprisoned parent is arrested for a child-related crime or has directly or indirectly harmed a child. Direct harm includes crimes or abuse a parent commits against the child. Indirect harm includes crimes or abuse a parent commits against a child's other parent, sibling, or relative. These cases are especially difficult to navigate and may require professional guidance, counseling, and/or therapy.

Additionally, this handbook does not specifically address children whose parents are detained in immigration detention facilities. While these children may benefit from some of the resources in this handbook, these children and their families have different experiences with the criminal justice system.

Although the information in this handbook is not exhaustive, the Department hopes the tips, tools, and resources included empower and equip caregivers to support children with parents in prison.

This handbook was last updated in March 2021. Visit the DOC website at <https://doc.la.gov/> for the most up-to-date information on prison policies and operations.

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## Letter from the Secretary



To Louisiana's Caregivers of Children with Parents in Prison:

On behalf of the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude and appreciation for Louisiana's caregivers of children with parents in prison. Accepting this challenging role is a courageous, yet rewarding decision. Caregivers do not receive holidays, sick leave, or vacations from parenthood or guardianship. However, I firmly believe the role of a caregiver is one of the most meaningful and important jobs that a person can do.

During this demanding time, much will be asked of you. The child will need your guidance, love, and support to ensure he or she continues to prosper physically, mentally, and emotionally. The imprisoned parent will require your assistance in maintaining his or her relationship with the child as well. Although these responsibilities may feel burdensome, your hard work and dedication do not go unnoticed.

Caregivers play a vital role in helping the Department carry out its mission to protect public safety and reduce recidivism. Strong familial relationships are integral to an imprisoned parent's success inside prison and returning to communities. My hope is that this handbook will serve as a useful resource and helpful guide as you and your family learn to navigate this difficult situation.

Thank you for everything that you do for Louisiana's children and for their parents in jail or prison.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. M. Le Blanc". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning and a long, sweeping tail.

**Secretary James M. Le Blanc**

# Letter from an Imprisoned Parent

Dear Caregivers,

Before I went to prison, I had a beautiful wife-to-be, sons and daughters, and a host of other family members, who thought highly of me and my family. They had high expectations for our future. But, one day things changed and I found myself sentenced to 25 years in prison.

At first, I didn't even know how to start this time.<sup>1</sup> All kinds of questions would pop up in my head. Where do I go from here? How am I going to make it? Will my family continue to love me or will they forget about me? These were only a few questions I would ask myself.

After coming to grips with myself and accepting the fact that I really had to do this time, I finally decided to call my loved ones. My children's mother reassured me, "We are gonna keep praying and work this out together. I will make sure your girls will be there with you. You will always be their father." Hearing these words gave me a sort of relief and also a sense of encouragement. But even more so, these words opened my eyes to understanding the position I really had as a father, a husband, and a respected head of household.

Those words also prompted me to accept my circumstances and to begin to do whatever possible to maintain a strong family relationship, even though I would be physically separated and distant. Through phone calls, letters, and visits, I was able to lay the foundation to secure our relationship for this long journey apart. Through all of this, their mother was always there in support of my children and their relationship with me.

As the years passed, my children continued to grow physically, mentally, and spiritually with the assistance of their mother, others in

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<sup>1</sup> The word "time" refers to Mr. Norwood's prison sentence.



the family, and a host of friends they'd chosen. Now, years later, when I see or talk to my young ones, who are beautiful in every aspect, I can see all of the hard work and effort of these caregivers on display. But, what makes me so grateful is that no matter my situation, they still love me.

I often ask myself, "What if no one would've taken the time to be there for my children? To guide them through their transition from young children to adults? To provide for them? To be their support system? To teach them what it takes to succeed and how to answer all these questions of curiosity that transitioning to adulthood brings with it?"

Today I'm so grateful for the willingness, compassion, patience, understanding, and love from ALL of the caregivers who played a role in raising my daughters and sons to be the beautiful, intelligent, and independent adults they are today. I am also grateful to the Department for creating this wonderful resource for caregivers and imprisoned parents.

My final words of encouragement for caregivers are to never underestimate how important you are to children and their imprisoned parents. Your efforts make all the difference.

Thank you all,



**Everett Norwood**

# Introduction

Imprisonment does not end a parent's role in his or her child's life. Although parenting becomes more challenging when the parent is in prison, caregivers can help imprisoned parents continue as active supporters in their children's lives.

Caregivers of children with parents in prison may be the imprisoned parent's spouse, unmarried partner, parent, grandparent, sibling, or friend. The caregiver also may be the child's foster parent. No matter the relationship, caregivers face many challenges in dealing with the criminal justice system and raising children without the imprisoned parent.

During this time, children may benefit from surrounding themselves with people going through the same experience. Participating in community organizations or support groups can help children feel like they are not alone.

In Louisiana, parental incarceration or imprisonment affects about 1 out of every 12 children.<sup>2</sup> During this difficult time, children need to know their caregivers and imprisoned parents still love and support them. To ensure children continue to receive this love and support, imprisoned parents, caregivers, and children all must work together to build and maintain healthy relationships.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) classifies parental imprisonment as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). ACEs are traumatic events that occur during a person's childhood. ACEs also include experiencing physical or emotional abuse, mental health disorders, substance abuse disorders, or violence. Parental

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<sup>2</sup> Keeping Kids and Parents Together. (March 2018). *Human Impact Partners*. Retrieved from, [https://humanimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/HIP\\_LAcaretakers\\_2018.pdf](https://humanimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/HIP_LAcaretakers_2018.pdf).

imprisonment and other ACEs contribute to the development of toxic stress and other negative health and wellbeing outcomes for children.

For example, research shows children with imprisoned parents may be at a higher risk for developing learning disabilities, behavioral problems, developmental delays, speech or language problems, and anxiety or depression.<sup>3</sup> As such, it is important for caregivers and imprisoned parents to be aware of these negative effects and proactively work to prevent or alleviate them.

In order to help caregivers and imprisoned parents during this stressful time, the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections – Corrections Services (herein referred to as “DOC” or “the Department”) created this informational handbook to offer helpful tips, resources, and strategies to support children with parents in prison.

In this handbook, tips for **caregivers** are colored **blue**, tips for **imprisoned parents** are colored **red**, and tips for **both caregivers and imprisoned parents** are colored **purple**. For a list of community organizations that support children with parents in prison and their caregivers, please refer to Chapter 9 of this handbook. For more information about DOC or specific prison facilities, please visit the DOC website at <https://doc.la.gov/>.

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<sup>3</sup> Turney, K. (2014, August 19). Stress Proliferation across Generations? Examining the Relationship between Parental incarceration and Childhood Health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146514544173>.



## Chapter 1: Why Maintain Relationships?

The decision to allow children to maintain a relationship with their imprisoned parent is difficult. Every family is different and must make decisions based on the needs of children, preferences of imprisoned parents, family budget, and other complicated factors.

Although no single decision fits every circumstance, both children and imprisoned parents can benefit from maintaining contact and communication throughout the parent's prison sentence. In cases where maintaining a relationship with the parent is in children's best interest, many imprisoned parents can contribute positively to their upbringing. Individuals and circumstances change over time so caregivers should continuously evaluate their decision to facilitate the parent-child relationship.

While many children want to make sure their imprisoned parent is safe, they may not wish to contact the parent immediately following an arrest. Additionally, in some cases, contact or communication with the imprisoned parent may not be in children's best interest at the present time. However, caregivers can reevaluate the possibility for a relationship between imprisoned parents and children in the future.

It is important to note that caregivers should prioritize the needs of children first. Caregivers may consult school counselors, therapists, and community organizations or support groups to help them make decisions.

## **Benefits for Children**

The potential benefit children may receive from maintaining contact with an imprisoned parent depends on how much support they receive from caregivers or other trusted adults. With this support, children may gain the following benefits:

### **1) Heal feelings of neglect and abandonment.**

No matter the circumstance, separation from a parent is traumatic for children. However, contact with an imprisoned parent can help children cope with this trauma. It is important for children to know

that the imprisoned parent loves and supports them, even from prison. Although the parent is no longer physically present, consistent communication helps children understand that their parents are still emotionally present for them. This understanding can help children heal from feelings of neglect and abandonment as well as better understand why the parent is no longer at home.

Additionally, visits give imprisoned parents and their children the space for intimacy. Imprisoned parents may find it easier to speak more honestly and openly with children face-to-face. These open and honest discussions can decrease children's feelings of neglect.

## **2) Maintain the parental status of the imprisoned parent.**

Consistent contact and in-person visits help children and imprisoned parents maintain continuity in their relationship. For children in foster care, this continuity may influence a judge's or child welfare agency's decision to maintain an imprisoned parent's parental rights upon release.

## **3) Prepare children for the imprisoned parent's release.**

Staying connected helps children and imprisoned parents grow, learn, and change. After the parent finishes serving time in prison or jail, the parent's move back home is easier for everyone when communication between the children and imprisoned parent remains constant.

Without a relationship during imprisonment, children and imprisoned parents may idealize their reunion. They may set exceedingly high expectations for one another that fail to match reality. In other cases, children and/or the imprisoned parent may view each other as strangers.

Children who do not stay connected with their imprisoned parent may also experience the parent's return as an intrusion. They may be

confused when the newly released parent brings a change in parenting style and rules to an established routine in the family. Children also may experience this confusion or frustration whether or not the parent lives with them.

## **Benefits for Imprisoned Parents**

Imprisoned parents who maintain relationships with their children may experience the following benefits:

### **1) Build the foundation for successful rehabilitation.**

Families are integral to the successful rehabilitation of people in prison. People in prison who receive visitors and maintain family ties are more likely to maintain successful relationships with their families upon release. Families can provide hope for imprisoned parents which manifests into growth, knowledge, and change.

People in prison may take a variety of rehabilitative classes pertaining to anger management, moral recognition therapy, substance abuse recovery, job training, education, faith-based programming, and more. Many prisons also have parenting skills programs, such as Malachi Dads or Nurturing Parenting. These programs can help prepare imprisoned parents for release and teach them valuable life skills.

Caregivers should encourage imprisoned parents to participate in these types of programs. Instruct imprisoned parents to speak with their facility's Education Coordinator or Transition Specialist about programs they are interested in taking.

Consistent communication with imprisoned parents also helps keep them informed on current events and news in the outside world. With more knowledge and awareness about life outside of prison, imprisoned parents are better prepared for reentry.

## **2) Allow imprisoned parents to feel involved in the day to day of children's lives.**

Consistent communication helps imprisoned parents stay informed about their children's lives. Although imprisoned parents cannot see their children every day, they still want to hear about children's daily activities, challenges, and routines.

Imprisoned parents also can share details about their day-to-day lives with children. For example, imprisoned parents can talk about what time they wake up, the food they eat at different meals, or activities they do throughout the day. Frequent and open communication with children creates a sense of normalcy for imprisoned parents and allows them to feel active in children's lives.

## **3) Increase likelihood of receiving parole.**

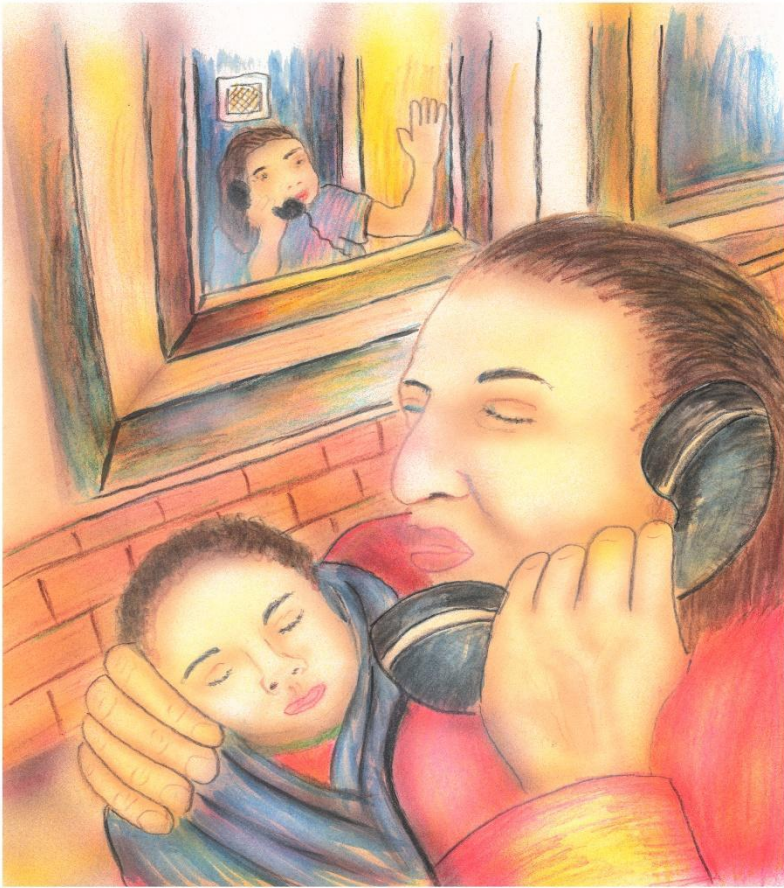
The Committee on Parole may be more likely to grant parole to imprisoned people with a strong family support network. The Committee also considers the imprisoned person's:

- Release plan;
- Case record (disciplinary reports, prison work history, and criminal history);
- Rehabilitative and educational program or counseling sessions;
- Victim Impact Statements;
- Prior criminal history;
- Character, social background, and emotional and physical condition; and
- Police, judicial, and community attitudes towards the imprisoned parent's possible release.

With these factors in mind, caregivers should encourage imprisoned parents to take care of themselves, follow institutional rules, and participate in rehabilitative and educational programs for which they are eligible. Instruct imprisoned parents to speak with their facility's



Education Coordinator or Transition Specialists about programs they are interested in taking. Visit the DOC website for a complete list of rehabilitative and educational programs that are available at each facility: <https://doc.la.gov/>.



## Chapter 2: Co-Parenting

Imprisonment places added strain on any relationship, especially for those who co-parent. Imprisonment changes the way caregivers and imprisoned parents communicate, make decisions, and maintain their own relationship outside of caring for the child.

**As such, it is important for caregivers and imprisoned parents to build healthy, collaborative relationships to co-parent children**

**effectively.** These relationships serve as the foundation for sustaining positive communication between imprisoned parents, caregivers, and children.

## Communication Tips

Caregivers of children with parents in prison may be relatives, family friends, or foster parents. However, no matter the pre-existing relationship, it is important for children to know that their caregivers and imprisoned parents support and care for them.

The following are general tips for developing and sustaining a healthy co-parenting relationship:

- Tip 1.* Include the imprisoned parent in conversations about parenting decisions, such as discipline, childcare providers, schools, extracurricular activities, healthcare, participation in community organizations, *etc.*
- Tip 2.* Both the imprisoned parent and caregiver should listen actively to each other and maintain honest and open communication.
- Tip 3.* Be supportive and show appreciation of the other parent's or caregiver's efforts. Acknowledge when the parent/caregiver does a good job. A simple “thank you” or “I really appreciate all that you do” goes a long way.
- Tip 5.* Be sensitive to what is said in front of children. When children are within earshot, avoid speaking negatively about the imprisoned parent. It is important not to taint the child's image of the imprisoned parent.

*Tip 6.* Resolve conflicts sooner rather than later to maintain a good relationship. Do not put children in the middle of arguments or discussions.

*Tip 7.* The imprisoned parent should encourage his or her family to maintain a relationship with the child. The caregiver should support relationships between the child and the imprisoned parent's family as well. Ensure family members on the imprisoned parent's approved visiting list have authorization to bring the child with them to visit the imprisoned parent.

Caregivers and imprisoned parents must set realistic expectations with each other for co-parenting. Imprisoned parents may be frustrated when they are unable to reach the caregiver. They may be upset if a caregiver misses a visit or call or does not involve the imprisoned parent in an emergency decision. Although these emotions are normal, it is important for imprisoned parents and caregivers to talk through these emotions honestly and respectfully.

Additionally, caregivers must learn to say “no” when they cannot do something the imprisoned parent requested. While it is important to support the imprisoned parent, caregivers must take care of their own needs first.

## **Budgeting Tips**

The imprisonment of a loved one is expensive. Families often lose a primary source of income, and household expenses increase to finance communication and other costs of supporting the imprisoned parent.

Although talking about money can be difficult, caregivers should speak openly about finances with imprisoned parents and set realistic communication expectations. The following section is designed to guide this discussion over family finances.

There are five main categories of costs directly associated with a parent's imprisonment: 1) visiting, 2) electronic communication through JPay, 3) phone calls, 4) mailed communication, and 5) sending money. Caregivers and imprisoned parents should determine the budget for each category together.

## **1) Visiting**

The total cost of visiting a person in prison will depend on the method of transportation. For those traveling by car, you will need to determine the cost of gas. For those traveling by bus, you will need to calculate the cost of the bus fare for each person visiting.

Depending on the length of the visit and the facility, food may be available to purchase for lunch in the prison or jail facility. Lunch may cost between \$10 to \$20 per person. Some facilities have vending machines to purchase snacks as well.

Some facilities also have a photographer available to take pictures of visitors and their imprisoned loved ones. The cost of these pictures may vary depending on the facility, but it is usually around \$4.00 per photo.

Determine how many times per month you can afford to visit the imprisoned parent. Some families may not be able to afford monthly or weekly visits and should create a savings plan instead. For example, for a family who wants to visit an imprisoned parent every other month, ensure you set aside enough money for half of the cost of one visit in your monthly budget.

For those who are unable to physically visit the facility, virtual visits through JPay's video visitation platform, Video Connect, are available. A ten-minute Video Connect session costs \$2.50.

## **2) Electronic Communication**

JPay allows people to email, send photos (Snap n' Sends), send videos (Videograms), and participate in video visits with their imprisoned loved ones. To use JPay, caregivers need to create a JPay account and purchase JPay stamps to send emails, Snap n' Sends, and Videograms.

JPay sells stamps in packages of:

- 20 stamps for \$6.00, (\$0.30 per stamp)
- 35 stamps for \$10.00, (\$0.29 per stamp)
- 60 stamps for \$15.00, (\$0.25 per stamp)

Purchasing the 60-stamp package is the most cost-effective option. It is important to note that caregivers and children do not need to use all 60 stamps in one month.

For imprisoned parents to send emails or Videograms, the cost per stamp is \$0.30. For both families and imprisoned people, all emails and Snap n' Sends require one stamp and all Videograms require two stamps.

Caregivers and imprisoned parents should set limits on the number of electronic communications an imprisoned parent, child, and caregiver can send. Purchases are non-refundable.

## **3) Phone Calls**

Telephone communication is provided by an outside vendor, Securus Technologies. A 15-minute phone call costs \$3.15. Determine the maximum number of 15-minute phone calls per month and multiply this number by \$3.15 to determine the family budget for phone calls. For example, one 15-minute phone per day for 30 days would cost \$94.50.

#### 4) Mailed Communication

The cost of sending letters and packages varies. Stamps typically cost between \$0.20 to \$0.55 per letter. Family members can order food or hygiene packages and other personal items through the Canteen Package Program. The minimum cost for a food or hygiene package is \$20. For more information on the price of packages and how to order, visit <http://www.prisonenterprises.org/canteen-packaging-program/>.

#### 5) Sending Money

Some families and friends send money to imprisoned people for canteen items, communication, and other expenses. Caregivers can send imprisoned parents money through the mail, walk-up locations for MoneyGram, the Internet, the phone, and lobby kiosks.

##### *Mail*

Family and friends may send money orders through the mail. There is NO charge for sending money orders via mail. JPay requires a JPay deposit slip to accompany the money order. The maximum amount of money that can be sent via mail is \$999.99.

##### *MoneyGram*



MoneyGram is located in Walmart and CVS Pharmacy locations as well as other locations with the MoneyGram logo. Family and friends must provide the MoneyGram office with cash only and the imprisoned person's information. MoneyGram will submit the payment electronically. MoneyGram charges a fee for this service. The maximum amount of money that can be sent is \$4,999.99.

##### *Internet*

Family and friends may go online to [www.JPay.com](http://www.JPay.com) and send funds using a credit or debit card. JPay only

accepts Visa and MasterCard. The fees associated with sending money through JPay online are:

Money Sent	Fee
<b>\$ 0.00 - 9.99</b>	<b>\$2.50</b>
<b>\$ 10.00 - 19.99</b>	<b>\$3.50</b>
<b>\$ 20.00 - 49.99</b>	<b>\$6.50</b>
<b>\$ 50.00 - 99.99</b>	<b>\$8.50</b>
<b>\$ 100.00 - 199.99</b>	<b>\$10.50</b>
<b>\$ 200.00 - 300.00</b>	<b>\$12.50</b>

*Phone*

Family and friends may call 1-800-574-5729 to transfer funds using a credit or debit card. Only Visa and MasterCard are accepted. The fees associated with sending money by phone are:

Money Sent	Fee
<b>\$ 0.00 - 9.99</b>	<b>\$3.50</b>
<b>\$ 10.00 - 19.99</b>	<b>\$4.50</b>
<b>\$ 20.00 - 49.99</b>	<b>\$7.50</b>
<b>\$ 50.00 - 99.99</b>	<b>\$9.50</b>
<b>\$ 100.00 - 199.99</b>	<b>\$11.50</b>



**\$ 200.00 - 300.00**

**\$13.50**

*Lobby  
Kiosks*

Kiosks are located in all state correctional facility visiting areas. Family and friends may provide funds to imprisoned parents by credit/debit card or cash. The same rates and fees apply for credit/debit card as transferring money via the Internet. Cash deposits in Lobby Kiosks have a \$4.00 fee per transaction.

## Parenting Tips

Although discipline is a necessary duty for all parents, no imprisoned parent wants to discipline his or her child. Imprisoned parents already have limited opportunities to interact with children and often do not want to spend this time on discipline and punishment.

Each family must decide how the imprisoned parent will be involved in parenting the child. For some families, discipline helps the imprisoned parent feel involved in his/her child's life and relieves the caregiver of the role as sole disciplinarian. For other families, the imprisoned parent's role in discipline can cause resentment or stress between the imprisoned parent, caregiver, and/or child.<sup>4</sup>

*Tip 1.* Involve the imprisoned parent and children in family decisions. Each person feels respected and valued when all family members are included in decision-making.

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<sup>4</sup> Fletcher, A. (2016, April). Positive Discipline and Child Guidance. *University of Missouri*. Retrieved from, <https://extension2.missouri.edu/gh6119>.

- Tip 2.* Reassure the child that it is okay to make mistakes and that he or she is still loved and a good person. Be patient with the child.
- Tip 3.* Remember, caregivers and parents make mistakes too. Apologizing to the child when you make a mistake, sets a good example for them to do the same.
- Tip 4.* Try not to raise your voice when you speak to the child. Instead of lecturing the child, have a discussion in which both parties feel heard and respected.
- Tip 5.* When children misbehave, do **NOT** tell them that they will turn out like their imprisoned parents. This statement increases their sense of shame and stigma.
- Tip 6.* Teach children to take ownership of their mistakes. For example, if the child got in trouble for throwing a temper tantrum in the store, the imprisoned parent could work with the child to think of ways to handle his or her anger better in the future.

Although parenting children from prison is difficult, frequent and open communication can help children be more receptive to discipline from their imprisoned parents.

## Practicing Self-Care

While caregivers may worry about the imprisoned parent, they should practice self-care first. Caregivers cannot effectively take care of children or imprisoned loved ones without first tending to their own needs. The time and energy invested in caring for children and dealing with imprisonment often leads to stress and exhaustion. At times, the caregiver may feel like he or she is “doing time” just like the imprisoned parent.

Caregivers should prioritize meeting the children's needs and their own needs. This includes meeting personal needs, such as getting enough sleep and taking time for one's self.

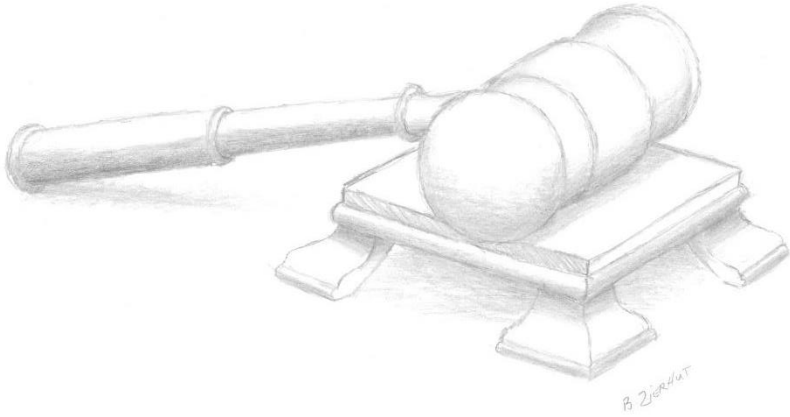
The following are several self-care tips for caregivers:

- Tip 1.* **Get involved in community organizations and support groups for caregivers of children with imprisoned parents.** These groups offer a good forum to discuss emotions, common problems, and other thoughts about caring for children with parents in prison with people who are going through the same experience.
- Tip 2.* **Connect with loved ones and people with lived experience.** This means finding friends and family members to talk to. Sometimes, sharing this guide with them will help your friends and family better understand the challenges you face as a caregiver of a child with an imprisoned parent.
- Tip 3.* **Don't hold everything in!** Holding feelings in creates tension and adds stress. Talk about your feelings. It is better for your health, gives you practice for talking to children, and gives children a model for talking about this very difficult subject.
- Tip 4.* **Get comfortable with the truth.** Keeping secrets, similar to holding in feelings, can cause physical and emotional stress. Telling the truth about a loved one's imprisonment also makes it easier to ask for help.

**Tip 5. Continue to do things you enjoy!**<sup>5</sup> The imprisonment of a loved one can be expensive; therefore, it is important to ensure you leave room in your budget to do things you enjoyed before your loved one's imprisonment. For example, if you used to treat yourself to a manicure or a takeout meal from your favorite restaurant, try to leave room in your budget to continue to do those things. Although you may not be able to do these activities as often, it is important to do things you enjoy or substitute these activities with low-cost hobbies.

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Kristin Antoine-Morse, a member of Secretary's Families of the Incarcerated Advisory Board, recommended this self-care tip for caregivers.



## **Chapter 3: Stress Points in the Criminal Justice System**

From the point of arrest to the time of release, there are numerous crises or *stress points* in the criminal justice system. These stress points may elicit different emotions and/or behaviors from children with imprisoned parents. Common traumatic points in the criminal justice system include: arrest, pre-trial and during trial, sentencing, imprisonment, parole, and pre-release and reentry.

It is essential to understand how these stress points may affect a child's emotions and behaviors. Through this understanding, caregivers can support children in developing healthier, more positive strategies to cope with stress and negative emotions. Caregivers and children can turn to community organizations for emotional support as well.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that every child and family is different. Children experience a wide array of emotions. However, no matter the child's visible response, every child experiences some degree of stress and trauma from parental imprisonment.

This chapter focuses exclusively on explaining why children feel certain emotions during different stages of the criminal justice system. See “Chapter 4: Supporting Children” to learn about different strategies to help children cope with these overwhelming emotions.

## **The Arrest: Fear, Confusion, and Panic**

Separation from a parent is a traumatic experience. When a parent is arrested, trauma from this separation may be exacerbated when a child witnesses the arrest of the parent.

However, even when children do not witness their parent’s arrest, children often imagine the worst about their parent’s condition. Children use negative images portrayed in the media about the criminal justice system to create their own terrifying narratives.

During this time, children and family members often have little information about the parent and the criminal justice process. The fear and panic that children experience after an arrest may lead to nightmares, not wanting to go to daycare or school, resistance to staying alone, or clinging behavior to a person, animal, or object.

## **Pre-trial and During Trial: Anxiety and Frustration**

Pre-trial is the period of time from when a person is arrested to when he or she goes to trial. Before a trial, the arrested parent may be released on bail or detained in a correctional facility. If a parent is detained during the pretrial period, he or she will remain incarcerated until the trial. Some parents may be detained without a trial for long periods of time, especially for more serious charges. Thus, arrested parents, caregivers, and even attorneys often do not know when an arrested parent may come home.

The uncertainty and unpredictability that characterize the pre-trial period can cause children to feel anxious about the situation. During this turbulent time, children may become frustrated with adults who they once viewed as “all-knowing,” but who are now unable to answer their questions.

Children also may feel confused about what is expected of them and worried about what the future holds. Caregivers should be honest with children and respond age-appropriately to details about the parent’s case. Caregivers may choose to consult people with lived experience or community organizations for advice and additional support during this time.

If a caregiver must have discussions with an attorney or about the parent’s case when the child is home, have a toy, snack, or activity available to comfort the child. Caregivers should be prepared to talk about what the child may have overheard and be able to translate the information into language that the child can understand at his or her age.

Keep in mind that some children may be too worried about the caregiver’s feelings to ask the caregiver about what they overheard. In these cases, caregivers should reassure children that the caregiver loves, supports, and is there for them.

Caregivers should never promise children that a particular outcome will occur, but should prepare to have a “worst case” conversation. Although caregivers may not have all of the answers, honest and open communication will help build trust between the caregiver and child. Remember, it is okay to admit you do not know the answer to a question.

## **Sentencing: Hopelessness and Helplessness**

During sentencing, family members often experience shock and hopelessness. Even if family members know the arrested parent is guilty, they often hope for a miracle or a lighter sentence. Family members and children with parents in prison can experience a lack of control as the judge decides the fate of the imprisoned parent.

The sentencing period (from the time a parent is found guilty until a parent receives his or her sentence) could last several months. During this time, children may not be allowed to visit a parent or visits may be limited.

In some cases, an imprisoned parent may be found guilty even though he or she is innocent. For these individuals and their families, the frustration and rage at the injustice of the criminal justice system can feel overwhelming. These situations are extremely difficult to navigate. Caregivers and children should seek support from community organizations, family members, friends, and counselors.

In any scenario, the finality of a parent's sentence may crush children's hope of reunification. Sentencing makes separation from the arrested parent a reality. After a parent receives his or her sentence, the child and caregiver may both benefit from connecting with people in similar situations or getting involved in a community organization to help cope with stress and other difficult emotions.



## **Initial Imprisonment: Abandonment, Embarrassment, and Resentment**

Children experience parental imprisonment as abandonment. Often, children experience a mixture of emotions, which may be confusing. Children may be worried and concerned about their parent's safety, while also being angry and frustrated at the parent for breaking the law and leaving them.

Media portrayals of prisons and jails may cause children to feel more worried about the imprisoned parent's wellbeing and safety. To reduce these fears, speak to children about imprisonment honestly and in an age-appropriate manner (see Chapter 5 Answering Children's Questions).

To further complicate matters, many children with parents in prison face social stigma from their peers and other members in the community. Unfortunately, society uses stereotypes to negatively characterize people in prison. These negative stereotypes can cause children with parents in prison to experience bullying or embarrassment. Although embarrassment is a normal feeling, caregivers should reassure children that they have nothing to be embarrassed about.

Parental imprisonment changes numerous aspects of a child's life. Imprisonment adversely impacts a family's finances and significantly changes the family dynamic. Some children experience larger changes that may be overwhelming, such as moving to a new home in a new school district and away from their friends. All of these factors are important to keep in mind when supporting children as they cope with the stress and emotions caused by parental imprisonment. During this difficult time, remember to be patient with children.

## **Parole: Anxiety and Hopefulness**

Parole provides people in prison with the opportunity to serve the last portion of their sentence in the community, but under the direct supervision of a parole officer. Imprisoned parents who are eligible for parole will receive a parole eligibility date. The Louisiana Committee on Parole typically meets with an imprisoned person within six months of his or her parole eligibility date. However, parole eligibility does not guarantee that a person will be granted parole.

For children who are aware that their parent has a parole hearing, this period of time is extremely stressful. Children may be hopeful for a good result and anxious that their parent's parole may be denied.

If parole is granted, children may be elated and excited to be reunited with their parent. However, children also may experience stress, confusion, and a mixture of positive and negative emotions as their parent reintegrates back into their lives (see Pre and Post Release: Mixed Emotions).

If parole is denied, children feel abandoned by the parent all over again. Some children are mad at the parent and blame the parent for the negative outcome, whereas other children become frustrated with the criminal justice system.

For parents released on parole, parole supervision and reporting requirements may limit their parenting capacity and ability to perform certain tasks. For example, some parents may have curfews and geographic restrictions that may prevent them from participating in certain activities with their children. These limitations may frustrate and confuse children.

## **Pre- and Post-Release: Mixed Emotions**

Just as the imprisonment of a parent represents a big change in the child's life, so does the imprisoned parent's return home. The periods immediately preceding and following a parent's release from prison are often the most traumatic for children and families. Children, caregivers, and imprisoned parents all changed significantly throughout the parent's imprisonment, so everyone will need to adapt to a new normal.

When a parent is released from prison, children are older and often at a new developmental stage in life. The parent may treat the child the same as the parent did before he or she went to prison. However, children have different needs and expectations when a parent is released. Some children have never seen the imprisoned parent outside of prison. Parents and children will need to work hard to navigate this new phase of their relationship. Remember to be gentle with each other because this transition is difficult for everyone involved.

Caregivers also change substantially during a loved one's imprisonment. If caregivers are the spouse or partner of the imprisoned parent, then they might have assumed the role of both mother and father during the imprisoned parent's absence.

Through these new responsibilities, caregivers may have gained independence and competence in childcare and managing family matters. In some cases, caregivers or imprisoned parents have remarried and started new families. Caregivers and imprisoned parents will need to work together with children to redefine and learn their new roles in the family.

Additionally, imprisonment changes people. Children may be confused when their parents return home and do not act the same as they did before. While in prison, the parent had little privacy. This transition is hard. Caregivers and children will need to be patient with

the parent and may need to reteach the imprisoned parent about life outside of prison.

During this transient period, most children experience contradictory ideas and feelings about their parent's return. Children may be hopeful that reunification will fix the problems that existed before the parent's imprisonment.

They also may harbor anger at the parent for abandoning them. Some children may even try to protect the caregiver and imprisoned parent by hiding their emotions and then fall apart when they sense the adults are okay. As such, caregivers, imprisoned parents, and other trusted adults in the child's life should be prepared to help the child cope with and process these complex emotions.



## **Chapter 4: Supporting Children**

### **Common Emotional & Behavioral Responses**

Every child is different. Depending on a child's developmental stage and personality, he or she may have different emotional and behavioral responses to a parent's imprisonment.

Parental imprisonment can create an unstable environment for children and interrupt parent-child bonding, which is critical to child development. For these reasons, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention classifies parental imprisonment as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). ACEs are “potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years).”<sup>6</sup>

ACEs can have prolonged negative effects on children’s health, well-being, and opportunity. For example, ACEs contribute to the development of toxic stress, learning and attention deficit disorders, and anxiety or depression.<sup>7</sup>

Children with parents in prison also may experience the following:

- 1) Developing physical symptoms (e.g. headaches, stomach aches, other illnesses or injuries), having nightmares, beginning to fear the dark, or clinging to the remaining parent or caregivers;
- 2) Showing signs of regression, for example, exhibiting behaviors of younger children such as bedwetting or thumb-sucking;
- 3) Withdrawing from friends and social relationships or previously enjoyed activities;
- 4) Retreating into denial and/or an imaginary world;
- 5) Showing anger, aggression, and hostility toward the adult in charge or toward other authority figures, like teachers;
- 6) Becoming disobedient and defiant at home or school, refusing to obey previously obeyed rules;
- 7) Suffering a decline in school work and social relationships at school or beginning to skip school;

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<sup>6</sup> (Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> (Turney, 2014).

- 8) Struggling with feelings of embarrassment and neglect; and
- 9) Feeling jealous of other children who do not have parents in prison.

Some of these behaviors may disappear or reappear during different stress points in the criminal justice process.

It is also important to note that children who appear to be fine may still be suffering. Caregivers should keep a close eye on children who appear to be numb or unaffected by their parent's imprisonment. Some signs that the child may be suffering silently include ignoring the topic of prison, deflecting when asked about the parent's imprisonment, avoiding people who are close to the imprisoned parent, and/or hanging out with new friends who encourage them to misbehave.

## **Tips to Help Children Cope**

### **Tip 1. Reassure children that they are loved and supported.**

When a parent goes to prison, children may feel abandoned, guilty, or unloved. It is important for caregivers to remind children that the caregiver and imprisoned parent still love and support them.

### **Tip 2. Talk about feelings with the child.**

As discussed in Chapter 3 of this handbook, children experience a wide array of emotions during a parent's imprisonment. As such, it is important for caregivers to check in on children regularly to see how they are feeling and coping with these complex feelings.

For example, a caregiver could say, "You look sad. Are you missing your mom/dad?" or "When you get that angry at little things I wonder

if you are also angry at your mom/dad for going to prison?” Caregivers should validate children’s feelings and let them know it is okay to feel sad, angry, or any other emotions.

During these discussions, caregivers should talk about their feelings with children. These discussions help children feel like they are not alone. Caregivers can speak openly and honestly about their own emotions, but should avoid speaking negatively about the imprisoned parent.

Caregivers should assure children that it is okay to have different feelings toward the imprisoned parent than the caregiver. For example, a caregiver could say, “We feel different things about your dad’s imprisonment and that is okay. I still want you to go visit him because he’s your dad and he loves you.”

### **Tip 3. Try to maintain a consistent routine, especially for young children.**

Caregivers should provide infants and young children with consistent routines to help build security. In the morning, let the child know some of the things that will happen throughout the day.

Caregivers are encouraged to share this routine with the imprisoned parent as well and schedule regular times for the parent to call the child. The imprisonment of a parent is extremely disruptive to a child’s life, so it is important to reduce uncertainties whenever possible.

Caregivers also can give children a comfort item to keep during the day, such as a family photo or stuffed animal. Comfort items may help children cope with stress and negative emotions when the caregiver is not physically present.



#### **Tip 4. Encourage children to pursue hobbies or activities they enjoy.**

Caregivers should encourage children to continue healthy activities like reading, playing sports, painting, and playing games with their friends. These activities help children build confidence and process negative emotions. Children can also talk about these interests with the imprisoned parent.

Caregivers should try to participate in hobbies with children as well. Sharing these activities shows children that you all are still a family and it is okay to have fun without the imprisoned parent present.

#### **Tip 5. Set up family discussion times.**

Families can designate times each week to discuss prison and non-prison related topics. For example, caregivers can choose a night to hold family meetings to discuss how everyone is coping with the parent's imprisonment. Family meetings also can be a time to discuss other positive or negative events from the week.

Families should coordinate a time each week to speak to an imprisoned parent as well. Since people in prison can only make calls and cannot receive calls, this coordination helps ensure that children do not miss a call from a parent.

Although it is important to provide children with opportunities to discuss the parent's imprisonment, some children may need a break from talking about prison. Families can set aside times when "prison and jail talk" is off limits, such as Saturday morning breakfast. This time provides a moment of relief to those who need a break from the subject.

### **Tip 6. Read stories or watch TV shows about children with parents in prison or jail.**

Caregivers should encourage their libraries to include books and pamphlets about children with imprisoned parents in their collections. See “Chapter 9: Resources” for a list of books that discuss parental imprisonment. Caregivers also can purchase these books online or at bookstores to read with younger children.

Additionally, some children’s television shows include children with imprisoned parents in the storyline. Sesame Street has episodes with a character named Alex, whose dad is in jail. Caregivers can watch shows like Sesame Street with young children to help them better understand parental imprisonment and start a conversation about prison in an age-appropriate manner.

### **Tip 7. Get support and help for children and yourself.**

Children and caregivers need people to confide in. These people can be friends, family members, or other trusted adults in the children’s lives. Caregivers and children also may benefit from the professional help of therapists, counselors, and/or religious leaders.

In some communities, there are local organizations which provide support groups, camps, or clubs for children with parents in prison and/or caregivers. Support groups and community organizations for children with parents in prison and their caregivers can help children and caregivers feel like they are not alone.



## Chapter 5: Answering Children's Questions

The imprisonment of a parent is traumatic and confusing for children. During this time, children need support and guidance from their caregiver to help them understand and cope with what has happened.

When a parent is arrested, there are generally four main questions that children ask or want to ask their imprisoned parents:

- 1) Where are you?
- 2) Are you okay?
- 3) Why are you in prison/jail?
- 4) When are you coming home?

In addition to these four questions, there also are two questions that children worry about, but may not ask explicitly:

- 1) Do you blame me?
- 2) Do you still love me?

Many children may not ask these questions directly; however, that does not mean they are not grappling with these questions. Good communication is the best way to support children. This includes actively listening to children and ensuring you answer their questions honestly and in an age-appropriate manner.

Both the imprisoned parent and caregiver must determine what information to share with the child and who should tell the child this information. It is essential that the imprisoned parent and caregiver are on the same page so that the child does not receive conflicting or confusing information.

During these difficult conversations, you should urge children to express their feelings. Children may ask the same questions several times, however, this does not mean they do not understand the adult's answer. Children often repeat a question when they do not like the answer, want the answer to change, or reach a different stage of cognitive or emotional development and understand the situation in a new way. Continue to communicate openly and honestly with children when this occurs.

The following section provides advice on how to answer difficult questions children may have about their parent's imprisonment:

## 1) Where are you?

When answering this question about an imprisoned parent, parents and caregivers should tell the child the truth. Caregivers should allow the child to decide whether he or she wishes to share the truth with others.

Research on child mental health shows that telling children the truth typically helps minimize the child's anxiety and adjustment to painful situations. Speaking openly and honestly with children helps the family maintain healthy, trusting relationships. Additionally, children almost always find out the truth, and it is better for children to hear the truth from their caregiver or the imprisoned parent.

Having an honest conversation with children is important to the overall health and wellbeing of the child. The caregivers should emphasize that they love the children and they should not feel guilty or ashamed about the parent's imprisonment. Express to children that their emotions are a natural and common response to this situation.

## 2) Why are you in prison/jail?

After a child learns a parent is in prison or jail, they typically want to know the reason why. When discussing the reason for a parent's imprisonment, it is not only important to be honest but also age-appropriate.

Before starting this conversation, ask the child, "What do you think prison is?" and "Why do you think your mom/dad is in prison?" These questions help gauge how much the child already knows about prison and the parent's sentence.

After caregivers determine what the child knows, the caregiver should prepare the child to have a difficult conversation about the parent's

crime. Caregivers should give children the opportunity to opt out of this discussion.

For example, the caregiver could say, “This is a hard conversation and it is extremely sad. Are you sure you are ready for this conversation right now?” Asking the child if he or she has the emotional space to handle this difficult discussion gives the child a sense of control over the situation.

For children who are nine years old or younger, the New Orleans-based organization, Daughters Beyond Incarceration (DBI), recommends caregivers explain the criminal justice system through the three branches of government.

For this explanation, caregivers should discuss the following:

- In the United States, there are three branches of government: 1) the legislative branch, 2) the executive branch, and 3) the judicial branch.
- The legislative branch makes the laws, the executive branch carries out the laws, and the judicial branch evaluates laws.
- When a person breaks a law created by the legislative branch, then the police, a part of the executive branch, may arrest him or her to carry out the law.
- The courts are part of the judicial branch. Judges and juries evaluate whether there is enough evidence to convict the person for breaking the law. The punishment for breaking a law may be a prison or jail sentence.
- DOC is part of the executive branch and is responsible for carrying out the sentence set by the courts.
- DOC is in charge of prisons, which are places that people go when they receive a prison sentence. A person in prison is not allowed to leave until he or she has completed his or her sentence.

Caregivers should also differentiate between breaking the law and breaking household or school rules. For example, caregivers should

reassure children that if they speak out of turn in class or get sent to the principal's office that they will **NOT** be sent to prison. Children should not conflate breaking minor rules with breaking the law.

Older children will have more questions and may need more details. For children who are ten years old or older, caregivers should tell the child which crime the parent is accused of committing. The truth is often easier for children to cope with than the worst-case scenarios that they imagine.

Caregivers also should encourage children to practice restorative healing exercises with them. For example, the caregiver could tell the child, "Your parent's imprisonment is going to be stressful for both of us, but I want you to know that we are in this together and can help each other through it." Caregivers and children can also journal together or do other activities that improve their mental and emotional health.

In some cases, an imprisoned parent may be innocent or receive an unfair sentence. Although these issues are important to discuss, caregivers and imprisoned parents should focus on the needs of the child. In these cases, parents and caregivers should ensure the child feels supported and learns to cope with any injustice in healthy ways.

In cases in which the parent is guilty, the parent may feel ashamed of his or her action(s). Imprisoned parents may not want to admit to their child what they did. In most cases, imprisoned parents simply need to apologize to children for the upset and upheaval that they have caused. They need to ask children to forgive them and be a partner in rebuilding their lives.

These conversations are extremely difficult to have with children. Caregivers should recognize it takes courage for imprisoned parents to talk about their mistakes with their children. During these

conversations, imprisoned parents risk anger and rejection from their family; however, this honesty can help create a positive foundation for the child and imprisoned parent's relationship in the future. As such, caregivers should be understanding and supportive of imprisoned parents who speak openly and honestly with their children.

### 3) Are you okay?

Children are often extremely concerned about their imprisoned parent's safety and well-being while in prison. Imprisoned parents can answer this question by saying, "I am not happy here but I can certainly handle it." or "I am okay in some ways. I have a bed and food and books to read. But, I am not okay because I'm sad that I can't be with you." These kinds of answers balance the truth with some reassurance that the parent misses the child and is not in severe danger.

Use this time to have imprisoned parents, caregivers, and children describe their emotions throughout this process. **Caregivers, imprisoned parents, and other trusted adults should ensure that they ask children how they are doing as well.** Often, family members and friends are so concerned with the wellbeing of the imprisoned parent that no one asks children if they are okay. Caregivers should consistently talk to children about their feelings to ensure they are mentally healthy.

Caregivers and imprisoned parents may also use this time to explain empathy to children. Empathy is the ability to identify and understand other people's thoughts, emotions, and mindsets.<sup>8</sup> Caregivers and imprisoned parents can describe the mindset of someone in prison and why he or she may act differently than before. This is also a good opportunity to practice empathy towards the children.

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<sup>8</sup> (Empathy, 2021).



## 4) When are you coming home?

Whether a person is awaiting trial or has already received a sentence, there is often a great deal of uncertainty about when an imprisoned parent will actually be released. During pre-trial, families do not know if the parent will be found innocent and released or found guilty and receive a lengthy sentence. Even once parents receive their sentence, they may be released early on parole or for earning good time credits.

Due to this uncertainty, parents should not promise children that they will come home “soon.” Children have a different sense of time than adults. Imprisoned parents and caregivers should let children know how long the parent may be absent in concrete and age-appropriate ways.

For example, young children best understand time when adults measure time in seasons or holidays. For shorter sentences and during pre-trial, imprisoned parents may tell younger children they won’t be home by Christmas or for a birthday. For longer sentences, parents can say the number of summers or birthdays until a parent can come home.

The truth is easier for children to grasp than vague answers like “It will be a long time.” While this can be painful for children to hear, it is less painful than waiting for a parent who does not show up.

## 1) Do you blame me? & 2) Do you still love me?

Although children may not ask these two questions directly, children often struggle internally with these questions. Caregivers and imprisoned parents should ensure children feel loved and supported. It is important for caregivers to assure children that the parent's imprisonment was not their fault. Parents are human and make mistakes. Imprisoned parents and caregivers should emphasize that children are **NEVER** responsible for their parents' mistakes.

Children often interpret the parent's behavior solely in connection to themselves. As such, parents should be unwavering in their assurances that the child is loved unconditionally and that the child did not do anything to cause their imprisonment.

## Other Difficult Conversations

Children also may ask the question, "Why me?" Some children may wonder why their mom or dad has to be in prison, whereas other children have both parents free. Caregivers should reassure children that the imprisoned parent still loves them unconditionally and the parent's action is not a reflection of how much the parent cares for them. Caregivers can respond to this question by emphasizing children's strengths. For example, caregivers can say, "Children who have an imprisoned parent grow up to be a strong person. Your heart is so big because you love your mom/dad while she/he is far away." Caregivers can assure children that they are capable of handling this challenge together.

In addition to the emotional toll of imprisonment, imprisonment often places a significant financial burden on families. Many families lose

an income when a family member goes to prison or jail. Numerous caregivers must obtain an additional job, seek higher paying employment, or work longer hours to decrease the financial stress on the family. These work changes may cause children to need a babysitter or other childcare alternatives.

In addition to changes in the family's income, imprisonment itself increases a family's expenses. Families may need to pay legal or court costs or put money in the imprisoned person's account for necessities at the prison commissary. The cost of phone calls, sending letters, and visiting a loved one in prison can become expensive over time as well.

Children are always watching and listening to their family members and caregivers. They will hear extended family and friends talk about these issues as stressful or even with anger toward the family member awaiting trial or in prison. Older children who have a better understanding of money will have questions about these issues and want to know why their own lifestyle is changing because of these financial strains.

Caregivers should be honest with children about the family's finances, without worrying or alarming them. However, caregivers should also reassure children that the adults will figure everything out.



## Chapter 6: Communicating with a Parent in Prison

Good communication is fundamental to maintaining any relationship. However, it is nearly impossible for children to communicate with an imprisoned parent without adult assistance.

Children can stay connected to their imprisoned parents in a variety of ways including: phone calls, electronic mail, mailed letters and packages, in-person visits, and video visits at participating facilities.

The frequency and method of communication depends on numerous factors including a family's finances, departmental regulations, the needs of the child, and the preferences of the imprisoned parent. Each form of communication has unique advantages and challenges to sustaining relationships between children and imprisoned parents.

## **Mailed Communication – Emails, Letters, Packages, Publications, Photos, *etc.***

Although letter writing may seem outdated, it is still a valuable tool for communication between children and imprisoned parents. Letters allow both children and imprisoned parents to share their thoughts and feelings without being interrupted or judged.

Some people express themselves more effectively and honestly through drawing or writing. Speaking about difficult topics or showing remorse, affection, and other feelings can be embarrassing or nerve-racking in-person. Letters allow imprisoned parents and children to think purposefully about what they are saying and edit or rewrite a letter until they are ready to send it.

Additionally, letters are tangible and permanent. Saving letters from an ongoing correspondence can be like keeping a journal. Children cherish their letters. Rereading a parent's letters over time can give a child the very real experience of a growing relationship.

Even if imprisoned parents do not know where their children are or if their letters are returned, they should still write to children. Imprisoned parents can save these letters to give children upon release. Children

will appreciate that the imprisoned parent still cared for them and was thinking of them while in prison.

## Mail Tips for Caregivers

Depending on a child's age, some children may need help physically writing the letter or putting their feelings into words. Caregivers should encourage the children to write the letters regardless of the child's age or writing abilities. This allows the imprisoned parent to see the child's progression.

The following are tips [caregivers](#) can use to help children communicate with imprisoned parents through the mail:

- Tip 1.* Talk to children about things they wish they could tell their imprisoned parents. Based on these discussions, create and maintain a running list of topics for children to write about.
- Tip 2.* Plan for holidays and birthdays. Help children send packages and holiday-themed letters or emails to their parents for these special occasions. Before sending these items, you should check to ensure packages abide by the facility's mail rules.
- Tip 3.* Encourage children to make a "treasure box" of items they want to give their parents but are not allowed to send to them in prison. The parent can open this treasure box of gifts upon release. Children can send a picture of the craft or gift to the parent and tell the parent that they are placing the gift in the box.
- Tip 4.* Send imprisoned parents copies of the child's report cards, school tests or reports, awards, and diplomas. Although children may only want to send good grades

to their parents, encourage children to send school work with mistakes as well. Many imprisoned parents want to be involved in the child's education and may be able to offer support or advice to the child.

- Tip 5.* Keep a stack of stamped envelopes, already addressed to the parent, so children can send letters or drawings whenever they desire. However, ensure you do not address too many envelopes because sometimes people in prison transfer to different facilities.
- Tip 6.* Keep a calendar with special occasions (e.g. the parent's birthday, religious holidays, *etc.*) to help prompt children to write letters when appropriate. Put this calendar where the child can see and reach it.
- Tip 7.* Remind the imprisoned parent to write to the child for special occasions and offer the imprisoned parent advice on what to write about, such as the child's interests or recent family events.
- Tip 8.* Review the facility's letter and email policy before sending letters and emails. For example, letters are **NOT** allowed to be written on decorative stationery or have stickers on them.
- Tip 9.* Do not place too much pressure on children to write letters. Children should not feel like letter-writing is a chore. However, some children may need some prompting and encouragement to get started.

## Mail Tips for Imprisoned Parents

The following are tips for **imprisoned parents** to write letters or emails to their children:

- Tip 1.* Write often. Just as most young children would rather have five pennies than one nickel, younger children would rather get many notes and cards than a few long letters.
- Tip 2.* Clip and send cartoons and photos from newspapers and magazines.
- Tip 3.* Write letters to younger children in large block letters so children can read the letters more easily. Send age-appropriate math problems and have children send the answers back to you.<sup>9</sup>
- Tip 4.* Draw pictures of where you live, work, eat, and exercise to help children understand your daily life.
- Tip 5.* Send line drawings or tracings of familiar television or cartoon characters. Children can color in these drawings and send them back to the imprisoned parent.
- Tip 6* Start an add-on drawing activity. You can begin a drawing and send it to your child. Then, your child adds to the drawing and sends it back to you. This activity can go back and forth until the drawing is done.
- Tip 7.* For communications with older children, you can start games like tic-tac-toe, hang man, versions of

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<sup>9</sup> Daughter's Beyond Incarceration provided this tip to the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections.



crossword puzzles, boggle, chess, checkers, and invented games based on current videogames.

- Tip 8.* Ask children questions about their daily lives or interests. You can ask about school, friends, TV, video games, pets, and/or sports.
- Tip 9.* Recommend a book that you and your child can read at the same time. You and the child can discuss the book in letters and in conversations over the phone and in person.
- Tip 10.* Remember not to be harsh or overly critical about your child's work, drawings or letters, grades, and the frequency of their letters to you. When you need to correct the child or voice concern, emphasize what the child did right as well as what needs improvement.

For example, you can say, "I loved the creative introduction you used for your essay. However, I noticed you had some spelling and grammar errors. Remember to make sure you proofread your next assignment. Overall, I think your essay discussed some really interesting ideas though." Parents should try to end letters or critiques on a positive note.

## JPay Email Correspondence

Children and imprisoned parents also may email each other through JPay. Email is faster and more convenient than mailing letters through the post office. Depending on the facility, individuals typically receive emails within 48 hours. The Department uses JPay to provide correctional email services to imprisoned people and their loved ones.

To send an email, the caregiver must have a JPay account. Each email requires a “stamp” that can be purchased online or at JPay kiosks in the facility. As of February 2021, JPay stamps cost \$6 for 20 stamps, \$10 for 35 stamps, and \$15 for 60 stamps.

Caregivers and children may decide to attach a VideoGram or a Snap n’ Send to the email. VideoGrams are 30-second videos that loved ones may record to send to their imprisoned loved ones. Snap n’ Sends are photographs that loved ones may attach to JPay emails.

Each typed page of text for an email requires one (1) stamp and each attachment or Snap n’ Send requires one (1) stamp. VideoGrams require two (2) stamps. Emails, VideoGrams, and Snap n’ Sends must all be sent through the caregiver’s JPay account. Caregivers may access JPay online or download the JPay app on their smartphone.<sup>10</sup>

Although DOC does not place a limit on the number of emails that an imprisoned parent may receive or send, caregivers, imprisoned parents, and children should discuss their own limit for email communications to ensure they stay within the family’s budget.

Caregivers may need to help younger children write or type the email. VideoGrams may be more appealing to young children who are better at speaking than writing. VideoGrams and Snap n’ Sends also give the imprisoned parent the opportunity to see the child outside of in-person visits. These attachments are cherished keepsakes for imprisoned parents.

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<sup>10</sup> This information was obtained through JPay’s website at <https://www.jpay.com/PEmessages.aspx>.

## Sample Letters/Emails

### Suggested Topics to Write About:

- Positive activities the child or imprisoned parent is doing
- Common interests (e.g. sports, hobbies, books, music, *etc.*)
- Current events in both of the child's and imprisoned parent's life (e.g. friendships, sports games, recitals, upcoming tests)
- Celebrating special events, such as birthdays and holidays
- Favorite memories about each other and the family
- Updates on familiar people (family, friends, coaches, *etc.*)
- Classes the child or parent is taking

### Sample Letter/Email for a Child to Write to an Imprisoned Parent:

*Hi Mom/Dad!*

*How are you doing? I miss you so much! Yesterday, Grandma and I baked cookies and they were delicious. Remember that time when we made chocolate chip cookies together and you burned them! These cookies were much better. I bet you would have loved them.*

*Things are going well in school too. I like all of my teachers a lot. Ms. Smith is my favorite teacher. I got an A on my spelling test and joined the soccer team. Do you play sports or participate in any programs?*

*I drew you a picture of the family. I hope you like it! Everyone says hi and they miss you too. I can't wait to see you next time we come to visit. I love you so much Mom/Dad!*

*Love,  
[Child's name]*

## **Sample Letter/Email for an Imprisoned Parent to Write to a Child:**

*Hi [Child's Name],*

*I am writing to see how you are doing and let you know I miss you. It is important to me that we keep in touch and that you know that I think about you all the time. I want you to know that even though I am not with you right now, I think about you every day. I can't wait to see you the next time you visit!*

*So what have you been doing in school? What was the highlight of your day? Mine was sitting down to write to you! I am so proud of you for doing well on your spelling test. I bragged about you to all of my friends, who are impressed with your accomplishment as well.*

*Did you watch the Saints game on Sunday? I am so excited they beat the Falcons! I wish I could've watched the game with you. You always have the best football cheers.*

*Before I go to sleep, I was thinking that maybe we could try and do an activity together – even while we are apart. For example, we could read the same book for an hour each day and tell each other what we think of it. I can check out a book from the library. I included a list of books we have at the library that I thought you might like. Let me know which one you like best so we can start reading!*

*I can't wait to hear from you and I love you so much. Just thinking about you makes my day better! I hope you have a great week, keep up the good work in school, and I will be waiting to hear from you soon!*

*Love,  
Mom/Dad*

# Mailed Communication Guidelines

All incoming general correspondence must contain the return address of the sender, the name of the imprisoned parent, the DOC number of the imprisoned parent, and the name and mailing address of the facility where the imprisoned parent is currently housed. Correctional officers will open and inspect all incoming letters and packages to check for contraband, forms of money, and other prohibited items.

The following is a list of materials you **can** send to a person in prison:

- Paper with words and drawings;
- A limit of five (5) printed articles from the internet, newspaper clippings, and magazine clippings (Xerox copies allowed) per piece of regular correspondence;
  - **NOTE:** Multiple copies of the same clippings/articles for any one imprisoned individual are not allowed.
- Magazines, newspapers, and other published materials shipped directly from the publisher; and
- Photographs or printed images.
  - **NOTE:** Hard backed and laminated photographs or other images that are subject to alteration or modification may be rejected.

The following is a list of materials you may **NOT** send to a person in prison:

- Cash, checks, or any other form of money;
- Letters or materials written in code;
- Greeting cards and post cards;
- Decorative stationary or stationary with stickers;
- Sexually explicit materials;
- Other general correspondence for which rejection is reasonably related to a legitimate penological interest; and
- Drawings, writing, and marking on envelopes, other than return and sending address, are not permitted.

The following is a list of publications you may **NOT** send to a person in prison:

- Maps, road atlas, etc. that depict a geographic region that could reasonably be construed to be a threat to security;
- Writings that advocate, assist, or are evidence of criminal activity or facility misconduct;
- Instructions regarding the ingredients or manufacturing of intoxicating beverages or drugs;
- Information regarding the introduction of, or instructions in the use, manufacture, storage, or replication of weapons, explosives, incendiaries, escape devices or other contraband;
- Instructions in the use of martial arts;
- Racially inflammatory material or material that could cause a threat to the imprisoned population, staff, and security of the facility; and
- Writings which advocate violence or which create a danger.

Keep in mind that communication policies may vary based on the facility. Visit the DOC website at <https://doc.la.gov/> for more information on facility-specific policies.

## **Conversations over the Phone**

Children and imprisoned parents cherish phone calls because phone calls allow them to hear the sound of their loved one's voice. However, sometimes parents, imprisoned or not, struggle to find common interests and topics to discuss with their children.

Unlike other parents, imprisoned parents have limited opportunities for communication with their children. Imprisoned parents often feel pressured to make the most of these limited opportunities. However, what really counts is the parent listening to the child. The subject of the conversation is not so important. Phone calls are special for

children because they get to interact with the imprisoned parent one-on-one, even if the call is only for a few minutes.

Phone calls are a good opportunity to have conversations that may be uncomfortable. Navigating difficult conversations helps the imprisoned parent and child build trust and develop a deeper bond throughout the parent's imprisonment.

Parents should not be discouraged when children do not seem interested in talking. Many children take time to adjust to speaking to the imprisoned parent over the phone. Caregivers and imprisoned parents should allow children to move at their own pace.

### **Phone Tips for Imprisoned Parents**

The following are tips for **imprisoned parents** to use during phone conversations with their children:

- Tip 1.* Don't be afraid to ask about the child's life. Not asking may make children feel that you are not interested or worried about the answers. Imprisoned parents should use this time to ask children about their friends, the neighborhoods that they are playing in, social activities, and other relationships.
- Tip 2.* Do things "together-apart." Read the same book, plan to watch the same TV show or movie, watch for changes in the moon or stars, *etc.*
- Tip 3.* Ask about topics like sports, music, school, and other topics that are part of the everyday lives of most children.
- Tip 4.* Avoid making promises about what you will do, buy, and get for the child when you are released. Promises

shift the relationship from the present into an uncertain future.

- Tip 5.* If children become angry, frustrated, or upset over the phone, practice breathing exercises with them to help them calm down.
- Tip 6.* Ask the child if they want to have conversations about topics that are sensitive or require long explanations before discussing the topic.
- Tip 7.* Play a phone game, which may include things such as developmentally appropriate jokes and riddles. If the family chooses to play a game, make sure each child gets a turn.
- Tip 8.* End the conversation with a compliment or kind words to share with each other.

## Phone Tips for Caregivers

Caregivers may need to help imprisoned parents facilitate phone calls with children. The following are tips for [caregivers](#) to support children in speaking with an imprisoned parent over the phone:

- Tip 1.* Phone calls can become expensive quickly. Based on the family's budget, decide ahead of time how long the call will be. Caregivers should notify the child and imprisoned parent of the time limit.
- Tip 2.* Imprisoned parents must initiate the phone call. As such, arrange the call to be when the child is likely to be free to talk. Create a routine for when the imprisoned parent will call the child.
- Tip 3.* Give the child a notebook so he or she can write down any unfinished conversations with the imprisoned



parent. Then the child can resume this conversation on the next phone call.

- Tip 4.* Help children make a list of things to talk about on the phone. Use this list to give children hints during the phone call if they forget what they want to say or need help.
- Tip 5.* Focus on the children and encourage them to talk about their feelings and experiences. Encourage children to talk about their lives and their daily routines as well.
- Tip 6.* Give children a picture of the imprisoned parent to look at as they talk.

The prison phone systems provide a verbal warning when the call is about to end. Children may hang up when they hear the warning and before the time is up. Children may hang up early to exert control in a situation that feels out of their control. Instead of having the “prison phone system” end the call, they may want to end the call on their own terms.

Imprisoned parents can inform children that they want them to keep talking at the warning, but understands if they would rather end the call. Remember, calls should focus on the needs of the child.

Caregivers also can have children speak to the imprisoned parent first so the caregiver is the one to end the call when the warning occurs.

## Phone Guidelines

Each imprisoned person has an approved master list of up to twenty (20) telephone numbers for family, friends, and legal calls. An imprisoned person may only call a phone number on his or her approved master list. Thus, you must ensure the phone number you

plan to use to communicate with the imprisoned parent is on his or her list.

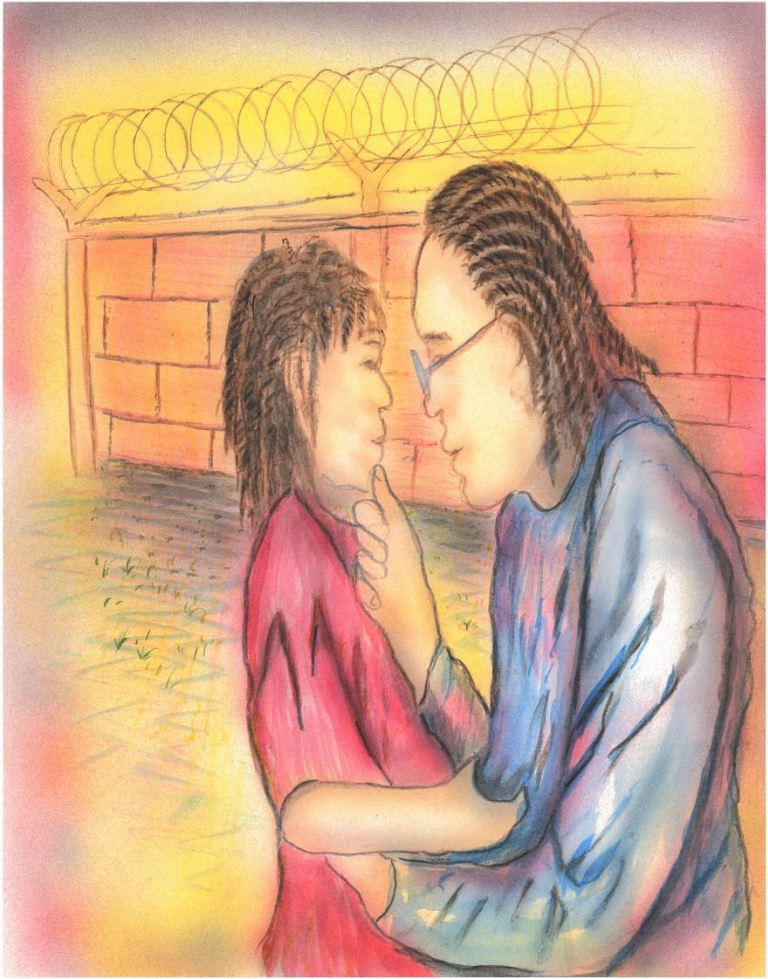
People in prison can only make collect calls. Prison telephones are limited to out-going calls only, which means an imprisoned parent will need to call the caregiver. Consider scheduling a time each week for an imprisoned parent to call and speak with his or her child(ren).

Calls are usually limited to 15 minutes. When a person in prison makes a call, the called party is notified that it is a collect call from a person at a state prison facility. The called party is given the option of accepting the call or refusing the call by hanging up.

Telephone communication access is provided by an outside vendor, Securus Technologies. Securus' Customer Service number is 1-800-844-6591 for individuals who need assistance with billing, receiving calls from people in prison, stopping unwanted calls, and/or requesting a block on future calls from an individual(s) in prison.

Caregivers must set up an account with Securus and provide their primary residence information. Calls to prepaid cell phones are not permitted.

Keep in mind that communication policies may vary based on the facility. Visit the DOC website at <https://doc.la.gov/> for more information on facility-specific policies.



## **Chapter 7: Visiting a Parent in Prison**

The decision to bring a child to visit a parent in prison is difficult. This decision depends on a variety of complicated factors, including a family's budget, transportation, the needs of the child, the preferences of the imprisoned parent, and the facility's policies and regulations.

For many children, communicating their parent can minimize or repair attachment disruptions, provide opportunities to talk about feelings in healthy ways, and help them cope with feelings of abandonment resulting from the separation.

However, **prisons are stressful environments, and it is important for caregivers to adequately prepare children.** Without proper preparation, visits can be negative experiences and create difficulties for children. Even when visiting environments are supportive of children's needs, children need time to learn to cope with the feelings which stem from the visit.

While not visiting is sometimes easier on the child's emotions in the short-term, distance and separation from one's parent may have negative effects in the long-term. For example, separation may leave children with overwhelming feelings of confusion, questions, and fear that could contribute to poor behavior in school and at home.

DOC has two types of in-person visits: contact and non-contact. Contact visits will likely be in a cafeteria setting. During contact visits, children and caregivers can touch the imprisoned parent in an appropriate manner, such as holding hands or a brief embrace. Visitors may be able to purchase food, sit at a table, or take pictures. Young children may be allowed to sit in their parent's lap.

Non-contact visits have a glass barrier separating the child and caregiver from the imprisoned parent. Children and caregivers cannot touch the imprisoned parent, but they can communicate with the imprisoned parent verbally. Children may become upset when they see their parent behind a barrier and when they are told they cannot touch the parent. Caregivers should ensure they adequately prepare children for non-contact visits.

For families who choose to allow children to participate in visits, caregivers and imprisoned parents can take numerous steps to ensure children have an experience as positive and stress-free as possible.

## A Child's First Visit

Before taking a child to visit a parent in prison, caregivers should try to visit the imprisoned parent once or twice alone. These individual visits can help caregivers provide children with important information, such as what the prison looks like, where the visit will take place, how long the visit will last, what the rules are, and other relevant details. Sharing information about what to expect during prison visits can help reduce the child's anxiety and stress.

The caregiver's initial visit may also help him or her assess the imprisoned parent's ability or willingness to focus on the child. If the imprisoned parent or child is not ready for a visit, then the caregiver should consider postponing the visit. Caregivers should create a plan to help the child work through his or her emotions as well. For example, caregivers and children can write in a journal or draw pictures about how they feel before or after a visit. These activities may make it easier for the child to express and share his or her feelings.

Children often have mixed emotions about visiting an imprisoned parent. Children may feel excitement, fear, worry, and/or concern. Depending on the length of time since the child last saw his/her parent, he/she may worry about recognizing the parent, how the parent may have changed, and if the parent still loves him/her.

To help reduce fears and uncertainty about visits, caregivers may explain the following to children:

- How you will get to the jail or prison;
- Security procedures that will occur (e.g. waiting in a line, going through a metal detector, experiencing a pat-down, *etc.*);
- What the imprisoned parent will be wearing and if the imprisoned parent's appearance changed;
- Layout of the visiting area;

- Behavior that is acceptable;
- Time limits of the visit;
- If food is available in the visiting room, and if so, the type of food; and
- The child will have to say goodbye and leave without his/her parent.

The child's first visit should be focused around the child and the child's needs. Both the caregiver and imprisoned parent's attention should be centered on the child for the full duration of the visit. Children may be less reluctant to visit the parent in the future if their first visiting experience is positive.

## Preparing for the Visit

Depending on the child's age and personality, caregivers may need to prepare children for visits differently. Some children will need weeks of discussions and explanations to prepare for the visit, whereas some children only need several days to prepare.

For example, children who need time to adjust to changes and new environments may require several weeks of preparation. On the other hand, children with very persistent and non-distractable temperaments may become anxious if the preparations begin too far in advance.

It is important for caregivers and imprisoned parents to set realistic expectations with children. When children's experiences match their expectations, they will feel less stress and anxiety.

## Tips for Caregivers

The following are tips **caregivers** can use to set realistic expectations for children:

- Tip 1.* If possible, visit the prison before bringing the child. Use this initial visit to gather information to answer the child's questions more accurately and reduce uncertainties.
- Tip 2.* Contact the imprisoned parent to advise him or her of the child's interests and potential topics to discuss or not to discuss during the visit.
- Tip 3.* Ask the imprisoned parent if his/her appearance has changed significantly so that you can inform the child.
- Tip 4.* Before the visit, check with the imprisoned parent to ensure you and the children are on the parent's approved visiting list.
- Tip 5.* Bring snacks in the car and feed children before you enter the facility. Leave uneaten snacks in the car because you are not allowed to bring food items into the facility.
- Tip 6.* Bring only enough change and cash money for food from vending machines, if applicable. Some facilities have meals, such as pizza, available to purchase which costs about \$10 - \$20 per person.
- Tip 7.* Arrive early. Ensure that you do not have prohibited items or contraband in your car or on your person. Check your pockets and children's pockets before you enter the facility, and leave anything questionable in your car. Also, ensure you have an acceptable photo ID to present at registration.

- Tip 8.* Since many visiting rooms and waiting areas may not have games to amuse children, think of imaginative ways to keep children engaged while waiting to visit and while visiting. Remember caregivers must supervise children at all times and are responsible for children's behavior.

## **Tips for Imprisoned Parents**

The following are tips **imprisoned parents** can use to set realistic expectations for children:

- Tip 1.* Before the visit, ensure the caregiver and children are on your approved visiting list.
- Tip 2.* Prepare the child for the visit in letters or through discussions over the phone. Write and talk about what the visiting rules are, what the visiting room looks like, what you will be wearing, *etc.*
- Tip 3.* Communicate with caregivers to help prepare them for the visit and answer their questions, especially if the caregiver is unable to visit without the child first.
- Tip 4.* Brainstorm imaginative ways to keep children entertained. Ask the caregiver about the child's new interests and different topics to discuss and not to discuss.

Although there are department-wide rules prisons must follow, each prison has facility-specific visiting rules and procedures as well. Visit DOC's website: <https://doc.la.gov/> in advance to see facility-specific information, such as visiting days and hours.



## During the Visit

Caregivers and imprisoned parents are responsible for supervising children and monitoring children's behavior throughout the entire visit. Some facilities may have "children's corners." Children's corners are spaces in visiting areas with games, books, and other child-friendly activities. However, caregivers and imprisoned parents should prepare other ways to entertain children in case these options are not available.

Imprisoned parents and caregivers should focus on keeping the visiting experience positive for children. Do not use the visiting time to discuss the child's poor behavior or grades. Imprisoned parents can use phone calls or letters to discuss these negative topics or to discipline children.

To create a more positive visiting experience for the child, **caregivers** and **imprisoned parents** should do the following:

- Tip 1. Start the conversation.** Starting the visit may be awkward, especially if the child does not visit often. The imprisoned parent or caregiver should be prepared to start the conversation.
- Tip 2. Develop a plan for if the child misbehaves.** Caregivers and imprisoned parents are responsible for keeping the child well-behaved. However, giving the child enough attention should reduce the likelihood of misbehavior.
- Tip 3. Stay positive.** Discuss topics such as similar interests; updates on family, friends, and pets; favorite music or sports teams; special events like holidays or birthdays; something the child discussed in a recent letter; *etc.*

**Tip 4. Continue any rituals or customs.** During the visit, imprisoned parents and children can perform any rituals or customs they had before the parent's imprisonment, such as doing a special handshake, saying a prayer or a rhyme, or singing a song. Parents and children can also create rituals or customs to perform at the beginning and/or end of each visit.

The end of a visit can be extremely difficult for children. **Caregivers** and **imprisoned parents** can do the following to make saying goodbye easier for children:

**Tip 1. 15 minutes before you plan to leave, notify children that the visit is ending soon.** This advance notification will allow children to prepare to say goodbye and take their time.

**Tip 2. Create a goodbye ritual.** Goodbye rituals are actions the imprisoned parent and child can do together. For example, the imprisoned parent or child can sing a song, perform a special handshake, say a rhyme or inspirational quote, *etc.* Goodbye rituals help create a routine for the child and may help ease the transition to leave.

**Tip 3. Allow the child to leave the visiting area before the parent returns to his or her unit or dorm.** It is usually easier to leave than to be left, if permitted.

## After the Visit

Visits evoke many emotions. After a visit, it is important for the caregiver and child to process these emotions and practice self-care.

Caregivers and children can practice meditation or breathing exercises to re-center themselves to a healthier mental state after the visit.

It is important to discuss both the positive and negative aspects of the visiting experience. Caregivers can ask children what they liked and didn't like about the visit, what was hard to say, and other questions to unpack the experience. If children do not want to share their feelings about the visit, caregivers can open up a space for the discussion by sharing their own feelings first.

Communicating effectively with children after visits helps prepare children, caregivers, and the imprisoned parents for the next visit. If children tell caregivers what they did not like about the visit, then caregivers can find ways to help children manage these issues in the future. If children do not want to talk about their feelings, give them a journal to draw or write about their emotions.

Several days after the visit, imprisoned parents can call or send a letter/email to the child. Imprisoned parents can follow up on any conversations they had with the child during visits to show they were listening to what the child was saying. Communication immediately following visits is a good opportunity for imprisoned parents to share things they liked about the visit as well and how much the visit meant to them.

## Special Visits and Escorted Absences

Under certain circumstances, wardens may allow imprisoned parents to receive special visits. Special visits are visits that occur at a different time or place than regularly scheduled visiting areas, have a longer duration than normal visits, take place with a person who is not on the imprisoned parent's approved visiting list, take place with a person who is otherwise not eligible to visit the imprisoned parent, or other abnormal situations, as outlined by the facility's policies.

Escorted absences occur when imprisoned people are allowed to leave institutional grounds with continuous security supervision. Hospital trips, bedside visits with dying family members, funeral of family members, speaking engagements, court appearances, religious services, and other special occasions may qualify for an escorted absence.

If imprisoned parents receive an escorted absence for a family funeral or other occasion in which their children will be present, then caregivers must adequately prepare children. Caregivers should tell children that the imprisoned parent will be wearing restraints and accompanied to the event by trip officers. Seeing the imprisoned parent in restraints may be upsetting to children. Children may benefit from speaking with a mental health care professional or people with lived experience before and after an imprisoned parent's escorted absence.

Not all imprisoned people are eligible for special visits and/or escorted absences. Additionally, even if a person is eligible for a special visit or escorted absence, that does not mean he or she will definitely be granted this privilege.

Keep in mind that special visit and escorted absence policies may vary based on the facility. Visit the DOC website at <https://doc.la.gov/> for more information on facility-specific policies.

## **When Children Do Not Want to Visit**

Children may not want to visit a parent for a variety of reasons. These reasons may include the child's age, prior negative visiting experiences, perception of prison, mood on a particular day, or other circumstances.

Caregivers should not force children to visit their imprisoned parent. However, it can be important for children to make initial visits with

imprisoned parents so they can have their questions answered, address emotional needs, and assure themselves of their parent's wellbeing.

If children are also avoiding speaking to the imprisoned parent over the phone, then the child and parent may have a larger problem with their relationship. The caregiver and other trusted adults who support the child should carefully assess the possibility that a child who strongly resists visiting and communicating with a parent may have been abused or neglected by the parent. The child also could have another fear or concern related to the parent that needs to be addressed in a professional setting.

If children are only resisting visits, this resistance may stem from negative visiting experiences in which the child feels ignored, bored, or reprimanded. Children also have busy lives and may have less time for their parents, imprisoned or not.

**In either scenario, a child's wishes not to visit an imprisoned parent should be respected, examined, and reassessed over time.**

Counselors, therapists, and other trained professionals can help children express their emotions and cope with their parent's imprisonment. These professionals can help caregivers decide whether visiting a parent in prison is in the best interest of the child as well.

# Visiting Rules & Regulations

Visiting people committed to the Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections is a privilege. Visits may be restricted, denied, or suspended if an imprisoned person and/or visitor does not follow the Department's visiting rules.

In addition to department-wide regulations, each institution has its own visiting rules and procedures. Please visit the Department's website: [www.doc.la.gov](http://www.doc.la.gov) for facility-specific information, such as each institution's address and phone number, directions, information regarding local transportation to the institution, and visiting days and hours.

The Department encourages and supports visitation for people on an imprisoned person's approved visiting list. The following guidelines help ensure a safe and secure visiting area while promoting a family atmosphere.

## 1) Visiting Application Process

In order to visit a person in prison, the visitor must be on the imprisoned person's approved visiting list. Imprisoned parents are responsible for initiating the visiting application process. He or she must send the caregiver the "Applications for Visiting Privileges" form to be completed for the caregiver and for his or her child/children.

After receiving the application in the mail, the caregiver must complete the application for himself or herself and for the child(ren). A caregiver must be the legal guardian of the child in order to complete the application on the child's behalf. Once completed, the caregiver should mail the applications back to the facility where the imprisoned parent is housed.

People in prison may have up to ten (10) visitors on their visiting list. They may add or delete visitors on this list. The Department does not count minor children under 18 toward the maximum number of approved visitors; however, the child(ren)'s names still must appear on the list in order to visit.

If a caregiver is unsure if he or she or a child are on an imprisoned parent's approved visiting list, the caregiver should contact the imprisoned parent directly. **Do not call the institution housing the imprisoned parent.**

## 2) Searches

All visitors, including minors, are subject to searches of their property, automobile, and person. These searches are conducted by trained staff in a professional manner that minimizes indignity to the visitor while still accomplishing the objective of the search.

Visitors also are subject to additional searches using metal detectors and ion scanning equipment. Specially trained search dogs (K-9s) may be used as a part of the search process both prior to a visitor entering the visiting area and in the visiting room during visits.

Any person who refuses to be searched at any time will not be allowed to enter the facility. A visit may be terminated if a visitor refuses to be searched, or if contraband or other prohibited property or items are found on the visitor or in the visitor's property.

If a visitor does not wish to be searched either by hand or by using other means, the visitor should not attempt to enter a DOC facility. However, if a visitor is pregnant or is receiving radiation treatment for medical conditions, then he or she may provide a doctor's note to avoid the scanner.

### 3) Prohibited Items and Contraband

Contraband is prohibited from being brought into the institution or stored anywhere on institutional grounds. Contraband includes:

- Any controlled substances;
- Any type of weapon, firearm, or any other item detrimental to the security of the facility;
- Alcoholic beverages or beverages which produce intoxicating effects;
- Explosives or combustibles, including matches and lighters;
- Stolen property;
- Marijuana, tobacco, and tobacco related items;
- Cameras, video and audio recording equipment, and electronic devices, including but not limited to cellular telephones, smart watches (e.g. apple watch), pagers, Blackberries, radios, tape recorders, *etc.*;
- Any currency or coin over the amount allowed at the institution. Money may be used to purchase items from the vending machines, but visitors are **NOT** allowed to give money to an imprisoned person;
- Any article of food, toiletries, or clothing, unless authorized by the Warden.

The introduction of contraband is a felony and punishable by a fine up to \$2,000 and imprisonment up to 5 years with or without hard labor. Personal possessions (wallet, purse, etc.) must be left in the visitor's locked vehicle for the duration of the visit.



#### 4) Items Allowed During Visits

Visitors **MUST** bring:

- **\*Valid form of Identification\***
  - Valid forms of identification include:
    - 1) A valid driver's license from the state of residence;
    - 2) A valid state photo identification card from the state of residence;
    - 3) A valid military photo identification card (active duty only); or
    - 4) A valid passport.

Visitors may bring the following items:

- Enough cash money for vending machines and/or concessions in the institution's visiting area
- Prescribed medication that is life-saving or life-sustaining, such as nitroglycerine pills, inhalers, oxygen, etc., is permitted. Medication is limited in quantity to no more than that required for the duration of the visit. Visitors must advise the staff at the visiting desk that they are in possession of such medication.

If the visitor has an infant child, the following items are permitted:

- Four (4) diapers,
- Two (2) jars of vacuum sealed baby food,
- One (1) plastic baby spoon,
- Two (2) plastic bottles of milk or juice,
- One (1) change of clothing,
- One (1) baby blanket (maximum width and length not to exceed 48 inches), and
- One (1) clear plastic bag of baby wipes.

These items, except the baby blanket, must be stored in a single clear plastic container (i.e., gallon size zip-lock bag.) All items are subject to search.

## 5) Visitor Identification and Registration upon Entry to Institution

Upon arrival, you will park and leave prohibited items and personal possessions (wallet, cell phone, purse, *etc.*) in your locked vehicle. You will then walk to the visiting processing center to register to visit. To register, you will need to provide your name, address, and relation to the imprisoned person.

All visitors over the age of eighteen (18) must have a valid form of picture identification with them.

## 6) Dress Code

Visitors must wear clothing that does not pose a threat to the security or maintenance of order at the facility. Visitors wearing improper clothing for visiting will not be allowed to visit. Visitors are **NOT** allowed to wear the following articles of clothing:

- Clothing similar to those worn by imprisoned people (blue chambray shirts, gray or white sweatshirts, solid white or solid gray t-shirts);
- Clothing similar to those worn by correctional officers (camouflage, blue battle dress uniforms);
- Clothing that exposes bare (or almost bare) shoulders, such as strapless tops or spaghetti straps;
- Sheer or transparent clothing, and clothing that exposes one's stomach, such as crop-tops;
- Overly tight clothing, such as yoga pants, spandex, *etc.*;
- Swimsuits, house slippers, or shower shoes (wearing no shoes is also prohibited, unless by a child who is being carried by an adult);
- Exposed undergarments or tops with no undergarments underneath;

- Anything with obscene or profane writing, images, or pictures; anything that might appear gang-related or be indicative of gang affiliation;
- Mini-skirts and cut-off pants;
- Hats or head coverings, except as required by religious beliefs; and
- Please note that skirts, shorts, dresses, etc. must be no shorter than one (1) inch above the kneecap and not have deep, revealing slits.

## **7) Special Rules when Visiting with a Minor Child**

Minor children may visit on any of the regular visiting days when accompanied by an adult visitor on the imprisoned person's approved visiting list. Both the minor child and the adult visitor accompanying the minor child must be visiting the same imprisoned person at the same time.

While on facility grounds, children under the age of 18 must be accompanied by their parent or legal guardian at all times. Caregivers must supervise children at all times. Children are not allowed to be left alone at any time while on facility grounds. Parents or legal guardians shall be responsible for the behavior of their children and a visit may be terminated if children become disruptive.

## **8) Contact between people in prison and visitors**

People in prison who are eligible or permitted contact visits may embrace (hug) and exchange a brief kiss with their visitor at the beginning and end of the visit. During the visit, the only contact permitted between imprisoned people and visitors is holding hands. Excessive displays of affection or sexual misconduct between people in prison and visitors is strictly prohibited.

Small children may be permitted to sit on the lap of the visitor or imprisoned person. Any improper contact between an imprisoned person and visitor shall be grounds for stopping the visit immediately.

Some people in prison are restricted to non-contact visits. In these cases, there shall be no physical contact or touching at all between the imprisoned person and visitors. Restroom breaks may be authorized, however, visitors will be subject to undergo the entire search process again.

### **9) Restrictions on visits with minors**

The following imprisoned people are ineligible to visit with any minor child, including their own biological minor child or minor step-child:

- Imprisoned people who have a current or prior conviction for a sex crime involving a minor child family member, or
- Imprisoned people who have a documented history of sex abuse with a minor child family member.

The following people convicted of sex offenses may be authorized to visit with their own biological minor child or minor step-child at the discretion of the Warden:

- Imprisoned people who have a current or prior conviction for a sex crime involving a minor child when the minor child is not a family member

The following people convicted of sex offenses may be authorized to visit with any minor child at the discretion of the Warden:

- Imprisoned people who have successfully completed or are participating satisfactorily in sex offender treatment. (Treatment staff who teach the sex offender treatment class shall be involved in the decision-making process for this type of visit.)

In some cases, the court may authorize visitation with an imprisoned parent. As part of such visitation order, the court will include restrictions, conditions, and safeguards as necessary to protect the mental and physical health of the child and minimize the risk of harm to the child.

## **10) Public transportation**

Some DOC facilities have public transportation available to the facility. Information is provided at the facility to the people in prison if public transportation is available. There may be a cost for use of this transportation and DOC does not endorse or claim any liability for the use of the transportation provider. The visitor may contact the person they wish to visit in prison to obtain specific information regarding any types of transportation that may be available to the facility where the person is housed.

## **Video Visitation Rules & Regulations**

In 2020, DOC began offering video visitation at all state prison facilities. Video visitation provides families and friends of imprisoned people with another alternative to in-person visits. During video visitation sessions, referred to as Video Connect sessions on JPay, families and friends can virtually connect with their imprisoned loved ones and see and speak to their loved one without physically visiting the prison facility.

To participate in video visitation, all of the people in the video frame must be on an imprisoned person's approved visiting list. Video visitors also must have a computer with a working web camera, microphone, and speakers. Computers must have quality, high-speed internet connection available for the duration of the Video Connect

session. Before the first Video Connect session, visitors should test their equipment via the JPay website at:

<https://www.jpayers.com/JVisitTestCamera.aspx>.

Visitors can join the video session up to 5 minutes before the scheduled start time of the Video Connect session. Any family member or friend participating in a Video Connect session must comply with the same dress code and behavior guidelines that the Department mandates for in-person visits. Visit the “Visitor Guidelines & Information” section of DOC’s website (<https://doc.la.gov/>) for more information on the appropriate dress code and behavior guidelines.

Visitors must schedule video sessions via [www.JPay.com](http://www.JPay.com) at least 24-hours in advance of the desired session. As of February 2021, each Video Connect session costs \$2.50 for 10 minutes. This fee is paid directly to JPay. Visitors may only have one (1) Video Connect session per day. However, there are no restrictions on the number of Video Connect sessions that a visitor may have each week or month.

If an issue occurs that does not allow for a complete visit, the visitor should call JPay’s 24-Hour Customer Support 1 (800) 574-JPAY (5729). If JPay is at fault for the issue, then the visitor may request a credit for the visit.

Keep in mind that communication policies may vary based on the facility. Visit the DOC website at <https://doc.la.gov/> for more information on facility-specific policies.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

As caregivers of children with parents in prison, you play an integral role in ensuring the children's well-being and ongoing relationship with their imprisoned parents. Not only are you essential to helping children communicate with imprisoned parents, but you also are a necessary support for children.

Although caregivers have little control over the parent's imprisonment, you do have control over the child's experience and the lessons the child will learn and remember from this experience. Being an effective parent and co-parent is difficult even without the barrier of imprisonment. Similar to all parents, you will make mistakes along the way; however, the most important thing is that children know they are loved and supported.

It is the Department's hope that with the tips and resources found in this handbook, caregivers and children with parents in prison can thrive amidst the challenges of this difficult time.

# Chapter 9: Resources

Caregivers may access the following resources to learn more about supporting children with parents in prison. This list is not exhaustive and parishes may have different local resources available to caregivers.

## Government Services

### **1. Family Independence Temporary Assistance Program (FITAP)**

FITAP provides temporary cash assistance to eligible low-income families who need assistance for children. To apply for benefits and for more information, call 1-888-LAHELP-U (1-888-524-3578) for assistance, or visit <http://www.dss.state.la.us/page/139> or the Louisiana Department of Children & Family Services website.

### **2. Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)**

While the funding is limited and demand is high, Louisiana does provide financial assistance for paying childcare bills. This is known as a free subsidy for day care needs because the state will pay a portion of your total costs. Many conditions need to be met by applicants, but in general the assistance from the government is for those that meet low income guidelines and who need help while they attend job training programs, school, or work.

Applications are accepted online. Interested applicants may visit a local Economic Stability parish office in Louisiana or call 1-888-524-3578 for additional details, including application sites. For more information, visit <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/early-childhood/child-care-assistance-program> or the Louisiana Department of Children & Family Services website.



### **3. Kinship Care Subsidy Program (KCSP)**

KCSP provides cash assistance for eligible children who reside with qualified relatives other than parents. Interested applicants may apply online or at any Economic Stability Parish office. For assistance, call 1-888-LAHELPU (1-888-524-3578).

For more information, visit <http://www.dss.state.la.us/page/138> or the Louisiana Department of Children & Family Services website.

## **Community Organizations**

### **1. Daughters Beyond Incarceration**

DBI serves girls with incarcerated parents and is located in New Orleans, Louisiana. DBI provides participants with a holistic program that offers self-awareness training, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) college tours, nutrition sessions, financial literacy classes, prison visits/father-daughter workshops, conflict resolution, beginners cooking classes, stress management, etiquette classes, setting goals, problem-solving, complying with rules, communicating effectively and practicing social skills to initialize a healthy stable life through education, mentorship, and support to gain effective life and leadership skills.

For more information, visit <https://www.dbinola.org/what-we-do>.

### **2. Catholic Charities – Cornerstone Kids Mentoring Program**

Cornerstone Builders provides free family bus rides to prisons through its Bus Project and mentorship to children whose parents are in prison or jail through its Cornerstone Kids Mentoring Program.

Cornerstone Kids is a mentoring program for children ages 4-18 who have at least one parent in prison or jail. This program relies on volunteers from the community to provide support and encouragement to the children. Mentors make a one-year commitment to develop a positive relationship with the mentee. Through one-on-one activities and group meetings, mentors provide support and encouragement that promotes trust, confidence, enthusiasm, personal growth, and positive thinking.

For more information, visit <https://www.ccano.org/cornerstone/>.

### **3. Youth Empowerment Project (YEP)**

YEP provides mentoring and youth advocacy, adult education and high school equivalency preparation, employment readiness and career exploration, and out-of-school time enrichment programming. As a community-based nonprofit, these programs have been developed in response to unmet community needs and are aligned with YEP's core purpose, which is to empower young people to improve their lives and the lives of others. YEP serves youth in the Greater New Orleans area.

For more information, visit:

<https://www.youthempowermentproject.org/about>

### **4. Mentoring Children of Promise (Southeast Louisiana)**

This program matches caring adults with youth who have a parent in prison. Mentors volunteer to give these young people extra acceptance, attention, encouragement, guidance, and hope. Volunteers of America understands the trauma of loss these children experience and the economic and social challenges that result from imprisonment.

For more information, call 504-836-8701 or visit

<https://www.voasela.org/mentoring-children-of-promise.>

## **5. BELOVED Community for Restorative Justice**

BELOVED Community: Victory is Ours Coalition is a school-based organization geared toward students who have been directly or indirectly affected by the criminal justice system (Incarcerated loved one or have been incarcerated themselves). This program offers them education about the restorative justice process and criminal justice reform while empowering them with the tools necessary to redirect the 'School to Prison Pipeline' in their personal lives.

BELOVED provides mentoring, counseling, help with school reintegration, academic assistance, personal care assistance, and family mentoring and mediation.

For more information, visit:

<https://sites.google.com/view/belovedcomjusticerestored/home>

## **6. Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC)**

Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) is a grassroots, state-wide, membership-based, and intergenerational organization working to transform the systems that put children at risk of prison. Through empowerment, leadership development, and training, FFLIC strives to keep children from going to prison and support those who have and their families.

For more information, visit: <https://www.ffmpeg.org/other-resources>

## **7. Capital Area United Way**

Capital Area United Way provides individuals and families with support in health, education, basic needs, and income stability. Capital Area United Way serves the following parishes: Pointe Coupee, West

Feliciana, East Feliciana, St. Helena, Livingston, Ascension, St. James, Iberville, West Baton Rouge, and East Baton Rouge.

For more information, visit: <https://www.cauw.org/mission>

## Books

You may ask your library to see if these titles are available. You also may purchase these titles from a bookstore in person or online:

### **1. Visiting Day**

- a. Author: Jacqueline Woodson
- b. Illustrator: James Ransome

### **2. The Night Dad Went to Jail: What to Expect When Someone You Love Goes to Jail**

- a. Author: Melissa Higgins
- b. Illustrator: Wednesday Kirwan

### **3. What is Jail Mommy?**

- a. Author: Jackie A. Stanglin
- b. Illustrator: Cierra Jade McGuckie

### **4. Families Change: A Book for Children Experiencing Termination of Parental Rights**

- b. Author: Julie Nelson
- c. Illustrator: Mary Gallagher

### **5. In My Family**

- a. Author: Sesame Street

Visit: [https://slol.libguides.com/ld.php?content\\_id=27555714](https://slol.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=27555714) to view this free printable e-book from Sesame Street.

## **6. New Hampshire Department of Corrections - The Family Connections Center List of Books for Children of Incarcerated Parents**

The New Hampshire Department of Corrections Family Connections Center compiled lists of books for children with parents in prison or jail, books for children who have witnessed trauma or experienced loss and grief, books for children who have been separated from one or both parents. Caregivers may access those lists at this link:

<https://www.nh.gov/nhdcc/fcc/books.html>.

# Chapter References

The purpose of this section is to recognize the resources used to write and illustrate each chapter and subchapter of this handbook.

Imprisoned people created all of the illustrations in this handbook. The following people contributed illustrations:

- Carlos Arias, cover illustration and Chapter 5
- Douglas Whitton, Chapter 1
- George Wright, Chapter 2, Chapter 7
- Bruce Zierhut, Chapter 3
- Ila Womack-Grey, Chapter 6
- Ricky Armentor, Chapter 4

Parts of the following chapters and subchapters were adapted from Volume I and Volume II of the *Stronger Together* handbooks from The Osborne Association of New York:

- Special Considerations and Exceptions
- Chapter 1: Chapter Introduction, Benefits for Children subchapter, and Benefits for Imprisoned Parents subchapter
- Chapter 3: Chapter Introduction, The Arrest subchapter, Pre-trial and During Trial subchapter, Sentencing subchapter, initial imprisonment subchapter, Parole subchapter, and Pre-Release and Reentry subchapter.
- Chapter 4: Common Coping Mechanisms subchapter and Tips to Help Children Cope subchapter.
- Chapter 6: Mailed Communication subchapter and Conversations over the Phone subchapter.
- Chapter 7: A Child's First Visit subchapter, Preparing for the Visit subchapter, During the Visit subchapter, After the Visit subchapter, and When Children Do Not Want to Visit subchapter
- Chapter 9: Conclusion

Pamphlets 102, 103, 107, 204, and 303 from the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library were adapted in the following chapter and subchapters:

- *CIPL 102: Why Maintain Relationships?*
  - Chapter 1: Chapter Introduction, Benefits for Children subchapter, and Benefits for Imprisoned Parents subchapter.
- *CIPL 103: Conversations: Questions Children Ask*
  - Chapter 5: Chapter Introduction, “Where are you?” subchapter, “Why are you in prison/jail?” subchapter, “When are you coming home?” subchapter, “Are you okay?” subchapter, and “Do you blame me? & Do you still love me?” subchapter
- *CIPL 105: Visiting Mom or Dad - The Child’s Perspective*
  - Chapter 7: A Child’s First Visit subchapter, Preparing for the Visit subchapter, During the Visit subchapter, and After the Visit subchapter.
- *CIPL 107: Communication Tips for the Incarcerated and Their Families*
  - Chapter 2: Parenting subsection
  - Chapter 6: Mailed Communication subchapter and Conversations over the Phone subchapter.
- *CIPL 204: Tips for Caregivers – from Caregivers*
  - Chapter 4: Tips to Help Children Cope subchapter
- *CIPL 303: Common Stress Points*
  - Chapter 3: Chapter Introduction, The Arrest subchapter, Pre-trial and During Trial subchapter, Sentencing subchapter, initial imprisonment subchapter, and Pre-Release and Reentry subchapter.

The following chapters and subchapters used language recommended by Ann Adalist-Estrin from the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library:

- Chapter 2: Self Care subchapter

- Chapter 3: Pre-Trial and During Trial subchapter
- Chapter 5: Other Difficult Conversations subchapter

Parts of the following chapters and subchapters were adapted from *Reaching Beyond Bars: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin and their Families* written by the Correctional Education Association – Wisconsin (CEA-Wisconsin):

- Introduction
- Chapter 1: Benefits for Children subchapter and Benefits for Imprisoned Parents subchapter
- Chapter 2: chapter introduction, Co-Parenting subchapter, Communication Tips subchapter, and Self-Care subchapter
- Chapter 3: The Arrest subchapter
- Chapter 4: Tips to Help Children Cope subchapter
- Chapter 5: “When are you coming home?” subchapter
- Chapter 6: Mailed Communication subchapter, Sample Letters section, Conversations over the Phone subchapter
- Chapter 7: Chapter Introduction, A Child’s First Visit subchapter, During the Visit subchapter

For more information on any of the materials used to create this handbook, please see the following citations:

- Adalist-Estrin, A. (2014). CIPL 102 Why Maintain Relationships? *Children of Incarcerated Parents Library*. Retrieved from, <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/cipl102-whymaintainrelationships.pdf>.
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