

Parenting From Prison

Despite the large number of families separated due to incarceration, the majority of parents who are incarcerated are able eventually to reunite with their children.

Even though there are challenges in continuing your role as a parent, it is very important both for you and your children. Both mothers and fathers play very important roles in their children's development of a sense of identity, security, and belonging which will affect them throughout their lives.

The major concerns for most parents who are incarcerated are:

- 1) dealing with the emotions of being separated from their children,
- 2) making decisions regarding the placement and care of their children,
- 3) maintaining contact with their children during their incarceration, and
- (4) reuniting with their children once they are released from prison.

Parenting from prison isn't easy. However, it is possible to play an active role in your children's lives. Unfortunately, many parents in prison lose contact with their children. This does not have to happen.

To avoid losing contact with your children, it will take effort on your part, the part of the children's caregiver, and maybe even the court.

You will probably get frustrated or feel overwhelmed at times. Communicating with state agencies, courts, your children, or their caregiver can be very difficult, especially from prison. Some family relationships may be strained. Transportation problems may prevent you from having regular visits with your children. Sometimes, it may feel like it is impossible to stay in touch with your children.

All of these challenges are real and must be overcome. It will require patience, creativity, and persistence on your part. Always remember that being a parent is the most challenging and rewarding job you'll ever have.

You, your children, and the person who is taking care of your children are all affected by your incarceration. This section offers information on how you can deal with your own feelings around being separated from your children so that you can parent most effectively.

This section will also help you understand how your incarceration affects your children and how to establish a working relationship with the person who is taking care of your children during your incarceration. It also offers some practical suggestions on what you can do to make the most of this difficult situation.

Being a Parent Who is Incarcerated

How does being in prison change how I parent?

Being physically separated will obviously limit your ability to parent in the same way as you did before you were incarcerated. Even though you are still a parent, you will probably not be handling many of the day-to-day decisions and activities normally involved with raising children, including providing for their daily needs and even discipline. This change may leave you with a sense of loss and confusion, especially if you were living with your children before you went to prison.

Even though you may not be involved in the day-to-day care of your children, you can still provide them with emotional support and guidance that is very important to them.

You may also be actively involved in making important decisions regarding their lives, including who you want to take care of them

while you are away. For both you and your children, it is important to understand that you can still be an active and caring parent, even though you are in prison. It is also important for you to understand that your children are coping with a lot, too, and they will need time and support to adjust to someone else providing for their daily needs.

What if I didn't have much contact with my children prior to my incarceration? Is it too late to try and establish a relationship with my children now that I'm in prison?

Even if you didn't have much or any contact with your children prior to your incarceration, it is never too late to try and have a relationship with your children. As one father put it, going to prison caused his "priorities to change" greatly. However, trying to start a relationship with your children after you are in prison may be complicated and may require you to take several smaller steps rather than just one big leap.

Before you take any steps to make contact with your children, it is important that you really think about the commitment you can make to your children and what you are willing to do on a consistent basis. It is very hard on children to have a parent drop in and out of their lives.

Once you have decided that you really want to see if starting a relationship with your children is possible, the next thing you will need to consider is what steps you might need to take. Unless you've been ordered by a court not to have any contact with your children or their other parent (or caregiver), you might consider writing a letter to the children's caregiver and see if they are open to the idea of you trying to establish a relationship with your children.

If you had a pretty good relationship with the other parent or caregiver, they may be willing to help you establish a relationship with your children. If you don't have a very good relationship with your children's other parent or caregiver, you may need to try and resolve some of the issues between the two of you before you can move forward with establishing a relationship with your children. It's important to remember that building any relationship takes time and trust. You might need to move forward slowly and gently. Hopefully, you and the children's other parent or caregiver will try and work together to find out what's best for your children, even if you are unable to resolve all of the problems between the two of you.

If the other parent refuses to allow you to have any contact with your children, you may need to go to court and ask for visitation or other contact with your children. This is more fully discussed on page 29 ("Allocation of Parental Responsibilities").

What can I do to emotionally cope with being separated from my children?

How well you deal with your incarceration will have a direct influence on how well your children cope.

You may have feelings of regret, loss, depression, guilt, anxiety, or helplessness because you are separated from your children. You may also be afraid of being rejected by your children or resentful that your children are bonding to someone else while you are in prison. You may also feel angry that you are in prison or feel that you were treated unfairly by the criminal justice system. Because your reactions will affect your children, it is important that you start with yourself and try to deal with these emotions so that you can best help your children in their adjustment.

The following are some things you can do to help you deal with your separation from your children:

- **Acknowledge your feelings.** It is okay to express your feelings whether you have contact with your children or not. If you deny your feelings, you may just shut down and not be able to be there for your children.
- You may want to **write down your thoughts and feelings** on a regular basis in a journal.
- **Make a list of your personal strengths** and how you have survived so far.
- **Talk with other parents who are incarcerated about their experiences.** They may feel the same way or have a different perspective that might help you.
- **Create and use your support system** of family, friends, or a spiritual counselor. It is OK to reach out to others for help.
- **Learn as much as you can about child development and parenting** from books in the prison library or through parenting programs offered at the prison.
- **Set realistic goals for yourself** about what you can do to be involved in your children's lives and do those things.
- **Try to find ways to reduce your stress** whenever possible. Regular exercise, prayer, or meditation may help.
- **Be patient with yourself, your children, and their caregiver.** You are all going through a stressful time.

One incarcerated mother said, "I shut all my feelings up ... I didn't want to get attached. The first time I held my daughter she was 9 months old."

Although it can be very difficult and painful, trying to work through some of these feelings might help you adjust better, which will strengthen your ability to help your children adjust.

As one incarcerated mother said, "It's OK to express your feelings about being away from your kids." Another said, "It made me feel better to know everyone else was feeling like I did [about missing my kids]."

Even as you work through some of these feelings, it is important that you are careful about sharing all of your emotions with your children. Although it is very important to be honest with your children and to explain how you are feeling to them, remember that children will take your feelings personally. So, if you are angry and express that in front of your children, even if you aren't angry with your children, they will think you are mad at them. Also, if you are really sad when you are with your children, it may make them feel helpless and overwhelmed.

It is OK for you to be angry, sad, or depressed, but it is better to use your support system to help you deal with your feelings—not your children. They can't handle all their stress and your stress, too.

Remember that your children are affected by what you say *and* how you say it. Try to prepare yourself before a visit or phone call with your children. If you are upset right before a visit with your children, take a few moments to prepare yourself. Taking a few deep breaths or counting to ten may help you get in a better frame of mind to be around your children.

Maintaining a Relationship with Your Child.

What are some of the factors that may affect how my children react to my incarceration?

The way your children may react to your incarceration is based on a number of complicated factors. Each child is different and will react differently. Their feelings and behaviors may also change over time.

Some of the factors that may influence their reactions include:

- Their age
- Their relationship to you prior to your incarceration
- Whether they were living with you prior to your incarceration
- The length of your prison sentence,
- Their feelings about the crime for which you were convicted
- Their relationship to their current caregiver and the stability of their current homelife
- Whether they are separated from their brothers or sisters
- Whether older children are taking responsibility for caring for younger brothers or sisters
- How other people treat them because you are in prison
- The amount and quality of contact you have with them while you are in prison

Incarceration of a parent, like other forms of separation (divorce or military service), can be a very traumatic experience for a child.

You, your children, and their caregiver will have to adjust to changes in your relationship in three major phases:

- 1) the initial separation at the time of your arrest and the resulting loss of contact between you and your children,
- 2) the enduring or ongoing separation between you and your children during your period of incarceration, and
- 3) the reunification period upon your release.

How are children affected by having a parent in prison?

This is a very difficult question. Although every child and every situation is different, studies have found that children separated from a parent due to incarceration have some common emotional and behavioral reactions.

Emotional reactions: (common feelings children may have)

- Sadness, grief, low self-esteem, loneliness, or depression because of being separated from you or feeling rejected because you went away. Children, especially younger children, may believe they did something wrong to make you go away or that you went away because there is something wrong with them.
- Confusion or feeling helpless because they don't understand what has happened or don't know how to change it to make it better
- Fear, worry, anxiety about your safety and their safety
- Anger at you, "the system," and/or their caregiver for being separated from you
- Guilt because children may think that they did something to make you go away
- Difficulties in trusting people or fear of getting close to people

- Expectation of being rejected in other relationships
- Shame or embarrassment if other people make fun of them for having a parent in prison or otherwise speak badly of you

Behavioral reactions: (how children may act)

- May withdraw from friends and family
- May have problems sleeping or have bad dreams
- May have problems in school, including: difficulty concentrating, lower grades, missing classes, dropping out of school, becoming disruptive in school, or getting into fights
- May start making up stories or not telling the truth
- May abuse drugs or alcohol
- May get in trouble with the law
- May have developmental problems (for example, have trouble learning language skills)
- May “regress” and start acting younger than their age (for example, wetting the bed, clinging)
- May have difficulties bonding to their own children later in life

In addition to coping with the separation from you, children may also have to deal with the stress of adjusting to someone new taking care of them, living in a new house, going to a new school, and/or meeting new friends. Also, most children experience what is called “enduring trauma” due to the ongoing period of separation caused by incarceration.

What are the most important things that I can do to help my children adjust to having a parent in prison?

All parents and children have strengths and ways of getting through separation due to incarceration. Things that you can do to help your children the most are:

- Make sure your children have a stable living arrangement while you are in prison
- If possible, keep your children together in one home during your incarceration
- Choose a good caregiver to take care of your children while you are in prison
- Make sure your children have enough emotional support from family, friends, teachers, and others
- Have consistent and frequent communication and contact with your children while you are in prison

The most important messages you can tell your children over and over while you are in prison is that you love them, that you are OK, and that they are going to be taken care of.

How do I talk to my children about being in prison? What do I tell them?

As one incarcerated father said, “The main thing is that line of communication—you got to keep it open.”

Your children will probably have many questions. Some of the questions you may need to be prepared to answer include:

- “What is going on?”
- “Why did you go away?”
- “Where will I live?”
- “Is it my fault you went away?”
- “Who will take care of me?”
- “When will I see you again?”

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What can I do to help my children adjust during my incarceration?

When first incarcerated

- Reassure them about your safety and well being. Tell them about your day, and describe where you live. If children have some idea about what your life is like, it might help calm their fears about your safety.
- Answer any questions your children may have. Reassure them that they are OK and that they will be well cared for. Depending on the age of your children, you might want to discuss how long you will be in prison.
- Help make arrangements or know where your children are going to live while you are in prison.
- Talk with your children about how often you can call, write, or visit with them so they know what to expect. Above all else, be as consistent as possible.
- Know the hours and regulations for visitation so that you help the caregiver make arrangements for visits, if possible.

During your incarceration

- Find out as much as you can about your children's day-to-day life, including how they are doing at school (you can ask either the teacher or the caregiver to mail you copies of report cards), who their friends are, and what activities they are involved in. That way, you'll have things to talk about either during visits or through letters and telephone calls. This will also help you feel more connected to what is going on in their lives. Let them know you are still a part of their lives.
- Have regular and consistent contact with your children through visits, phone calls and letters. Tell your children often that you love them and how important they are to you.
- Have close contact with your children's caregiver to see if they need your assistance with anything regarding your children.
- Find out if the prison offers any special programs for parents (if the prison has a program where you can read a book to your children into a tape recorder and send the tape to your children; or if the prison has games in the visiting room.) If the prison doesn't, you might talk to officials to see if it's possible to start a program.
- Seek outside support for your children if you think they need it from teachers, spiritual counselors, or community programs.

During visits

- Be creative with your children. Play games, tell stories, read books, or draw pictures. Before the visit, plan activities - it can make the visits more fun.
- Tell your children that you love them and talk about what's going on in their lives. Consider following up the visit with a letter or phone call to thank them for coming for a visit and to follow-up with anything you talked about during the visit. For example, "Let me know how your test goes on Monday."
- Encourage your children to discuss their feelings with you – both good and bad. They look to you for understanding and guidance. Be a good listener.
- Above all, be patient! This is a difficult situation for everyone involved. Children have good days and bad days, too. Not all visits are going to go well. It doesn't mean that your children don't love you or that you shouldn't have future visits.

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“What do I do if people say mean things to me?”

“When will things be normal again?”

“What if something bad happens, and you’re not here to help?”

“Are you safe?”

Some questions are easier to answer than others. One of the hardest questions to hear and to answer will probably be, “When are you coming home?”

Your answers to these questions, and other questions your children may have, will depend mostly on their age. As your children get older, they may ask you more complex questions or want more detailed information. Be prepared to discuss and answer questions about your incarceration and any concerns your children may have. It’s important to remember that their fears are real. Uncertainty causes a lot of stress for children.

Try to provide them with answers that they can understand. After talking to your children, you might want to ask them whether they understood what you said. One way to see if your children understand what you are saying is to ask them to repeat what you said, using their own words.

Children of all ages will sometimes have difficulties in talking about their feelings. They may be confused about their feelings or may not know how to express how they feel. It’s important to remember that your children are trying to cope with a lot, too. Their emotions are real for them - even if they may not make sense to you.

Remember to listen to your children closely. If you don’t understand what they are trying to say to you, you can always ask them questions. In addition to listening to your children, it is important to **watch what they are doing**. If

you ask them how they are, and they say they are doing “fine,” but they are skipping school, getting into fights, using drugs or alcohol, or withdrawing from their family and friends, you can tell they aren’t “fine.” You may want to talk to them, their caregiver, or others close to them to find out what you can do to help them.

Although every child matures at his or her own pace, the following examples may help you figure out how to talk to your children and answer questions they may have.

For younger children (5 years old and under)

At this age, children will probably be most concerned about where you are, when they will see you again, and when you are coming home.

This is how one family answered the questions of a young child whose father will be in prison for a very long time:

The child asked her grandmother, “Where is my Daddy?” The grandmother told her, “Your Daddy lives far away in a big house with lots of friends.” When the child asked, “When is Daddy coming home?,” the grandmother told her, “Daddy has to live there for a long time, but don’t worry, you’ll be here with me. He can’t come visit us, but we will go visit him.”

Try to use words that your children can relate to and understand. For example, one incarcerated father told his young child that, “Daddy is in grown-up time-out.” This child was too young to understand what a prison is, but since they used “time out” as a way to discipline the child, the child could relate to those words. One incarcerated mother whose child lives in another state told her child that she was away at school and couldn’t come home for a while. Another mother who is incarcerated told her son that she had to go away because, “Mommy hurt someone.”

At this age, children don't generally understand what a prison is, or why someone is sent to prison, or even what "time" is. You want to answer your children's questions, but you don't have to give them details they won't understand. You can give them more information as they get older and mature. As a general rule, you can tell that your children are ready for more detailed information when they start to ask you more complicated questions.

Children in elementary school (6-10 years old).

At this age, children may begin to want more information and start to ask more questions. From about 7-8 years old, children are beginning to develop a sense of right and wrong. Children may begin to understand what a prison is and that people are sent to prison because they did something wrong.

If your child asks you why are you in prison, you could tell them, "Mommy did something wrong and can't come home for a while." One incarcerated father told his child, "Daddy made a mistake and has to pay for that mistake."

Children at this age are also starting to have an understanding of what time is, so if your child wants to know when you are coming home, you can answer that question more specifically, if you know. It will help them understand how long you will be apart if you relate it to something in their lives. If you just say, "Daddy is coming home in ___ years," they may not understand that as easily as if you said, "Daddy will be home when you are in ___ grade or when you will be ___ years old." Again, the important thing to remember is to use words that your children can understand and relate to in their own lives.

Your children may be asked questions or teased by other children because you are in prison. Talking about this issue with your

children in advance may help prepare them if they are faced with questions they may not know how to answer. You could ask your child, "Do people ever ask where your Daddy is?" If the child says, "yes," you can ask them, "What did you say?" If your child says, "no," you could ask them, "If someone asks you where your Daddy is, what would you say?"

By asking some questions and finding out what's going on in your children's lives, you can help prepare your children so that they feel comfortable about what they say to other people or friends. It's common in elementary school for teachers to schedule "parents day" events where children share information with other students about what their mother or father does for a living.

Talking with your children ahead of time can help them prepare for these types of situations which otherwise might be awkward or uncomfortable for them. For example, one incarcerated father works in the kitchen at the prison. When his daughter is asked what kind of work her father does, she tells people that he is a cook.

Special Considerations in Parenting Teenagers While Incarcerated

Research shows that 40 percent of teenagers who have an incarcerated parent visit them less frequently during their teenage years. Although this can be understood as "normal" teenage behavior, it makes parenting a teenager from prison a little more challenging.

During the teenage years, children are developing a sense of their own identity (separate from their parents) and becoming more independent. Although teenagers need parental guidance and structure, being more independent is normal and a part of healthy development. Even if you were living at home with your teenager, you would probably be

seeing less of him or her because they want to spend more time with their friends. Looking at the situation this way may help you if your teenager seems less interested in having the same kind and level of contact with you when they he or she were younger.

As a parent, finding the balance between letting your teenager have enough freedom to mature but having enough rules to protect them is quite a challenge, especially since you are in prison. With teenagers, it is particularly important to let them know what your expectations of them are. For example, if it is important to you that your teenage graduate from high school - you need to let them know that and encourage them in this goal. If you have rules around curfew, drug or alcohol use, or sexual activity, you need to have a serious conversation with your teenager.

The challenge for all parents who have teenage children is to figure out how to enforce the rules. Since you are incarcerated, the rules will need to be enforced primarily by the children's caregiver. You can play a very important role in supporting the caregiver so that the children are getting the same message from you and the caregiver.

The teenage years can be a turbulent time. Creating a sense of identity, self-esteem, and preparing for adulthood can be very stressful, and teenagers can make mistakes or poor decisions that can affect the rest of their lives. Having significant attachments with adults in their life and having consistency in their living arrangement will be the two major factors contributing to their successful adjustment.

Early teenage years (11-14 years old).

During the early teenage years, teenagers are entering puberty and are developing a sense of their own identity. In doing so, they want more control of their lives and will start testing limits

and boundaries. They are becoming more emotionally aware, are beginning to think about life goals and are starting to want to spend more time in group activities with their friends.

Sometimes they will act very dependent on you (more like they did when they were younger) and sometimes they will try to be very independent of you and even seem like they are pushing you away. This is normal. The most important thing you can do at this time is to talk with them and make sure the lines of communication stay open. This will be a challenge. At this age, you can probably talk pretty straight with them in answering their questions. You'll know that they are ready to handle more details by the questions they ask. The most important thing is to let them know that they can ask you any question.

Throughout their teenage years, your children's friends will be very influential in their lives - sometimes even more influential than the adults in their lives. It's important to always know who their friends are and what they do when they are together.

Later teenage years (15-18 years old).

During the later teenage years, children are developing a deeper sense of their own identity, want more independence, have more mature problem-solving abilities, are exploring sexuality and relationships with others, are more sensitive to being "different," and are thinking more seriously about their future and life goals. It is a great time to encourage your teenager to be thinking about their future and what they hope to accomplish.

It's very important for teenagers to have goals that they help to create. Teenagers that don't have a sense of a future or goals can easily feel lost. Teenagers who feel lost or feel that they don't have a future can easily get into deep trouble in school, at home, or with the law.

Sadly, many teenagers today don't have a sense of hope for their future.

As their parent, there are two primary areas where you can have the greatest influence in their lives:

- Encourage them to have hope and self-esteem; let them know they are important people to you, their family, and the wider community; and,
- Help guide and support them in developing goals and life skills they will need in their adult lives.

Your teenager may be getting their first job and need guidance on how to spend and save the money they earn. They may be preparing to live on their own in the near future. Learning how to get a job, how to manage money and pay bills, how to find an apartment, how to be in a healthy relationship, how to solve problems—all of these are important life skills they need to learn as they prepare to live on their own.

Staying in contact with your teenager is the most important thing you can do. As one mother in prison said, "Talk, ask questions, and listen, listen, listen to your teenagers." If you think your teenager is having problems, don't ignore them. Try to think of ways you can get extra support for them from other family members, the school, churches, or other community groups (like Big Brothers/Big Sisters). It is healthy for teenagers to pull away from their parents - it doesn't mean that other adults can't play important roles in their lives.

Being a teenager is a lot like being on a rollercoaster and their moods and attitudes can change a lot from month to month, week to week, day to day, or hour by hour. This is normal, even though it is probably one of the most frustrating and confusing things about trying to parent a teenager. One week they are

angels - the next week they will test your last nerve. Try to be patient and understanding. It will help if you can stay grounded. Just because they are on a rollercoaster doesn't mean you have to be on one, too.

All children, but especially teenagers, are particularly sensitive to criticism. Although it is important to talk to your teenagers about mistakes you think they are making, it is also very important that you be positive and encouraging with your teenagers. Tell them you love them and compliment them on their accomplishments. Even though you might think that your teenagers don't care what you think - they do. They especially care about what you think of them.

What can I do to make sure my children are getting the help they need?

One of the most important things you can do as a parent while you are incarcerated is to make sure that your children's needs are being met. There is an African saying that, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." Try and be as active a parent as possible, but don't be afraid to ask for help from others if you think it will help your children. Because you are in prison, there are some limitations on what you can do yourself. That doesn't mean that there is nothing you can do. For example,

- If you think your children are having problems in school, don't be afraid to write or call your child's teacher or school counselor to see what can be done to address the problem.
- If you think your children are having some emotional difficulties, you could try and find a therapist you trust to counsel them.

One mother in prison said that the best thing she did was to get counseling for her child. You may ask your relatives or friends

to be a little more involved in their lives so that your children have a strong support network.

- If your children are having medical problems or don't have medical insurance, you can see if they would qualify for health insurance under Medicaid so that they can see a doctor (see page 35).
- If your child expresses an interest in an activity (music, sports, computers, etc.), see if you can find an after-school program in their neighborhood.
- It is very important to have a good working relationship with the children's caregiver so that you can work together as a team.

The best thing you can do is be an active parent. Because you are in prison, this may require creativity and patience on your part. Not only will your efforts help meet your children's needs, they will also help you be well informed about your children so that you are better prepared to meet their needs when you are released.

What can I do While in prison that would help me be a better parent?

Many prisons offer parenting classes. Some prison libraries may also have reading materials available on child development and parenting. Educating yourself and strengthening your parenting skills can only help you and your children. It's important to remember that anything you do to help yourself also helps you be a better parent. Many prisons offer GED, alcohol/drug treatment, anger management, or job training that might help you build your skills so that you are better prepared to care for the needs of your children once you are released from prison.

Also, some prisons have more child-friendly visiting rooms at the prison than others. If the prison you are in does not have a special visiting area for children with games and books available, ask the Warden if it would be possible to create one.

If you are artistic, offer to paint a mural on the visiting room wall that would be cheerful for children. Having a child-friendly environment for visiting can help make your children feel more comfortable and make the visits more fun. If you have ideas for other programs that would help parents in prison, talk with prison officials to see if it would be possible to start a new program.

How important is visitation with my children while I am incarcerated?

Some people believe it is too traumatic for children to visit with a parent who is in prison.

Research shows, however, that most children benefit from contact with their parent even if it occurs in a prison.

It has also been found that the sooner children can have contact with their parent following a separation, the better. Although visiting a parent in prison can be emotional for children, the long-term benefits usually outweigh the difficulties. The first visit is usually the hardest, and visits with your children usually become easier when they are as regular and as frequent as possible.

It may be helpful to prepare your children for the visit through letters or phone calls so they will know what to expect. For example, you can let your children know what the visiting room is like, what activities you can do together, and how long of a visit you can have. It is also important for you to let the caregiver know of the prison rules regarding visitation, like dress codes, so you don't have problems with the visit.

Suggestions for Making the Most of Visits

Infants & Toddlers (0 - 3 Years Old)

Play Peek-a-boo, patty cake, talk; hold and cuddle them (if allowed)

Draw pictures, count with them, play the face game. Example: happy face, sad face, surprise, etc.

Tell them a story.

Tell them you love them.

Preschoolers & Kindergarten (4 - 6 Years Old)

Draw pictures for your children to color.

Make up short stories using their names as the main character.

Recite poems and nursery rhymes.

Have them practice their numbers and the alphabet.

Read them a story.

Talk about favorite things you've shared with them.

Listen, Listen, Listen, Listen.

Tell them you love them.

School Age (7 - 10 Years Old)

Make up word puzzles.

Develop ongoing games and stories for both you and your children to participate in.

Play cards, dominoes, Legos, read books, use material available at the prison.

Draw pictures, and encourage your children to do the same.

Listen, Listen, Listen, Listen.

Tell them you love them.

Early Teenage Years (11 - 14 Years Old)

Talk with them. Communication is one of the most important things you have to offer.

Ask them about what's going on in their life. (School, friends, activities)

Ask how they are feeling, what you can do to help support them, especially if they help care for younger siblings.

Participate in games, cards, whatever is furnished by your facility.

Listen, Listen, Listen, Listen.

Tell them you love them.

Later Teenage Years (15 - 18 Years Old)

Ask about how they are doing in school and any plans for college

Talk with them about their future plans for work, living on their own, and other "real life" issues, like drugs or alcohol and relationships

If possible, you might try and visit with your teenager alone so that you have some time to talk privately with them.

Listen, Listen, Listen, Listen.

Tell them you love them.

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Obviously, visits allow you and your children to be together, which is very important. In addition to providing closer contact and fuller communication, visits can also make the separation a little easier on you and your children. Frequent, consistent, and quality contact with an incarcerated parent has also been shown to help families successfully reunite after a parent is released.

What can I do if my children are not able to visit me very often?

Even if you aren't able to have regular visits with your children, there are still lots of things you can do to make your interaction together more fun. One father in prison draws a picture that he sends to his daughter so that she can color it and send it back to him. Another father and his daughter write a children's story together. You could write part of it and send it to your child to write some more. This could go back and forth until the story is done. Then you could start another story. You can also do crossword puzzles together by mail - where you do part and then your child does part. With some creativity, there are lots of ways to have fun with your children.

What if my children have difficulties during or after a visit?

It is normal for children to have emotional and/or behavioral reactions during or following a visit. This is most often due to the difficulty in reconnecting and then separating again. It is very similar to what children experience when custody is shared between parents who are divorced.

If you are having a visit with your children and they won't talk to you or seem withdrawn, don't push it. You can continue to have a visit with the adult who is there with them and create an opportunity for your children to join the conversation. Don't take it personally if your children are showing some strain during the

visit. Your children probably aren't rejecting you; they are just trying to manage their feelings the best way they know how. Be patient - your children are stressed out, too. If your children are having a really tough time with the visit, you may want to cut it short. Adults have bad days, and children have bad days, too. Try to be flexible and adaptable.

If your children get really upset when it is time to end a visit, the best thing you can do is tell the children that you love them, that you will see them again, and go ahead and leave. Let the caregiver take care of comforting your child at that point. Try to stay calm, and don't prolong the process. If your child is really upset, you could call or write later that night to say you love him or her and see if he or she wants to talk about it. It's OK if they don't want to talk about it. They may in time.

What are the legal reasons I should have regular visits with my children?

Visits are very important for legal reasons. If you do everything possible to keep up regular contact, including asking for visits with your children, you reduce the chances of losing custody of your children permanently. Child welfare authorities consider parent-child visitation as one of the most important indicators of parental interest in a child. Courts consider regular visits as one factor in evaluating your ongoing relationship with your children and whether it is in their best interest to be with you.

Should I keep records of my contact with my children?

If you are involved in a legal case involving custody of your children, you should keep a written record or log of the type and frequency of contact you have with your children. You may need this evidence in court. Having a record might also help you later when you are

released from prison and need to show a court that you are ready to take care of your children or have contact with your children. Write down a list of all visits, letters, and phone calls. Be sure to note the date and any other important information. See page 81 for an example.

What can I do if the caregiver will not, or cannot, bring my children for a visit?

Consider the reasons the caregiver gives for not being able to bring the children for a visit, such as not having the time, money, or transportation to the prison. Be both patient and persistent in finding ways to make the visitation possible. You may want to contact family, friends, or community groups to see if they can assist the children's caregiver in making visits with you possible. See page 76 in the resource section for groups that help with transportation.

If you can't work something out with the caregiver, you may also need to consider filing a "Motion for Allocation of Parental Responsibilities" to ask a judge to order that you have visits or telephone calls with your children. See page 29 for more information on Allocation of Parental Responsibilities cases.

If you are currently involved in **any** type of case involving your children (allocation of parental rights; divorce; Dependency & Neglect; paternity), you can request any time the judge orders visits with your children. (See sample letter on page 55. However, a judge is not likely to order visits if it is a hardship for the caregiver. In that situation, you can increase your chances that the court will order visits if you can make arrangements for someone else to transport the children.

Even if you aren't able to have visits with your children, don't forget that you can always stay in contact with your children through regular telephone calls and letters.

Building a Relationship with the Caregiver for your Children

While you are incarcerated, your children need someone else to care for them. This may be their other parent, a relative, or a foster family. It is important that you make an effort to build a good relationship with the caregiver regarding the care of your children. Getting along with the caregiver will help make your children's lives easier and help you maintain a relationship with your children. It's also important that the caregiver has a certified copy of your children's birth certificates so that he or she can enroll them in school or apply for financial assistance from the state.

How important is communication with my children's caregiver?

Regular communication with your children's caregiver while you are incarcerated is very important. It is primarily your responsibility to initiate and maintain contact with your children's caregiver and maintain a "working relationship" with them. You may have to address problems between you and the caregiver to be able to communicate about your children during your incarceration. If there is conflict between you and the caregiver that you are unable to resolve, you may need to limit your discussion to the immediate concerns about your children. Hopefully, you both have your children's best interests at heart.

How does my incarceration affect the caregiver?

When a parent is incarcerated, the caregiver for their children needs support, too. Caregivers who are relatives, especially grandparents, may be coping with their own feelings of grief, loss, or anger that you are in prison. **It is important to remember that often caregivers have drastically changed their lives to take on the responsibility of raising your children.**

The caregiver may also be struggling financially to raise your children. The shame and stigma that is associated with incarceration may also affect the caregiver. It is important to understand that taking care of children whose parent is incarcerated is often difficult, especially when you are serving a long sentence.

There may be a support group or family counselor with special knowledge of incarceration issues available for your children's caregiver. There are also things you can do to let the caregiver know that you appreciate him or her taking care of your children. Sending birthday cards or holiday cards to the caregiver can mean a lot. See page 76 for information on resources that may help the caregiver of your children.

What if I have problems with my children's caregiver?

It is important to try and resolve problems between you and your children's caregiver. Try and treat the caregiver with respect even if you have disagreements. If there is a lot of conflict between you and your children's caregiver that you are unable to resolve, it is important that you seek help with the situation. If you are involved in a legal case regarding your children, you may ask the judge to set the case for a mediation to try to reach an agreement. Otherwise, the judge will make the decision.

If you aren't involved in a legal case, and the caregiver refuses to respond to your requests for contact, you may need to file an action in court in order to have contact with your children. It is better for your children if you try to work things out directly with the caregiver or with the help of a third party. This way your children are not stressed by ongoing conflict between you and the caregiver.

How do I communicate and work with foster parents?

Non-relative caregivers, like foster parents, may or may not be as open to working with you because you are in prison. Foster parents may be more hesitant to bring your children for visits with you at the prison or accept collect telephone calls.

If your children are in foster care, you will need to make a special effort to build a working relationship with the foster parents and the social worker. In some instances, you may not have direct communication with the foster parents, and all communication with your children will occur through the social worker. In other situations, you may be able to write or call your children at the foster family's home. The first step is to contact the social worker to discuss issues like, how the parties (you, the social worker, and the foster parents) are going to work together and how to arrange contact with your children, including visitation, telephone calls, and letters to your children.

If you are having any difficulties working with the foster parents, try and see if your lawyer or the social worker can assist you in resolving the problem.

How should the caregiver be involved when I am released from prison and ready to take care of my children?

It is important to remember that transitioning back into your children's lives once you are released from prison is an adjustment for you, the caregiver, and your children. This process can be very stressful for everyone involved. Some of the issues include:

- Adjusting to your reintegration as a parent
- Shifting child-care and household responsibilities

- Continuing the relationship between the children and the caregiver during this process

Sometimes there can be conflict between you, the caregiver, and, even your children during this process. Caregivers may be hesitant to return the children to your care because of their own bond with the children and their desire to continue to take care of them. Caregivers may also have concerns about your ability to responsibly care for your children.

Some of the things you can do to help make this adjustment process smoother is to:

- Plan ahead of time so that you and the caregiver can discuss and agree on how you are going to reintegrate into the family.
- Have regular contact with the caregiver while you are in prison so that you have an ongoing relationship with him or her.
- Plan for a gradual change, if possible – where you have gradually more contact with your children to full-time care.

Caregivers and children may experience a sense of loss due to the change in their relationship. This is normal, and you shouldn't feel like your children don't care about you if they express sadness over leaving their caregiver.

- Understand that your children need time to make this adjustment, too.

In addition to adjusting to having more time with you, children may also have to adjust to living in a new place, going to a new school, or making new friends. All of this can be very stressful for children.

- The most important thing for both you and your children is that you have REALISTIC expectations about the reunification process; it will not happen immediately or magically. Successful

reunification will require TIME and patience.

- **You should give yourself enough time to adjust and get your life together before you resume the full-time care of your children.**

This means getting a place to live, finding work, developing your own support system, and stabilizing your own life. In the long run, it will be better for both you and your children if you can get yourself established before adding the stress of taking on the full-time care of your children.

Even if your children will not be living with you full-time after you are released, it is important for you to remember that your children will benefit from a gradual change so that they can adjust to this new phase in your relationship.

How do I reunite with my children if they are in foster care?

Federal law states that the primary goal of foster placement is the return of the child to his or her natural parents. Federal law also requires that reunification services be provided to families to assist them in this process. Parents who are in prison will need to work with the social worker in order to reunite with their children. Before you are released from prison, you should contact the social worker so that you know what you need to do in order to be reunited with your children. Ultimately, you will need to go to court because the judge will need to approve the return of your children to you.

What about the relationship my children have formed with the caregiver?

If you are fortunate, your children will have formed a positive attachment to their caregiver.

It will be helpful during reunification for you to recognize your children's feelings toward their caregiver and understand your children are also going to experience feelings of loss as they return to you as their parent. Try to find ways to support both your children and the caregiver during the transition period. You may want to write a letter to the caregiver from you and your children thanking them for being there for all of you while you were incarcerated. This is a good way to bring both recognition and closure to the role of the caregiver so you all can move forward.