

**How to explain...
Jails and Prisons
...to Children
A Caregiver's Guide**



Taken from the Oregon Department of Corrections

*Reformatted by Children of Incarcerated Parents and the
Frederick County Adult Detention Center*

What is this booklet about?

When parents are arrested or put in jail or prison, their children are often scared, confused, and upset. This is not a rare event. In 2007, an estimated 1.7 *million* children had an incarcerated parent. Often, people don't talk about having a family member in prison because it is very personal information. They may also feel a social stigma or prejudice against them for their situation. Children, though, may not fully understand and may have a lot of questions.

This booklet will help explain to children and families what it is like to have a mother, father, or other close family member who is incarcerated. Knowing more about the situation will help the child cope better with the circumstances.

Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is designed to help moms, dads, and caregivers answer children's questions about jail and prison. When children and families receive accurate information, they can understand and cope with some of the stress incurred when a relative is incarcerated. Most children are curious about jails and prisons, and many adults don't know what these institutions are like. Children of Incarcerated Parents and the Frederick County Adult Detention Center have put together some questions and answers to help tell the difference between myths and facts.

This booklet is written to reassure families of inmates. It promotes open and honest communication between children and adults. Ideally, even children old enough to read it on their own will read it with their caregiver, giving both a better understanding of the situation. Children too young to comprehend it on their own can also benefit if an adult talks with them about the topic in this booklet. These young children need to be guided by adults through the experience of talking in an emotionally safe, comforting, and nurturing way.

About Families

There are all kinds of families. Sometimes children live with their birth or adoptive mother and father. Sometimes they live with either their mother or their father. They can live with stepparents, grandparents, or even two mothers or two fathers.

When a parent is incarcerated, the children may change homes to live:

- With the other parent
- With another family member.
- In foster care provided by a family member.
- In foster care provided by someone they don't know.



A change in whom the child lives with may mean moving to a different neighborhood, school, town, or even a different state. Sometimes brothers and sisters live with different people.

All of these changes can be very hard on children. It may help the child to write down where family members are at this time, using the outline at the end of the booklet.

Feelings and Emotions

When a family member, such as a mom or dad, go to jail or prison, it may be very difficult for everyone involved. For some children, the experience can be emotionally devastating, while for others it is less serious. Sometimes it is a relief.

The child's age, understanding of the situation, and the reactions of others, particularly of family members, all play a part in the overall impact the experience will have on the child.

Children may have different feelings, and sometimes even several feelings at once, or one right after the other. Some children might feel sadness, fear, guilt, disbelief, anxiety, anger, and/or powerlessness. It is important to help children understand and work through their feelings.

Common Questions

To help children work through some of their feelings, including curiosity, we've repeated some common questions we hear from families and our suggestions for helping caregivers to respond.

Why did Mom or Dad go to jail or prison?

People are sent to jail or prison because they did not obey the law. Laws are rules that tell us how people should and should not behave. Children have rules of behavior, too. When some children break the rules, they may get a time-out or lose privileges. Prison and jail are like long time-outs for adults. Sometimes even a child as young as 15 who breaks the law and commits a crime could go to jail or prison like some adults who break the law. They would have to commit a very bad crime such as seriously hurting another person. This does not happen very often. Teenagers who break the law usually go to special prisons for young people.



What will happen to me?

Children may have a lot of change in their lives when a parent goes to jail or prison. No one likes to feel insecure. The following questions can guide discussion, and even answers, to provide reassurance:

- How long will my parent be in jail or prison?
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- How long will my parent be in jail or prison?
- Will I live in the same place?
- Will I have to move?
- Who will I live with?
- Will I be able to live with my parent when he or she gets out of jail or prison?

Is it my fault?

NO!

Many children feel guilty when their parent goes to jail or prison.

They may believe that they caused it to happen. It is very important to provide children with a non-judgmental, relaxed, unhurried, and safe place to express their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about why their parent was incarcerated.

It is important to help children realize:

- There are negative consequences when a parent breaks the law.
- They are not responsible for either the parent's behavior or the consequences of that behavior.

Will I go to jail or prison too?

Even if children are told they are the "spitting image" of the parent who went to jail or prison, this doesn't mean the child will travel down the same path.

Children need to understand that each person is responsible for his or her own choices in life.



Aren't jails and prisons the same thing?

Not exactly. Though many people use the terms interchangeably, jails and prisons are very different facilities. People who stay in a jail are either waiting to go to court or serving a lesser sentence. Inmates at the Frederick County Adult Detention Center have sentences of 18 months or less. If a court judge gives someone a longer sentence, they will be sent to serve it in prison, like the Maryland Correctional Institution in Hagerstown.

Where do people in jail or prison live?

Most people share a room, called a cell, which has two bunks, a sink, a desk, and a toilet. The cells are usually very small and look alike. Other people may live in dorms. These rooms are much larger and can house multiple people at once. Dorms like this are usually centered around a large, common dayroom.

What do people in jail or prison wear?

Different facilities have different dress codes. They may have to wear brightly colored jumpsuits. In other places, they may wear clothes that are more like street clothes, such as denim or T-shirts. Some places also give them different clothes to wear while visiting family, like khakis and T-shirts in place of their normal jumpsuit. At the FCADC, inmates wear special orange and white striped jumpsuits.

Where do people in jail or prison eat, and what kind of food do they have?

Most people eat in a dining room that looks a lot like a school cafeteria. The food is served cafeteria-style, with inmates lining up with trays as they choose their food. In some prisons, food on trays is brought to the people. There are usually some choices for people with special needs, such as vegetarian meals, pork-free diets, or low-salt diets.

Do people in jail or prison have a TV, library, bathroom/shower, and can they go outside?

In some prisons people can buy their own TV's, but usually there are special TV rooms. The programs may change as different groups of people take turns choosing the channels that they like. There are libraries in all facilities.





Every jail and prison has a law library so that people can work on their own court cases. The FCADC even has a subscription to a program called Westlaw, so inmates can look at legal databases online at a computer.

Showers are shared by inmates in each housing unit, and there may be assigned showering times.

There is usually recreation time, or "yard time," when groups of people can go outside for an hour or two. People can walk or jog around the yard, play sports, or lift weights – different facilities have different activities available. Most facilities also have an indoor recreational area for rainy days.

Do people in jail or prison work?

Most people in prison are required by law to work. At the FCADC, inmates can work in places like the laundry room, kitchen, and library. There is also a labor program, which allows crews supervised by a correctional officer to work outside landscaping or picking up garbage. By working these jobs, people may also receive credit to shorten their sentence. Some also attend school or special classes.

How do people in jail or prison spend their time?

People in prison are required to spend their time productively. They work or go to school or attend special programs such as alcohol and drug treatment or anger management classes. Many also pursue hobbies, especially art, or they can read, write, watch TV, or exercise when they have spare time.

Sometimes volunteers come in to hold special programs like self-esteem classes and large art projects.

Are people in jail or prison safe and healthy?

Correctional officers work hard to keep the jail or prison safe. If people in jail or prison have a medical or dental problem, they may ask to be seen by a nurse, doctor, or dentist in the facility. Sometimes, people may need special health care outside of the prison or jail.

Can I see or talk to Mom or Dad when they are in jail or prison? Do I have to?

Many children can see or talk to their parent even while they are in jail or prison and may crave contact. Some children, however, may be so angry or hurt when a parent is incarcerated that they do not want anything to do with him or her.

Talking about and validating the child's feelings can be helpful. Sometimes visiting may not be possible. For example, the child may prefer to avoid contact or distance may be a problem.

Also, a restraining order or DOC rule may prevent the parent from having any type of contact with the child.

Children who want to maintain close contact with their incarcerated parents should be encouraged to write, draw pictures (with markers, not crayons), talk on the telephone, and visit as much as possible. Studies show that maintaining contact and allowing children to visit, if possible, helps the children. It may also be very beneficial for the incarcerated parent to see their children.



What do I tell other people?

Many people are ashamed to talk about having someone close to them in jail or prison.

It may reassure children to tell them that:

1. "Two of every 100 children have a parent in jail or prison."
2. "YOU didn't do anything wrong. People should not try to make you feel guilty or ashamed."
3. "Sometimes, it is easier not to talk about a parent who is incarcerated, but you may never learn that there are plenty of other kids in the same situation. Talking about it with people you trust may help."
4. "It's OK to love your Mom or Dad who is in jail or prison, even if some people don't think you should."
"Even though Mom or Dad has made their mistakes and is paying the price for it, she or he still loves you very much."

In some communities there are groups of kids who have a parent in jail or prison, and they can meet to talk about such issues. This is called a support group. It can be very helpful to have peers to share feelings and coping strategies. County community corrections and social services agencies should be able to help you find an appropriate support group.

How can I learn when my parent will come home?

People in jail or prison usually know the approximate date they will be released.

Where can I get help?

Sometimes adults don't talk about the incarcerated parent because they are afraid it will upset the child. However, when the child is upset or hurt or confused, it is better to express those feelings to others than to let the emotions bottle up inside. Children are likely to worry and believe things are worse than they really are if a parent "disappears" and no one talks about it or lets them talk about it. Children should be encouraged to reach out to those they trust. They can be encouraged to make a list of people to talk to.



Sometimes, children and families need more help than other family and friends can provide. County information and referral staff can help to find further resources, and most libraries have Internet access. Some places to get help or information include:

- Frederick County Health Department Child and Adolescent Services – (301)600-1755
- Big Brothers Big Sisters Mentoring Plus Program – (301)694-0188
- 2-1-1 Referral Hotline
- NA/AA (Narcotics Anonymous/ Alcoholics Anonymous) – (301)662-0544 AA, 1(800)543-4670 NA
- Family and Corrections Network (804)589-3036 or www.fcnetwork.org (This site lists books for parents, caregivers, and professionals to read with children of prisoners.)
- Children of Incarcerated Parents – (301)696-6864

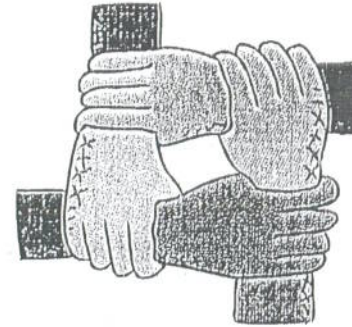
Notes for Caregivers:

Children may experience many mixed emotions from the time of the parent's arrest to well after his or her release. While these feelings may be expressed at any time, they are more likely to come to a head at certain states: arrest, trial, sentencing, incarceration (and often most strongly during and following visiting), and at the time of release. Often, the most stressful time is in the weeks and months following release. It can be difficult for an absent parent to reconnect with a child who has grown accustomed to living without him or her.



In summary, children of incarcerated parents need:

- To know the parent's incarceration is not their fault.
- To know what is happening to their parent.
- To know if they can have contact with their parent, and if so, when and how.
- To know where and with whom they will be living and going to school.
- To know what will stay the same and what will change while their parent is incarcerated.
- To know it is OK to still love their parent, ar



it is OK to be angry sometimes, too.

- To know that they are still loved and cared for.
- To be encouraged to express, in safe and healthy ways, their feelings about their parent and their parent's incarceration.
- To visit and maintain contact with the incarcerated parent as much as possible, when permitted and appropriate.
- To have stability and consistency in their living situations and daily routines.
- To feel safe.
- To have fun.
- To realize that people make choices in life that lead to different consequences.



How do I feel today?

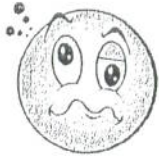
Caregivers may use this diagram to help children identify their feelings using pictures and/or words.



Embarrassed
Helpless
Ashamed



Angry
Disgusted
Rejected



Confused
Not sure
Let down



Tired
Bored



Depressed
Sad
Unwanted



Scared
Guilty
Lonely



Happy
Satisfied
Relieved



Surprised
Worried
Brave

Notes for Children

About my family:

My name is _____

I live at _____

My Mom is _____

She lives at _____

My Dad is _____

He lives at _____

My brother(s) and sister(s) are _____

My brother(s) and sister(s) live at _____

People to talk to:

Someone in my family _____

Someone at my school _____

Someone at my place of worship _____

Another adult I know and trust _____

A close friend _____