

When Parents Go To Prison

There are many challenges when relatives or licensed Foster Parents are called upon to raise children. One of those challenges is the “co-parenting” that occurs between the biological parent and the Guardian. Both parents feel a need to be the primary parent; one through birth right and one through legal placement. This is especially true when one parent is in prison and visitation is either court mandated or chosen by the adults or even the children..

Support for children visiting parents in prison is reflected in the results of several research studies that indicated parents in prison are less likely to re-offend upon release if they maintain a close connection with their children while incarcerated. Fewer studies have researched the effect of prison visitation on the children. Programs throughout the country coordinate parent-child visitation. Many more children visit their parent with relatives, including with their other parent.

Regardless of the visitation circumstances there are impacts on the children of which all adults involved need to be aware. This includes the incarcerated parents, the Guardians and those in the Court and Social Service systems (Judges, Social Workers, Lawyers). In addition, other adults interacting with the children should be informed so they may provide appropriate support and understanding. These include Teachers, School Counselors, and trusted Mentors such as Ministers, Coaches and Scout Leaders.

All adults involved in facilitating children’s prison visitations will provide the children with the support needed if the adults would implement the following behaviors.

- 1) Control personal feelings about the visitations and the incarcerated parent. Emotional adults frighten children who depend on the adults for guidance and stability.
- 2) Explain the process and procedures that the children will experience during the visitation. Children are calmer if they know what to expect.
- 3) Answer children’s questions honestly. If you do not know the answer, say so and offer to find the answer together.
- 4) Listen to the children attentively and respectfully. They need to share their history and their feelings.
- 5) Provide children with acceptable methods of expressing emotions, especially anger and fear.
- 6) Support appropriate methods of maintaining communication between visits
- 7) Be prepared for grieving and processing behavior after visits. Allow time and space for sadness, anger, limited concentration, etc. Provide the children with a “Circle of Support” by trusted adults, friends and trained counselors.
- 8) Unless court mandated don’t force or “guilt” children into visitation. Respect their need to set their own time, space and boundaries.
- 9) Include the parent in as many appropriate decisions regarding the children as possible.
- 10) Understand that the parent and children will have some type of relationship into the future.
- 11) Strive to maintain realistic expectations for all involved; children, parents, Guardians.

