

Supporting Communication for Families Impacted by Incarceration



Introduction

Communication produces, sustains, and empowers relationships. For children whose parents are incarcerated, communication with the parent in prison is essential. However, the separation of parents and children due to incarceration can be challenging for both parent and child.

Sometimes, to protect children, caregivers and other adults in children's lives oppose communication between parent and child. Some caregivers may not tell children the truth about the parent's incarceration. These choices, although typically well intentioned, can negatively impact child well-being. Children are less anxious when they know the truth. And for most children, contact with incarcerated parents is likely to offer protective comfort in the face of separation trauma and the toxic stress associated with family involvement in the criminal justice system.

Even when contact is limited to letters and phone calls, children can be greatly sustained by a parent's encouragement, support, and listening ear. But opportunities for communication between children and their incarcerated parents are limited and challenging to access. Proactive support from the adults in the child's life is a critical aspect of keeping communication between parent and child strong.

This brief is for the caseworkers and caregivers who support children who have parents incarcerated. It provides concrete tips for supporting effective visits and communication between an incarcerated parent and their child. Another brief in this series, *Supporting Relationships Between Children and Their Incarcerated Parents*, focuses on the impact of different phases of child development on communication and visiting.

Supporting Successful Visits

When a parent is incarcerated, they and their child are dependent on others to help them stay connected. When that parent is connected to the child welfare system, this support becomes crucially important—because without regular visits, the likelihood that their parental rights will be terminated increases (see the sidebar on ASFA and its impact

The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (NRCCFI)



NRCCFI is the oldest and largest organization in the United States focused on children and families of the incarcerated and programs that serve them. Visit

the [NRCCFI website](#) to access relevant facts and statistics about children and families of the incarcerated, download helpful materials for service providers and families, and find national, state, and local programs for and about families impacted by incarceration.

on incarcerated parents). There are many ways that caregivers and child welfare staff can support children and their incarcerated parents in maintaining connections through visits and other forms of communication:

- ▶ Before embarking on a visit, confirm the location of the incarcerated parent (incarcerated persons are transferred frequently), the time and place visiting is permitted, what you must or must not bring, dress code, and directions to the facility. You can check to see if there is information on the facility’s website about visiting policies and procedures.
- ▶ If possible, visit alone the first time. That way you will be able to describe the facility to the child, assure the child of the parent’s health and safety, and prepare for the visit.
- ▶ If it is not possible to make a “pre-visit”, ask the incarcerated parent about the facility and the visiting rules. How long is the wait? What does the visiting room look like? What is available to eat? You may also be able to speak to someone who has visited the institution to get as much information as you can about the entry process.
- ▶ Sit down with the child before the visit and explain the rules and procedures that must be followed. Provide as much detail as possible on what they can expect.
- ▶ Talk ahead of time to the incarcerated parent about how to best connect with their child during the visit. Give the incarcerated parent ideas for things to talk about related to the child’s interests and feelings or what is currently going on in their life. You can enhance this communication by encouraging children (and caregivers) to keep journals or logs—“What to tell Mom next time!”
- ▶ Many visiting rooms have nothing to help you amuse a child, and you probably will not be allowed to bring paper, pens, cell phones, books, or other items into the visiting room. Try to think of imaginative ways to keep the child engaged while waiting and while visiting.
- ▶ If possible, bring food from home and feed children just before you enter the facility. Because of waiting times and broken or empty vending machines, it may be impossible to predict when food will next be available.
- ▶ Arrive early. Be sure that you are carrying no drugs, weapons, or anything that might be confused with drugs or weapons. This includes over-the-counter and prescription drugs, vitamins, or metal objects. Check your pockets before you enter the facility, and leave anything questionable in your car or locker.



- ▶ Plan the visit carefully keeping the child’s developmental needs and readiness in mind. Use the charts in our accompanying tip sheet, *Supporting Relationships Between Children and Their Incarcerated Parents*, to help guide you in planning age-appropriate visits and communications.
- ▶ It is usually easier to leave than to be left. If possible, let children leave the visit before the parent returns to their unit or cell. It gives them a feeling of control when they are feeling powerless.

Communicating by Mail

Letters to and from children can provide both parent and child with an opportunity to share feelings without fear of judgment or shame. Some children can better express their feelings in writings and drawings—clearing the way for a closer relationship in the future. Likewise, some incarcerated parents can better express their affection and remorse without the embarrassment they may feel in a personal conversation. Saving the letters from an ongoing correspondence can be like keeping a journal. Re-reading a parent’s letters over time can give a child a tangible experience of a growing relationship.

Children may need help communicating with a parent by mail. Most children have difficulty writing letters. Today’s technology has made paper and pen letter writing less common and more tedious for children. For children with incarcerated parents, letter writing is often complicated by an additional array of obstacles, such as prison regulations and caregivers who may not want to stay connected to the incarcerated parent. Also, children’s feelings of sadness, abandonment, and rage can be very difficult for them to put into words. However, when adults work together, they can help children cope with these obstacles. Keep in mind the following tips:

- ▶ Facilities have many different rules about mail, such as no crayon or marker drawings, no greeting cards, or only photocopies of photos. Find out what can be sent into a facility before assisting children in this process.
- ▶ Letters from parents will be identified as from a correctional facility. Children and caregivers should be aware of that fact. If children are uncomfortable talking with peers or others about their parent’s incarceration, try to give them letters in private. It is most often in the child’s best interest to tell the truth about their parent’s whereabouts. However, if the parent’s incarceration must be kept from children, you can instruct the parent to send letters to an approved third party who will give them to the child.



- ▶ Incoming and outgoing letters can be opened by the Department of Corrections and read.
- ▶ If caseworkers or resource parents would like to supervise written communication, letters should be sent to the children in care of the caseworker or resource parent.
- ▶ It can be useful to provide the child with a stack of stamped envelopes, already addressed, so children can send messages or drawings whenever they like. Don't address too many envelopes; parents are often moved during their incarceration.

Communicating by Phone

It is often hard for parents and children to communicate, even without the barriers of incarceration. Opportunities to talk to an incarcerated parent are limited. Phone calls are most often collect calls, or paid for with the incarcerated parent's commissary phone card or the caregiver's credit card. The calls are expensive. Some facilities have only a few phones for many people to use.

Remember, correctional facilities' phone systems often beep to warn that the time is coming to an end. Some children will want to hang up at that warning and not finish the call. It is their way of controlling what feels like an out of control experience. Parents may feel angry that they are cutting the time short. Warn children ahead of time and encourage them to keep talking.



Helping Children Plan for Communication

The lack of immediacy in communication between a child and their incarcerated parent can be a challenge, particularly for young children. It means they cannot spontaneously share their successes or emotions when they happen. Later, when faced with a call or a visit, they may struggle to remember what they were so excited about sharing. Caregivers and other adults in regular contact with the child can play an important role in helping to overcome these barriers:

- ▶ Make running lists of things children want to tell mom or dad. Help the child to put aside keepsakes or mementos of these activities so that they have prompts to help them remember and describe what was happening.
- ▶ Plan for holidays and special occasions, and find out what gifts are allowed to be sent to the prison (e.g., a photograph in a handmade paper frame or a photo copy of that photograph).
- ▶ "Take dictation" for children who cannot yet write, and compile a stack of stamped envelopes to prompt children to continue communicating.
- ▶ Keep a calendar with special dates and reminders on it, and hang it where children can see.

Helping the Incarcerated Parent Plan for Communication

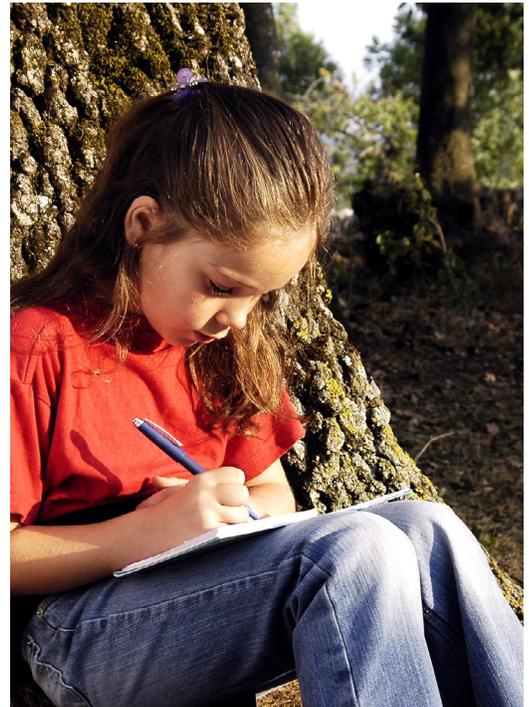
While many incarcerated parents long for contact with their children, they can also find it difficult to talk to them. Finding things to talk about can be challenging. The parent often feels pressure to make the conversations count, to make the communication meaningful. Parents may feel rejected when the child has little to say. In this stressful situation, parents often resort to asking a million questions—questions that children experience as intrusive. Parents and children alike worry that talk of the outside world will be upsetting to everyone. These are some simple strategies to help the incarcerated parent prepare for conversations:

- ▶ Provide information to the parent ahead of time about what is happening in the child’s life so they can ask specific questions.
- ▶ Tell them not to be afraid to ask about the child’s life. Not asking may make children feel that the parent is not interested in or is worried about the answers.
- ▶ Facilitate doing things “together-apart”: Have parent and the child read the same book, plan to watch the same TV show, or do amateur astronomy and watch for changes in the moon or stars. These provide a concrete activity for parent and child to discuss together.
- ▶ Let the parent know if there are particular topics the child is sensitive about so they can approach them carefully.
- ▶ Remind incarcerated parents of children’s birthdays and special occasions.
- ▶ Take regular pictures of activities, events, and milestones include them in letters with a brief description.

Debriefing and Providing Support After Visits and Contact

Visiting and communicating with a parent in prison can be emotional and difficult. Children may need help processing their feelings. Sometimes visits and contact with parents can have unintended negative consequences. In a subset of cases, this is because of unresolved conflict between parent and child—often, however, it is the result of understandable emotions such as grief, loss, sadness, and anger. It can be hard for a child to see a parent briefly and then have to say goodbye again. While it can be hard to watch a child go through that pain, it is important for caregivers to understand where the child’s reactions are coming from and to support them without unnecessarily shutting down contact with the incarcerated parent or punishing the child for externalizing their pain. Each child will have different reactions and may need different kinds of support. What is important is for caregivers to be patient, supportive, and attuned to the child’s needs.

- ▶ For younger children, provide warmth, support, and comfort after visits and contact. Respect the child’s feelings if the child is sad or disengaged immediately after a visit. Help them express their negative emotions, whether sadness or anger, through drawing, writing, or acting out things with dolls or toys.
- ▶ Encourage older children to journal, draw, sing, write music or poetry, or use other means to express themselves after visits.



- ▶ Plan quiet time after visits or scheduled communication, either for the child alone or for you and the child.
- ▶ If the child is receiving counseling or support, make sure that that individual is available to help the child process the visit if needed.

When Children Resist Contact

There is no simple answer to what should be done if a child resists contact with an incarcerated parent. There are many possible reasons the child may not want contact with the parent in prison. The child's relationship with the parent prior to incarceration may have been strained. The prison environment may feel threatening, awkward, or embarrassing. Traveling to visits can be stressful and boring. The visiting process itself can be humiliating and tedious. Some or all of the above may be issues for most children of prisoners. So, it is not surprising that children sometimes resist contact with their incarcerated parent.



The attitude of caregivers can help or hurt these dynamics. Most children and young adults report that visits are very difficult when the caregiver is antagonistic, negative, or sarcastic about the incarcerated parent or the visits. Even when adults do not say it with words, children perceive their resistance, and the resulting conflict of loyalties for the child can lead to a refusal of visits. In contrast, being positive, and supportive and helping children and youth to problem solve can help.

Listen to the child and try to really understand why they are reluctant. Sometimes, children resist contact because of unresolved issues with the parent. If the child resists both phone conversations and visits, this may suggest a problem in the relationship. Some children have anger and resentment that must be resolved before they can trust their parents enough to talk or visit. These children may need counseling and support in processing whatever is at the root of their reluctance before they are able to fully engage with the parent. Remember that although many incarcerated parents have histories of substance abuse, this does not mean that visits are inappropriate or harmful. Children of parents who have alcoholism or substance use disorder may be almost relieved to have contact with incarcerated parents because they are more likely to be sober.

If the child only avoids in-person visits, the time or conditions of visiting could be the problem. Older children have busy lives and may have little time for their parents, incarcerated or not. Sometimes children don't like to go to prison because they feel ignored, they feel tension between their family members, or they are bored during the visit. It is usually best not to force children to visit. Don't give up too easily, however, and talk through the issues with the child. Remember, when children say no to visits once, that doesn't mean that it is a permanent decision. Ask again periodically. They often change their minds.

Conclusion

There are many ways that incarcerated parents and their children can communicate. Unfortunately, it is hard to keep this communication going without explicit support from the adults in the child's life—especially when children are young. This document has outlined practical tips for caregivers and caseworkers to support the crucial role they play in encouraging and enabling communication between incarcerated parents and their children. The most important factor, however, is their attitude and belief about the importance of the relationship. Children look for cues from the adults around them. If those adults seem to value the parent's role in a child's life, the child will feel more empowered to connect. If the converse is true, children can begin to feel ashamed of their own desire to connect with their parent. No child should be made to feel that way. A commitment to supporting regular communications between parent and child is an important step in demonstrating that you support the parent-child relationship.

Learn More

This document was produced in partnership with the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (NRCCFI) and builds on content from the [Children of Incarcerated Parents Library](#) by Ann Adalist-Estrin, Director of NRCCFI. For more information, explore the following documents:

[Visiting Mom or Dad](#)

[Communication Tips for the Incarcerated and Their Families](#)

[Different Children/Behaviors](#)

[Caring for Children of Incarcerated Parents](#)

[Questions from Caregivers](#)

[What Do Children of Incarcerated Parents and Their Caregivers Need?](#)

[Tips from Caregivers—for Caregivers](#)

