

## ***F.A.I.R. Library:***

# **MAINTAINING A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILDREN**

Prison is not a normal place to carry on a relationship, particularly for children. Prison is not home and the visiting area is not a living room. It can also be a logistical nightmare to arrange the travel, time off work, find a time that suits the children's schedules, etc, let alone the restrictions that a Visiting Area places on children who like to make noise and be active. It is a challenge to be a family in this situation. Your child may find everything confusing and stressful before, during and after the visit.

Your child may become bored quickly. This is a difficult parenting task - to keep active children from interrupting others. Visitors at other tables may feel uncomfortable or intruded upon and vice versa. There are often limited activities or toys in the Visiting Room.

If you are in a partnered relationship, one of the things that you as parents need to sort out is: "Who is the visit for?" While the two of you may desperately want some time to yourselves, your starting point is that you are parents. You are responsible for your children. Your children will demand your time. Give it freely! Children pick up very quickly on whether they are wanted or included.

This is also true during visits. If your children are visiting, then the visit needs to be for the children. If you need time as a couple, then arrange for alternate childcare such as a babysitter, bartering with a friend to baby-sit their children, arranging for a visit when the kids are in school, asking a relative, or whatever other arrangement that you can make. All couples with children have a difficulty arranging for time as a couple. It is more difficult in the situation for you as parents coping with incarceration.

An incarcerated parent uses the same strategies as a parent in separation and divorce. For a child, emotional distance may be felt more sharply than physical absence: a child will feel loved by a parent a thousand mile away but will feel rejected and abandoned by a non-involved parent who lives around the block.

You may be able to dream up other solutions, but here are the most common ones used by incarcerated parents, depending on the security level of the institution:

- letter writing
- picture drawing
- photographs and family snap shots
- celebrations of birthdays, special events through handmade gifts/cards, etc
- short telephone calls
- sharing TV programs at the same time then discussing them by mail
- reading a short bedtime story over the phone
- consider Big Brothers, Big Sisters or the Boys and Girls Club
- share stories that you have read

- have children draw pictures of what they have done or been involved with
- draw pictures and send home to put on the refrigerator
- share something new that has happened
- plan conversations around a specific topic
- discuss positive things that are going on
- read a storybook onto an audio-tape and send the tape and the storybook to your child so they can read along with you
- take care of yourself
- tell child that you love them
- tell child, in age-appropriate ways, that it is not their fault that your incarceration took place
- tell child, in age-appropriate ways, that you are addressing difficulties that brought you to prison
- take a parenting course or program

Keeping a good relationship growing with your child during your incarceration take work - and play!



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