

F.A.I.R. Library:

TELLING THE CHILDREN

It is a difficult decision to tell children that a family member, particularly a parent, is incarcerated. Parental shame or fears that your child will think less of the incarcerated family member can interfere with appropriate discussions. While it is ultimately a parent's or care giver's decision to inform the children, there are several issues that must be considered. Here are some hints:

If children are not given an answer or a plausible explanation, they may fantasize their own explanation to fill the void. Children may blame themselves and feel that they have done something wrong that contributed to the incarcerated parent being absent.

Children are also smart. While they can be convinced that the incarcerated parent or family member is in the hospital, working for the government, on vacation, or in school, the child may become mistrustful or confused by the discrepancy between what they are told and what they experience. Additionally, it is better for a child to find out that a family member is in prison from a care giver rather than in the school yard or in the media.

In telling a child that a family member is in prison, it is important to keep the explanation simple and age-appropriate. Generally speaking, a 'keep it simple' explanation includes a declaration of the incarcerated parent or family member's love and care for the child, a statement that the incarceration is not related to any fault on the part of the child, that the incarceration is due to the incarcerated parent making a mistake that lead to incarceration, some indication of the duration of the absence of the family member from the child, and a description of any future contact between the incarcerated parent with the child by mail, by phone, or in visitation. Consideration can be given to include the incarcerated family member during the explanation, if you or the courts decide that there will be parent-child contact inside an institution.

There needs to be preparation and time to answer your child's questions about prison, prison life, the crime, and the safety of the incarcerated parent. It is better to say "I don't know" and to find the correct answer for your child. Some children will not ask questions at the time of the explanation but pose questions over the course of many days as they incorporate the information and any feelings that they may experience. Children may also need guidance in terms in how to deal with stigmatization and teasing that they may experience in the playground. If the child is told to not publicly share information that a parent is

incarcerated, the child may need to be given a plausible explanation to share with others. Children at school are aware and accepting of single parent families and non-custodial parents living in other communities. It may be enough to tell your child to share with others that the parents are separated. It may not be surprising that the responses and concerns of children of incarcerated parents can bear striking similarities to the responses of the children of separating and divorcing parents.

You as a parent or care giver may need to be aware of any attitudes and behaviors that are passed to the children during the explanation. Prisons are not normal places to be and criminal behavior is not appropriate. The process of talking with the children is to normalize their experience and feelings without normalizing prison or crime. It may be important for you to sort through feelings and the explanation that you will use with a care professional.

Some print resources available to assist in telling children about the incarceration of a family member include *When Your Parent is in Jail* by Maureen Whitbold, *When a Parent is in Jail* by Stephanie St. Pierre, *When Andy's Father went to Prison* by Martha Hickman, and *Two in every 100* by Meg Chrisman.

While not a predictor, research has shown that children with an incarcerated parent may be more likely to come into conflict with the law later in life. An interruption of a potential cycle of intergenerational criminal activity is necessary for effective crime prevention. Telling the children may start the process.



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