
A Caregiver Guide

Supporting the Families of Project H.O.P.E.



THE FAMILY TREE
INFORMATION, EDUCATION & COUNSELING CENTER

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What is this booklet about?

It is estimated that 1 in 28 children have a parent behind bars¹, which often causes the children to become confused, scared, and upset. This guide was written to help moms, dads, and other caregivers have the information they need to answer children's questions and support them during the time of separation from their parents and/or family. Ideally, a caregiver will read through this booklet and then use it as a guide.

When caregivers, families, and children receive accurate information:

- They can understand and cope with some of the stress related to incarceration
- They can reassure children and families about the situation of the incarcerated parent
- They will find encouragement for having open and honest communication between children and adults

It is important to consider that different aged children need different kinds of support and information. There will be specific tips and information throughout the booklet based on age and developmental level, but overall, younger children may need more guidance when reading this booklet.



About Families

Families can look many different ways: sometimes children live with their mom and dad, with step-parents, grandparents, other family members, or foster parents. When a parent is incarcerated, children may change homes, and in some cases these changes can mean moving to different home, neighborhood, school, town, or even a different state.

It can be helpful for children to write down where they and their family members are living at this time. There is an outline that can be used for this activity on the next page. For younger children, it may be helpful to read through it and write down their answers with them, and you can encourage them to draw pictures of their family members and home. If photographs are available, posting them in a place children can see, like on the fridge or in their room, can also be helpful. Older children may prefer to journal or just talk through the information with a trusted adult.



¹According to the Pew Research Center (2013), <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/21/sesame-street-reaches-out-to-2-7-million-american-children-with-an-incarcerated-parent/>

Notes for Children

About My Family



My name is _____

I live at _____

I live with _____

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 trust _____

A close friend _____



Feelings and Emotions

- When a family member, such as a mom or dad, goes 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 can even be a relief.
- Children may experience emotion particularly at certain stages of the incarceration process:
 - At the time of arrest
 - The trial
 - Sentencing
 - Incarceration
 - During and following visiting
 - This tends to be one of the most emotional times for children
 - Time of release
 - It can be difficult for an absent parent to reconnect with a child who has grown accustomed to living without him/her.
- The child's age, understanding of the situation, and the reaction 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, including some they may have never felt before, so it is important to help children understand and work through their feelings. Sometimes they even feel more than one feeling at a time. Some children might feel:

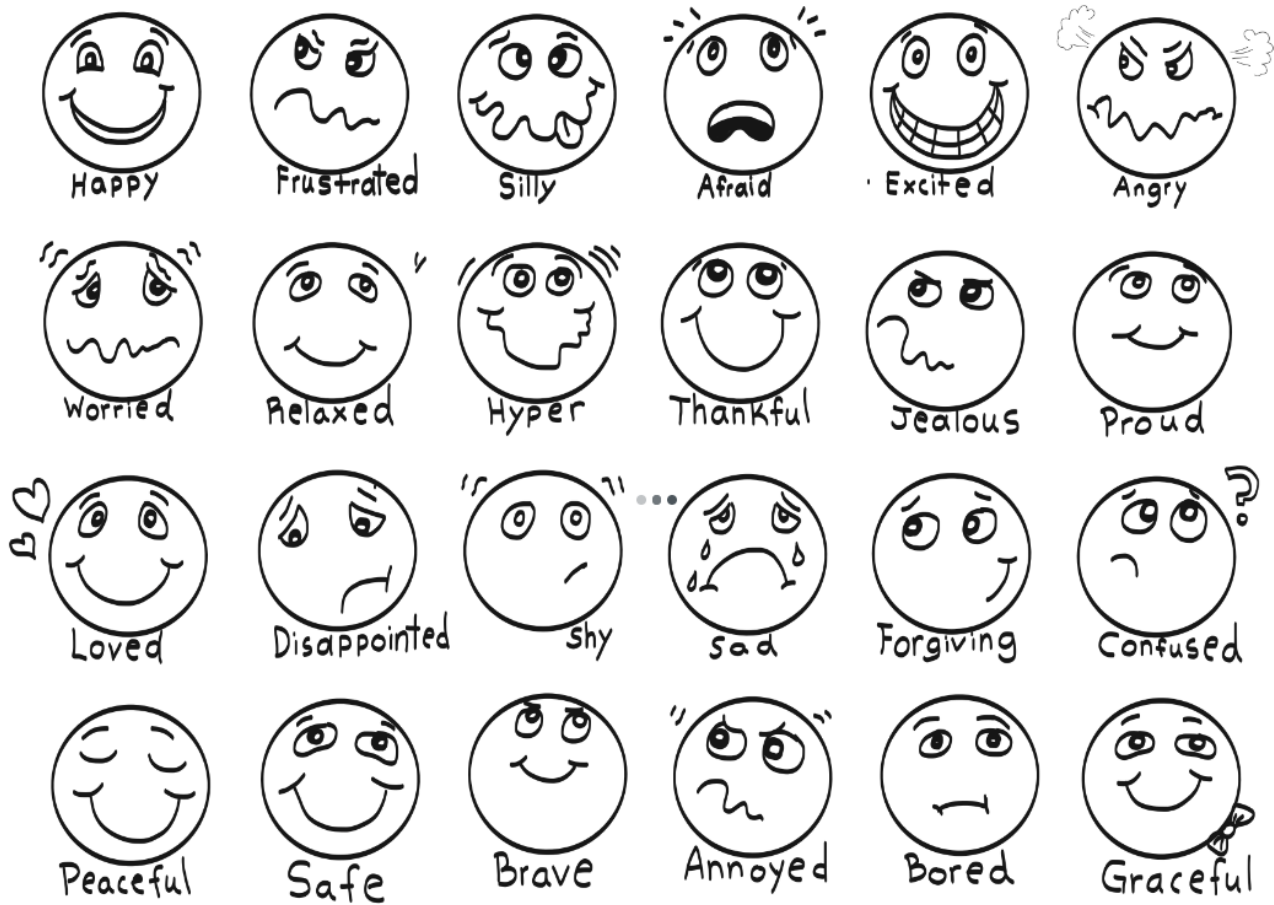
○ Sadness	○ Disbelief
○ Fear	○ Anxiety
○ Guilt	○ Anger
○ Embarrassment	○ Powerlessness
- It is important to help children understand and work through their feelings, and giving those feelings a name is a great place to start. The feeling faces on the following page can be helpful for elementary and middle school aged children.

Ideas for Older Children

For teens, writing in a journal may be helpful, although they may still need help in putting names to feelings. Some of the more complicated emotions a teen may experience are:

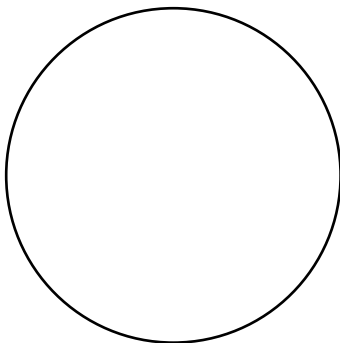
- **Apathetic** – indifferent and unenergetic; not taking any interest in anything, or not bothering to do anything
- **Inadequate** – not good enough; failing to live up to the expectations of self or others
- **Distant/Rejecting** – don't want to be connected to or identify with incarcerated parent or others
- **Disappointed** – let down by important people
- **Overwhelmed** – too much happening, too much responsibility and uncertainty, limited control
- **Lethargic** – tired; physically and mentally slowed down
- **Confused** – find it hard to focus, are disorganized, and/or uncertain about what to do or think

How Do I Feel Today?

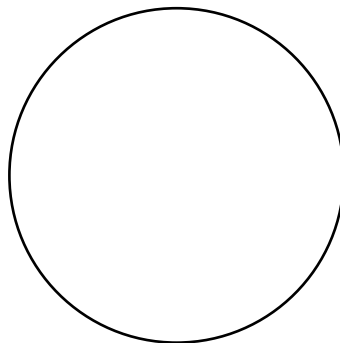


From Art of Social Work, <https://kristinamarcelli.wordpress.com/>

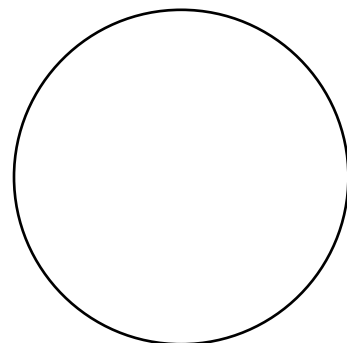
Draw Your Own



I feel _____



I feel _____



I feel _____



Seven Common Questions

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

1. 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.

2. What will happen to me?

- Many children often feel insecure, so it is important to let them know who will be caring for them and what changes they may be facing. They need to be reassured that they will not be abandoned, even if there is uncertainty about their living arrangements.

3. 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, and safe place to express their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about why their parent was incarcerated. It is important to help children realize that there are negative consequences when a parent breaks the law, but that ultimately, they are not responsible for their parent's behavior.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. Can I see or talk to Mom or Dad when they are in jail or prison?

- Many children can see or talk to their parent while they are in jail or prison.
- Children who want to keep close contact with their incarcerated parent should be encouraged to:
 - ✓ Write letters
 - ✓ Draw pictures
 - ✓ Talk on the telephone or video calls
 - ✓ Visit as much as possible

7. When is Mom or Dad coming home?

- Although the outcome and schedule of a parent's arrest and/or imprisonment is often uncertain, it is important to keep children up-to-date about what parents or caregivers do know. Children need to have concrete information they can deal with, even if it is, "We don't know what will happen yet."

Additional questions that children may ask and caregivers should be prepared to answer include the following:

- Where do people in prison or jail live?
- Where do people in jail or prison eat?
- What do people in jail or prison wear?
- Do people in jail or prison work?
- How do people in jail or prison spend their time?
- Can they go outside?
- What do I tell other people?

Sometimes, if possible, the best way to get their questions answered is to allow them to ask their incarcerated family member directly, especially if they can ask in person or via video call so they can also see their family member as they answer. Visitation is a good way for children to see that their family member is safe and healthy and to have their questions answered. Encouraging children and teens to write down their questions when they have them is a good way for them to remember the things they wanted to ask their family member, whether through letter or during a phone/video call or visit.

Caregivers and family members should do what they can to offer honest and age-appropriate answers to questions as much as possible. In addition to having the help of a counselor to help children navigate this time and their questions, some additional resources are listed below.



- **Sesame Street Workshop** offers tools, videos, and games for children who are dealing with the incarceration of a family member or loved one. <http://www.sesamestreet.org/toolkits/incarceration>
- **Rutger's Children of Incarcerated Parents Library** has a wealth of material to guide caregivers, parents, and other helpers of children with incarcerated parents. <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/resources/library/children-of-prisoners-library/>
- **Children of Incarcerated Parents** portion of youth.gov has materials for children, caregivers, teachers, and more. <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/children-of-incarcerated-parents>
- **The New Hampshire Dept. of Corrections Family Connections Center** website has lists of books for children dealing with incarcerated parents, separation, and drug addicted parents. The books are recommended based on age/grade and subject matter. <https://www.nh.gov/nhdcc/fcc/books.html>
- **Counseling** information is discussed later in this booklet

A Few Increased Risk Factors That Could Possibly Impact Your Child

Emotional Distress:

- Children with a parent in jail or prison may have a hard time dealing with their emotions, and this may begin to show in their actions. It is possible that children could have:
 - ✓ Nightmares or trouble sleeping
 - ✓ Anxiety
 - ✓ Temper tantrums
 - ✓ Fears about being away from you
 - ✓ A hard time concentrating
 - ✓ Bed-wetting

School Difficulties:

- The stress of having a parent in jail or prison may affect a child's school performance.
 - Classroom challenges
 - Social isolation
 - Other acting out behaviors
- Work closely with trusted adults at school to help your child have more success. Having information about the home life of a student can help teachers be more understanding about difficult behaviors, and can help them plan for what a child needs to help them learn.



Criminal Involvement:

- Some studies suggest that children who have incarcerated parents are more likely than other children to become involved in criminal behavior. This does not mean that your child(ren) *will* end up breaking the law, but that, as a caregiver, you should be aware of this increased risk. Talk often with your child(ren) about rules and consequences. Try to discipline from a place of strength rather than guilt, and ask for help with discipline as much and as often as you need. Let the child(ren) know they can talk to you. And most importantly, let them know that they are good.

There is additional information about finding help for both caregivers and children later in this booklet.

Visitation

Can I see or talk to mom/dad when they are in jail or prison? Do I have to do?

It is normal for children to feel angry and distant from their parent when they go away to jail or prison, and it is important to both acknowledge these feelings and to encourage children to maintain contact with their parents when they are ready to do so. There are several ways to do this, especially as sometimes visiting is not possible.

- **Letter writing** is a great way for children to communicate with their parent that is also less costly than other methods. They can often include photos or drawings, so children who cannot yet write can be encouraged to draw pictures with markers (some institutions have rules about drawings with crayons, so be sure to check your local rules or avoid crayons altogether).
- **Phone/video calls** are a nice option for children to communicate with their parent. Hearing their parent's voice and/or seeing their face can be reassuring. It is important to let children know how long they will be able to stay on the phone/video with their parent ahead of time. Keep in mind that phone/video calls are more costly and may need to be initiated by the incarcerated parent, and sometimes the parent will need to get approval before making the first call.

Visiting Tips

Visiting a parent in jail can be a positive experience and important for children because:

- Children love and miss their parents, and they worry about their parents.
- Visits can reassure children that their parents are okay.
- Visits maintain that unique and special bond between parents and children.
- Visits can reassure children that it is OK to love Mom or Dad who is in jail.

Preparing children for the visit is crucial. Consider the following tips before the visit:

- If possible, call or visit the jail or prison ahead of time to find out what security measures the child will have to go through.
 - Describe this to the child and explain that security is to keep everyone safe.
- Prior to a visit, it is important that children have answers to all of their questions.
 - Before you visit, make sure you tell the child where he/she is going. Describe the room, if possible.
 - Give your child enough details so they feel prepared for the situation, but not so many details that they are scared or overwhelmed.



Preparing Children for Visits Based on Developmental Level

Infants (0-6 months):

- Babies love being held, to look at things like faces, and calm themselves by putting things in their mouth. The way they communicate is by crying.
- Caregivers before the visit – let babies hear recordings of parent’s voice and face, use the same detergent as the baby’s parent, communicate with the baby’s parent about their new skills and developmental changes to keep the attachment between parent and baby strong.
- Parents during the visit – hold the baby as much as possible, position them so they can see your face as you talk and sing to them, allow them to touch your face, imitate the sounds they make, understand that crying means they need something, let the caregiver help you “read” the baby for meeting their needs.



Older Babies (7 months – 1 year)

- Babies like to crawl and move around, pick up objects and practice banging them, prefer familiar people, “shriek” and babble.
- Caregivers before the visit – allow baby a lot of time outside of their seat or carrier if they will need to be restrained during the visit, talk to baby with both “baby talk” and adult words as both will help to develop their language skills, avoid pressuring baby to “perform” during the visit if they seem resistant
- Parents during the visit – let baby sit alone and play “active” games (patty cake, bend and stretch), give baby appropriate finger foods if allowed, be patient if they respond to you like a stranger as it might take a little bit to warm up to you and be patient if they do the opposite and cling to you at goodbye time, say a quick goodbye but never trick baby and sneak away as that will affect their ability to trust.

Toddlers (1-2.5 years)

- Toddlers like to refine their motor skills by running and climbing, enjoy scribbling on paper and exploring everything, begin to be able to tell adults what they need and want, will begin to test the rules, can remember what mom or dad looks like when they are gone, and can do some things for themselves.
- Caregivers before the visit – be sure toddler is rested and fed as this age can be difficult during visits without a play area, don’t give toddler too many rules ahead of time as they will become overwhelmed or not remember them, show them lots of pictures of parent, check-in to see if cutting visits short is an option should toddler struggle too much with rules and restriction.
- Parents during the visit – play word games and make silly noises (where’s your nose?), walk around with them if possible, give them choices when possible (would you like to sit here or there?), set clear rules/limits and try to instruct them in a positive way (“walk, please” is better than “stop running”), be patient and firm with them as toddlers can be especially difficult during restrictive visits, prepare yourself for the possibility of cutting the visit short should they struggle with the environment.

Preschoolers (2.5-4 years)

- Preschoolers practice fine motor skills (drawing, digging, etc.), begin to express feelings with words, point out differences in familiar events, insist on being the center of attention, enjoy being read to and told about parent’s everyday life while incarcerated (when and where they sleep, what they eat, etc.), practice their emotional separateness by being oppositional and defiant, and ask many questions.



- Caregivers before the visit – read children letters from parents and send parents drawings from children, give autonomy and power of choice when appropriate (for example, with things like “Can you give your dad a hug?” and respect their ability to say yes or no) and be clear when choice is not an option for them (for example, by saying “It’s time for us to go now” instead of “are you ready to go?”).
- Parents during the visit – accept angry feelings and set limits on aggressive behavior (“You seem angry.” And “We don’t hit, even when we are angry. If you hit again, you will have to go to time-out.”), never use your leaving as a threat, sing songs together, be patient with their activity and volume level, give choices, answer their questions as best as you can and don’t be afraid to talk about your daily life.

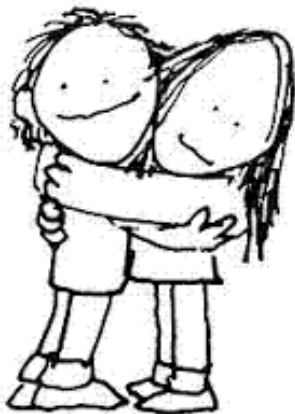
School Age Children and Teens

- Children will desire acceptance from their peers, play sports and games, collect things, want to talk about their life but may worry that it will make their incarcerated parent feel badly, hold back their emotions so the visit will go well, and sometimes may refuse to visit out of anger, hurt, or fear, and even just because they would rather be with their friends or doing other activities. Teens will desire more autonomy and independence, making it more difficult for adults to have them open up about their lives. Teens are also highly emotional.
- Grown-ups can – remember and accept that some children will be embarrassed about their parent’s incarceration and crime, play games with them, ask about their hobbies, listen to their stories without giving too much advice, tell them it feels good when they talk about their lives, look for signs of sadness, disappointment, upset and anger, and let them know that their feelings are important and you want to talk about them, answer their questions as honestly as possible, tell them about your life especially when it is things they can relate to (like TV, classes, books, etc.), reach out and connect over similar interest by asking them about their hobbies and passions, offer advice and guidance when invited to (“Would you like some advice or help?”) and spend the majority of the time listening, play games with them as they are more likely to open up about their lives while involved in other activities.



When the Visit Ends

It is important to talk to your child *before* the visit about how the visit will end.



- Tell the child how long the visit will last in terms they can understand.
- It is very important that children understand that their parent cannot leave with them at the end of the visit. Young children may need to hear this more than once. It may be helpful to explain that although saying goodbye may be hard, the visit is a very special time that their parent loves them and looks forward to seeing them. It is helpful to acknowledge that both children and adults may feel sad at the end of the visit.
- Bring a photo of the parent for your child to look at on the way home after the visit. While not the same thing, this helps children feel the parent’s presence.
- Resist the instinct to make the child feel immediately happy after a visit. Often the best thing to do is to ask your child how he/she is feeling and provide some time to experience that feeling.
- Encourage your child to draw or journal about the visit and their feelings.

Getting Help

Helping Children

Sometimes adults don't talk about the incarcerated parent because they are afraid it will upset the child. Remember, however, when the child is upset or hurt or confused, it is better to express those feelings to others than to let the emotions stew 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. Encourage them to make a list of people they feel comfortable talking to.
 - Some children benefit from talking to a counselor or other mental health professional.

This is hard work! What about me?

Caring for a child with a parent in jail or prison is hard work! One of the most important things you can do as a caregiver is to remember to take care of yourself. Creating a support network is a good way to do this, and your support network may include:

- A support group
- Private counseling
- A family physician
- Clergy
- School social workers
- Family and friends

It may also be helpful for you to journal, maintain physical activity, and/or to continue your regular hobbies. The following things may be helpful in reducing your stress:

- Breathe. When you feel tense, take 10 slow, deep breaths
- Communicate. Be honest with yourself and other safe people
- Be human. Be kind to yourself. Forgive yourself and others. Slow down and enjoy being alive.
- Find humor in life. Laugh at yourself and life. Have fun and play.

Where can I get more help?

Sometimes, children and families need more help than family and friends can provide, and this is where the services of The Family Tree can help. The Family Tree offers counseling for individuals, relationships and families, and also offers play therapy services for young children. They also offer a range of classes and groups that may be helpful during this difficult time. The next two pages include an overview of the services offered at The Family Tree and a current calendar of classes/groups.

References:

- Amstutz, L. S., & Zehr, H. (2011). *What will happen to me?* New York, NY: Good Books.
- Suzie, E., & Ponder, D. (2010). *How to talk about jails and prisons with children*. Retrieved from <http://www.childrensjusticealliance.org>

Adapted from A Caregivers' Guide: How to Explain Jails and Prisons to Children from the Inside-Out Connections Coalition.