



Children of Prisoners LIBRARY

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For Caregivers: CPL 202



Questions from Caregivers

What should I tell children about their parent's crime or punishment?

In a nursery school class, 4-year-old Billy drew a picture of a boat so loaded with fish that it sunk and the fisherman drowned. He told his teacher that his father (who was a fisherman but is in prison) was on a tuna run.

He also added, with a very worried face, "He's out there since my birthday last summer and the boat's gonna sink with that much tuna! So, I am sure he is dead and they are just not telling me."

Children need the truth, and in most circumstances they should get it.

Young children are often not asking for intimate biological details when they want to know "Where did I come from?" And they do not need the grand jury version of "Why is Mommy in

prison?" They are asking for a way to make sense out of what has happened.

Children often become nervous and anxious when they get answers that do not make sense. "She took something that did not belong to her, it was wrong, and now she is being punished." This makes perfect sense to a child.

Children understand the idea of punishment and often have fewer negative reactions to their parents imprisonment when they are told the truth. It is also a wonderful opportunity to explain to the child how the action was bad, but the parent is not bad—just as a child sometimes does things that are wrong, but that does not mean the child is bad.

Simplified descriptions of the crime may be necessary for younger children (i.e., he hurt someone or he stole something). Older children can often handle the complete story of the crime. In fact, they may hear about it at school or in the neighborhood and it is usually easier on them when they can get the story from their incarcerated parent, their caregiver or both together.

In many cases, the details of the crime need not be shared. Most often, however, the truth is better than what the child imagines, as in the case of 4-year-old Billy. More often than parents care to admit, the parent's illegal behavior is well known to the child, and many children have lived in fear of the parent being arrested or hurt long before the actual arrest.

Some incarcerated parents are indeed innocent. Others are guilty of a crime but were unfairly treated by the justice system. These are difficult issues for families and children. Family members will frequently talk about how unfair things are.

Often when one parent is incarcerated, children become overly concerned about and attached to the other parent or primary caretaker, fearing that s/he too will be taken away. By constantly talking about how unjust the system is, the incarcerated parent may aggravate the child's concerns that the remaining parent can easily be taken away next. Teaching children to see racism and injustice and still respect authority is a huge job, one that caregivers

Children of Prisoners Library

CPL 202: Questions from Caregivers

and inmates should work on together.

Another issue is who will tell the child? If the incarcerated parent is maintaining an active role in the children's lives and is in communication with them, he/she will want to participate in the explanations to the child. In other situations, the job belongs solely to the caregiver/other parent. Still other families struggle with differences of opinion about the what, how, and who of telling children about the crime and incarceration.

This is an individual family decision. Typically, however, it is best to focus on what will be most reassuring to the child, not on what will make the inmate or family feel most comfortable or least embarrassed.

How do I respond when the children refuse to talk to or visit their parents?

Twelve-year-old Dinah refused to speak to her Mom each week when she called from prison.

She would say, "I don't have anything to say to her." Her Grandma would say to the Mom, she doesn't want to talk to you and neither do I."

The answer to the question of supporting communication between children and their incarcerated parent often depends on how the caregiver feels about the incarcerated parent. Is this to be the child's choice, or is it the adult's decision?

In either case, it helps to let children know that care-giving adults understand that their feelings are probably confusing—that a part of them may really want to see or talk to their parent while the other part of them is too scared or angry. Most children who refuse or resist contact with their incarcerated parent have feelings that they need help with. It is especially hard if they are influenced by your feelings and have conflicting loyalties.

It is OK for the caregiver to let the child know that they have feelings about this, too. Sometimes the adult's feelings may be the same as the child's and sometimes they will not.

It also helps for the caregiver to reassure the child that even though they may be angry at the incarcerated person, you will not be angry at the child for loving their parent, missing them, and wanting to talk to them. The opposite may also happen. The child needs to know that he or she can be angry or disconnected from the incarcerated parent, even if the caregiver has forgiven the inmate parent and is staying close and connected.

There is also the issue of telephone expenses. Children can learn that money is not available for receiving collect calls. Clearly, there is cause for concern and outrage over the inmate telephone policies in this country.* Free world caregivers need to be sure that it is finances that motivate a cut back on or refusal of the inmate parents' collect calls and not a need to punish the prisoner.

* For more about these telephone contracts and how to do something about them, see www.curenational.org/~etc.

To visit or not to visit – what is best for the child?

This decision is a hard one. It depends on finances, prison policy, transportation, distance, and the preference of the inmate parent. Studies show that most children do better when they visit their parents. Usually it takes time for them to cope with the feelings that the visits raise, though. Not visiting is sometimes easier on the emotions, but out of sight is not out of mind.

Distance leaves a lot of bottled up feelings for kids to deal with. These feelings may show up in problem behaviors at home, school or both. Teachers and other adults in the child's world may not be aware of the importance of maintaining the relationship between children and their incarcerated parents. They may criticize the caregiver and become impatient with the child.

Communication between home and school, as well as caregiver support for the process are essential to minimize these conflicts.

Children of Prisoners Library

CPL 202: Questions from Caregivers

When we do visit, how can we help the visits to go well?

As six-year old Kyle was returning home with Ms. Simmons, the social worker, he talked endlessly about his Mom's life. She eats pizza on Fridays and can watch TV at night and has a toilet in her cell.

Ms. Simmons asked if Kyle had told her about the rabbit they got at his foster home or his first T-ball practice.

"I forgot to tell her," he said.

Know the child. How long can the child sit? Are there choices of time of day to go? Also prepare them for the details, such as how long the ride is, if guards will be in uniforms, etc.

Incarcerated parents can help in many ways. They can write to their child telling them all about what the visits will be like. Another issue is what to talk about.

Children are afraid that if they tell their parent about life on the outside, it will make them sad. Parents may be worried that if they talk about life inside, the children will be scared or bored. But it is OK to talk about everyday life. That is what children and parents are missing and needing.

Children could write letters to parents between visits and include report cards, book reports, photos, drawings, and other things that give the inmate parent ideas about

the child's life. This will make talking about everyday things easier. Children can also be encouraged to make lists of things to talk about on visits.

Caregivers can talk to children after visits about what they remember and what was hard to say. This will let children know it is OK to talk about their parents. It will also prepare them for the next visit.

How do we know whether a child's behavior (i.e. bed-wetting, acting out, etc.) is just a temporary reaction or when it is a symptom of a more serious problem?

Two-year-old Damon began biting at day care about a week after his father's arrest and imprisonment. When his mom asked the pediatrician, she was told that it was normal for toddler to be frustrated. She was given an article about biting and discipline. She felt embarrassed to talk about the incarceration. She wanted the behavior to be normal and unrelated to their circumstances, so she did not tell the doctor.

When a child's behavior worries you, whether or not you think it is related to the parental incarceration, always check with the pediatric health care provider.

It will help if you can pinpoint the following:

- When did the behaviors begin?
- How often do the behaviors occur?
- How intense is the behavior (such as periods of tearfulness vs. hysterical crying?)
- To what degree do the behaviors interfere with everyday life (such as thumb sucking, which interferes with speaking or playing with friends)?

There are so many different ways that children and their families react to the separation of incarceration, but most of the feelings are there for everyone – confusion, anger, sadness, fear for the parents well-being, and embarrassment in the peer group are the most common.

It is sometimes difficult to tell the truth about where the child's parent is. In spite of the discomfort, it is important for the health care providers, teachers, and counselors to know about parental incarceration in order to adequately assess the child's behavior and health.

School counselors and community mental health practitioners may also help. Many, however, have little training in dealing with issues of parental incarceration. This can complicate treatment and frustrate caregivers. When making an appointment with a mental health professional, it is important to ask if there is

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CPL 202: Questions from Caregivers

anyone there that has experience with inmate parents and their children.

Keep in mind that expertise in the field is still fairly limited. Feel free to share this and other material on children of prisoners with the professionals who serve you.

For information about these issues, see any of the Children of Prisoners Library pamphlets.



About the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL)

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