



# Children of Incarcerated Parents LIBRARY

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*Facts and Issues: CIPL 105*

## **Visiting Mom or Dad**

### **The Child's Perspective**

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

*3<sup>rd</sup> edition*

The decision of whether or not to take children to visit incarcerated parents is a hard one. It depends on finances, prison policy, transportation, distance and the preference of the parent behind bars.

There is very little research that examines the long term impact that visiting parents in prison or jail has on the child or the parent- child relationship. Several studies have shown the positive results of maintaining contact between incarcerated parents, their children and the children's caregivers.<sup>i</sup> The collective observations of clinicians and community service providers also suggest that most children manage the crisis of parental incarceration better when they visit their parents. For many children, communicating with his or her parent can minimize or repair attachment disruptions, provide opportunities for talking about the feelings child having and help them to cope with the grief

and loss resulting from the separation.

Visits also can correct frightening images and idealized fantasies by seeing the prison and the parent.

Most incarcerated parents are imprisoned for drug and other non-violent crimes so relatively short sentences are common and parents will likely be part of their child's life, post release. Maintaining contact then is crucial for release preparation. Visiting is also part of most reunification plans for children in the child welfare system.

For the incarcerated parent, in-prison parenting programs and other visitation interventions are shown to be correlated with lower rates of recidivism, increased self-esteem, and more parental involvement with their children following release<sup>ii</sup>

There are some studies that suggest that visits can also create stress and difficulties for children and families especially

when visits do not go well because of stressful correctional environments or because of the lack of preparation for or support after the visits. More research is needed to determine the elements of quality prison visiting for children.

Even when visiting environments are supportive of children's needs, it takes time for children to learn how to cope with the feelings that the visits raise. While not visiting is sometimes easier on the emotions in the short run, and on the caregiver or parent who may not be eager for the child to maintain the relationship with the incarcerated parent, out of sight is not out of mind.

Distance and separation leave a lot of confusion, questions, imagined dangers and fears for kids to deal with. These feelings may show up in problem behaviors at home, school or both and can be harmful to the child over time.

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## *C IPL 105: Visiting Mom or Dad*

Children depend on their adult caregivers to make the experience of visiting incarcerated parents as stress free as possible.

### **Know the Rules**

Knowing visiting rules and regulations, including where to go and what to bring, is an important part of the adult's preparation for a prison visit. These preparations can make the visit and the post visit reaction easier for the child.

Children need to know what to expect. First, it is important to tell the child what the visit will be like. Tell the child: how long the ride is, if correctional officers will be in uniforms, what the incarcerated parent will be wearing, details about the search process for getting in, including if there will be a metal detector or dogs and guidelines for going to the bathroom and using vending machines.

Some of this information can best be obtained from incarcerated parents. Incarcerated parents can tell caregivers what they will be wearing, and if there are any changes in their physical appearance since the last time the child saw them.

Some information can be obtained from the prison, especially about visiting hours and what you can take in. Check on prison or jail web sites and don't forget to search for information on visiting for children if there is nothing on the Department of Corrections home page. Caregivers may also tell children how they will go to the prison, how long the trip will take and if there is money for snacks.

When the experience matches children's expectations, they will be less anxious.

### **Know the Child**

How long can the child sit? Are there choices of time of day to go? How long in advance do they need to begin to discuss the visit? Some children (those with slow- to-warm-up temperaments) take a long time to adapt and adjust to people, places, and ideas or plans. They need days or weeks of talking about the visit to be ready. Other children with very persistent and non-distractible temperaments may become too anxious if the preparations begin too far in advance. Discussing the visit only a day or two ahead of time may work better for them.

Incarcerated parents can also help. They can write to their child telling them all about what the visits will be like. They can be in touch with caregivers in advance to be filled in on the child's daily life and make lists of things to talk about in the visit.

### **Plan to Talk**

What to talk about in the visit is often a real challenge for the children and their parents and caregivers. Children are afraid 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.

Caregivers also need to know how to talk to children after visits. Ask them about what they remembered or liked best about the visit and also about what they didn't like or what was hard to say. This will let them know that it is OK to talk about their parents. It will also prepare them for the next visit.

Some caregivers may have trouble separating their feelings about the incarcerated parent and the crime from the child's feelings. When this happens, children have trouble expressing their own feelings—from fear of upsetting the caregiver. In some cases, it becomes necessary to seek professional guidance and counseling.

### **Have Realistic Expectations**

The charts on the following pages give guidelines on how to prepare children of different ages for visits.

# Children of Incarcerated Parents Library

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## Preparing Children For Prison Visits: A Developmental Guide

<p><b>Infants:</b> <b>0-6</b> <b>Months</b></p>	<p><b>Babies Like To:</b></p> <p>Be held a lot!!</p> <p>Look at things, especially faces. Reach and bat and grab.</p> <p>Put things in their mouths. Some need their fingers and thumbs to calm themselves.</p> <p>“Respond” to familiar voices and faces</p> <p>React to new sounds</p> <p>Use their sense of smell to differentiate between people</p> <p>Cry to communicate</p>	<p><b>Before the Visit Caregivers Can:</b></p> <p>Let baby hear a tape of parent’s voice (videos are great, too).</p> <p>Wash baby’s sheets and clothes in the soap or body wash used by the parent.</p> <p>Communicate with the incarcerated parent about the child’s new and emerging skills, what her noises mean as she learns to talk and how he is standing, crawling or rolling over. This may make the incarcerated parent sad but will help maintain the attachment and could minimize distress at visits.</p>	<p><b>During Visits Incarcerated Parents Can:</b></p> <p>Know that holding your baby won’t spoil him or her.</p> <p>Position baby so he/she can see you – change position if he/she gets bored.</p> <p>Allow baby to touch your face and explore you.</p> <p>Gently unfold fingers when they grab your hair, etc.</p> <p>Talk to baby a lot!</p> <p>Change the tone in your voice. Sing. Imitate baby’s sounds.</p> <p>Understand that babies cry be- cause they need or want some- thing.</p> <p>Let baby’s caregiver help you to “read” baby’s signals. They may be changing rapidly and you will need help knowing what the changes have been.</p>

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<p><b>Older Babies: 7-13 Months</b></p>	<p><b>Babies Like To:</b></p> <p>Sit alone.</p> <p>Crawl and move.</p> <p>Pick up tiny objects.</p> <p>Practice banging and shaking and dropping things.</p> <p>Go to someone they know when “strangers” are around.</p> <p>Babble and shriek.</p> <p>Show understanding of simple commands (wave bye-bye).</p> <p>Practice getting the caregiver to come to them and take care of their needs by calling, crying or shrieking and then stopping when held or attended to.</p>	<p><b>Before the Visit Caregivers Can:</b></p> <p>Allow baby lots of time unencumbered by seats and straps. If they will need to be restrained during the visit, let them be out of car seat, walker or stroller and roll around on the floor or grass or blanket for a while before the visit.</p> <p>Talk to baby both in “baby talk” and using adult words. Babbling back in the baby’s language promotes language development as long as adults also use real words to communicate to baby.</p> <p>Be careful not to pressure baby to perform for you or others if he/she is resisting, even though you may want them to practice all the new things they can do to show Mom or Dad at the visit.</p>	<p><b>During Visits Incarcerated parent Parents Can:</b></p> <p>Let baby crawl or sit alone or play “active” games (patty cake, bend and stretch.)</p> <p>Give baby age appropriate finger foods if allowed. Be very careful with vending machine snacks that can cause choking such as popcorn, peanuts and small candy items.</p> <p>Be patient – if baby reacts as if you are a stranger, keep close...but don’t push. Baby will probably warm up to you after several visits.</p> <p>Some babies may have the opposite reaction and cling to you. In this case, saying goodbye can mean that caregivers may have to pull or pry baby away from Mom or Dad. This is painful for everyone.</p> <p>In most cases, quick goodbyes are best. Never trick baby (or any age child) or sneak away. This will cause the child not to trust you next time.</p>
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<p><b>Toddlers: 14-30 Months</b></p>	<p><b>Toddlers Like to:</b></p> <p>Refine their motor skills by walking/running/ climbing.</p> <p>Scribble</p> <p>Explore everything! Imitate adults Label objects using newly learned words.</p> <p>Tell adults what they need and want.</p> <p>Test the rules to see if they are real.</p> <p>Hold a picture of Mom or Dad in their mind when they are not with them.</p> <p>Do some things for themselves.</p>	<p><b>Before the Visit Caregivers Can:</b></p> <p>Be sure toddler is rested and fed...this is a most difficult age for visits if there is no play area.</p> <p>Do not bombard toddler with rules ahead of time... toddler will either not remember or test them anyway.</p> <p>Show toddler lots of pictures of the incarcerated parent.</p> <p>If possible make arrangements ahead of time so that you can be prepared to cut visits short if toddler cannot follow the rules.</p>	<p><b>During Visits Parents Can:</b></p> <p>Play word games...label objects, make silly noises, etc. ask where's your nose etc.</p> <p>Walk around if allowed. Label objects, colors and people for your child.</p> <p>Give toddler choices whenever possible...even little ones...do you want to sit here or here? Do you want one kiss or two?</p> <p>Give clear rules/limits with consequences but try to tell toddler what they can do, not what they are not supposed to do. "Walk, Junior. If you run you will have to sit on Mom-Mom's lap" is better than "Stop running."</p> <p>Toddlers are really frustrating, even to free world parents. It is especially hard when you want the visit to be perfect. Be patient but firm. Toddlers need both from parents and giving them both understanding and discipline is good parenting!</p> <p>Prepare yourself emotionally for the possibility of needing to cut the visit short if toddler cannot sit still or follow the rules. As unfair as it is to you to miss out on time with them, it is also unfair to be angry with a toddler for not being able to meet unrealistic expectations. Show pride in toddler's accomplishments while accepting that many emotional needs are still similar to a baby's.</p>
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<b>Preschoolers:</b>	<b>Children Will:</b>	<b>Before the Visit Caregivers Can:</b>	<b>During Visits Parents Can:</b>
<p><b>2 1/2-4year olds</b></p>	<p>Practice lots of skills like fine motor skills (drawing, digging, etc.).</p> <p>Begin to express anger in words. ("You're not my friend." "I hate you.")</p> <p>Point out discrepancies in familiar events.</p> <p>Insist on being the center of attention and interrupt adult conversations.</p> <p>Enjoy being read to. Wonder about the incarcerated parent's daily life: when and where they sleep, eat, go to the bathroom, etc.</p> <p>Practice their emotional separateness by being oppositional and defiant.</p> <p>Ask many questions.</p>	<p>Read children letters from parents.</p> <p>Send drawings to parents.</p> <p>Give autonomy, power and choices when appropriate so child can accept not having power or choice when grownups are in control.</p> <p>Be clear about whether or not the child does have a choice. Habits that adults have in using words can be very confusing to children:</p> <p>When adults ask, "Are you ready to go?" or "Can you give dad a hug?" or "Let's go now, ok?", children get the idea that they have a choice.</p> <p>If you are willing to accept, "No, I don't want to" or "I am not ready" as a response from the child, then your questions are OK</p> <p>If you really mean to say "We are going now, this is not a choice," then say that!</p>	<p>Accept angry feelings and set limits on aggressive behavior. "You look like you are mad at me and you don't like me being here do you?" is a way of letting children know that you get it that they are upset.</p> <p>"Even though you are very angry, you are not allowed to hit me, if you hit me again you may have to leave and see me next time." is a way of enforcing rules even though you will not want them to leave.</p> <p>Be careful not to say that you will leave as a consequence. And remember, the anger isn't bad, the child isn't bad...just the hitting is bad.</p> <p>Sing songs together.</p> <p>Play classification word games (all things that are fruit...).</p> <p>Understand that it is hard for preschoolers to be "quiet."</p> <p>Draw pictures with your child or talk about pictures they have sent you.</p> <p>Give many choices and accept preschoolers' tastes and preferences even when they are choices made only to be opposite from you.</p> <p>Answer children's questions as best you can. Don't be afraid to talk about your daily life.</p>

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<p><b>School Age: 6-12 years old</b></p>	<p><b>Children Will:</b></p> <p>Need to be accepted by their peers.</p> <p>Play sports and games. Collect things. Want to talk about their life but worry that they will make the incarcerated parent feel bad if they talk about the outside.</p> <p>Hold back emotions so that the visit will go well.</p> <p>Sometimes refuse to visit...out of anger, hurt or fear. Or sometimes just because they would rather play basketball or hang out with their friends.</p>	<p><b>Grown-ups Can:</b></p> <p>Remember and accept that children may be embarrassed by the parents' incarceration and crime.</p> <p>Play games with them.</p> <p>Ask about their hobbies, sports, collections. Listen to their stories without asking too many questions or giving advice. Just listen.</p> <p>Tell them it helps you to feel good when they talk about their lives.</p> <p>Look for signs of sadness, disappointment, upset and anger and let children know you accept those feelings and want to talk about it.</p> <p>Answer questions as honestly as possible.</p> <p>Talk to them about your life on the inside.</p> <p>Tell them things they can relate to like TV shows you watch, books you read and classes you take.</p>
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### A Child's First Visit

A child's first visit should focus on the child. Using the developmental guide on pages 2-

6, you can help make the visit successful. Anything that takes attention away from supporting the child should be avoided. The following are some additional guidelines for visiting prisons

- Before embarking on a visit, make any calls necessary to confirm that the incarcerated parent is currently housed at the jail (incarcerated persons are transferred frequently), the time and place visiting is permitted, what you must or must not bring, and directions to the facility.
- Arrive early. Be sure that you are carrying no drugs, no weapons - and nothing 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.
- If possible, bring food from home and feed children just before you enter the facility. Given waiting times and broken or empty machines, it may be impossible to predict when food will next be available.
- Reduce possible sources of stress and friction among the adult visitor, the child, the incarcerated parent, and the corrections staff. Cooperate with requests from corrections officials, even if they don't seem to make any sense.

Most visits take place on weekends

when the administration offices are closed, so if you get into a battle at the gate and are denied a visit, you will have no recourse. If you feel you are being mistreated, it is preferable to note the date, time and name of the officer and make a complaint to the proper officials after the visit is concluded or after you have returned home.

- If the facility is geographically near, and several visits will be possible within a short time after the initial incarceration, it is probably best if the adult (custodial parent, foster parent, and social worker) visits alone the first time. In that way, s/he will be able to describe the facility to the child, assure the child of the parent's health and safety, and prepare better for the visit.
  - It is important to take time to talk to the incarcerated parent about the importance of focusing her/his attention on the child. Give the incarcerated parent ideas for things to talk about related to the child's interests and feelings.
  - This pamphlet and others in the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library (CIPL) can help parents prepare for visits.
- Since most incarcerated parents do not have access to the Internet, friends and family can help by mailing CPL materials to them.
- If it is not possible to make a "pre-visit", try to ask the incarcerated parent about the facility and the visiting rules, or speak to someone who has visited the institution, and get as much information as you can about the entry process. How

long is the wait? What does the visiting room look like? What is available to eat? If you don't know anyone, call the facility.

- Since many visiting rooms have nothing to help you amuse a child, try to think of imaginative ways to keep the child engaged while waiting and while visiting. For ideas, see CIPL 107, Communication Tips. CIPL 103: Conversations - Questions Children Ask; can also be helpful.

### Two Final Thoughts

*The known is always easier than the imagined...when possible, be truthful.*

*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.*



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<sup>i</sup> Shlafer, R. J., & Poehlmann, J. (2010).

Attachment and care giving relationships in families affected by parental incarceration. *Attachment & Human Development, 12*, 395-415.  
doi:10.1080/14616730903417052

<sup>ii</sup> LaVigne, N. G., Naser, R. L., Brooks, L. E., & Castro, J. L. (2005).

Examining the effect of incarceration and on prison family contact on prisoners' family relationships. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 21*, 314-355.  
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