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*Facts and Issues: CPL 107*



## **Communication Tips** **For Prisoners and Their Families**

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

*Adapted from **How Can I Help?**, published by the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York, used with permission.*

### **Communication is the Source of Relationships.**

Communication produces, sustains and empowers relationships. For children whose parents are incarcerated, communication with the parent in prison is essential. Without communication, their adjustment and long term well being may be compromised. But opportunities for communication between children and their incarcerated parents are limited. These communications are carefully defined and rigorously controlled, both by the prison and by the children's adult caregivers.

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phone calls, children can be greatly sustained by a parent's encouragement, support, and listening ear. This is difficult at best—but meaningful communication between children and their prisoner parents is possible.

### **Conversations Parents and Children Can Have**

Some of the questions children have are discussed in CPL 103, *Conversations: Questions Children Ask*. These questions usually arise around the time a parent is incarcerated. Over the months or years of an incarceration, and even after a parent is released, children will

continue to ask questions. These questions and their answers are part of an ongoing relationship between a child and her/his incarcerated parent. This relationship will require and thrive on many kinds of communication.

### **Communicating by Mail**

Letters are a valuable tool for communication between children and their prisoner parents. Letters to and from children can provide an opportunity to share feelings without fear of judgment or shame. Some children can better express their anger and hurt in writing and drawing—clearing the way for a closer relationship in the future.

Some incarcerated parents can better express their affection and remorse in a letter without the embarrassment they may feel in a personal conversation. Saving the letters from an ongoing correspondence can be like keeping a journal. Re-reading a parent's letters over time can give a child a tangible experience of a growing relationship.

# Children of Prisoners Library

*CPL #107: Communication Tips for Families*

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To communicate with a parent by mail, children may need help. Most children have difficulty writing letters. For children of prisoners letter writing is often complicated by an array of obstacles. These obstacles include prison regulations and caregivers who may not want to stay connected to the inmate parent. Also, children's feelings of sadness, abandonment and rage are very difficult to put into words. However, when adults work together they can help children cope with these obstacles.

## **How Caregivers Can Help with Mail**

Talk with children often about things they wish they could tell their parent. Make a running list of these things that can be put in a letter to Mom or Dad.

Plan for holidays and special occasions. Most gifts are not allowed to be sent into a prison or jail. Find out what is allowed and use this list to help children choose items for birthdays or holidays.

Talk about other types of gifts that can be sent, such as a photograph of the child in a hand made paper frame.

When children make gifts at school such as clay pots and wooden items, encourage them to take a picture of the item. They can send the picture to Mom or Dad or keep a "treasure box" of these gifts to give to their parent upon release.

Other good items to help the child send are greeting cards (homemade or store bought),

Children are usually allowed to send photographs. Even if the coil pot or key chain that a child makes in art class or wood shop cannot be sent, a drawing or photo of it probably can be. Art works and accomplishments can be photographed for the absent parent.

school tests and copies of report cards, diplomas and awards.

Send school papers to parents. Most children and their parents have an easier time with school work that received a good grade, but encourage children to send their less than perfect work as well. Some incarcerated parents feel more connected to their children when they see papers and tests that children need help with, especially when they can write back with ideas and questions.

For children who cannot write, an adult can "take dictation" and write the children's message for them.

A stack of stamped envelopes, already addressed to the parent, can help children send messages or drawings whenever they like. But don't address too many, most prisoners are moved often during their incarceration.

Many children may need prompting from caregivers to keep in touch with the parent in prison. Some occasions are

especially appropriate for prompting: getting school pictures, the parent's birthday, and holidays. Keep a calendar with these dates and reminders on it. Put this calendar where the child can see and reach it.

Parents in jails and prisons may also need help communicating with their child. Family members can help by reminding them of birthdays and giving advice about the child's interests. They can let them know a child's real feelings and thoughts.

If the relationship between the prisoner and the child's caregiver is strained, the parent in prison may also need "permission" to write or encouragement to write often.

## **How Parents in Prison Can Help with Mail**

Children of prisoners usually love getting letters from their parents. They may not write back in a timely fashion, but that does not mean that these letters are not welcomed..

Write often. Just as most young children would rather have five pennies than one nickel, younger kids would rather get many notes and cards than a few long letters.

Prisoners can clip and send cartoons and photos from newspapers and magazines. Write letters in large block letters so they are easy for the child to read.

Prisoners with artistic talent can draw pictures of where they live, work, eat, and exercise to help

# Children of Prisoners Library

*CPL #107: Communication Tips for Families*

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children understand their parents' daily lives.

Some prisoners send line drawings or tracings of familiar television or cartoon characters, for their children to color and send back.

Add-on drawing activities are great fun. The parent begins a drawing and sends it to the child, asking them to add on to it and send it back. This can go on for some time, back and forth.

Older children may not need block letters or cartoons, but they do need to know they are in their parent's thoughts. Notes and cards of all kinds are appreciated.

Some older children like to play paper games like tic-tac-toe and hang man that can be sent back and forth. Versions of crossword puzzles, boggle, chess and checkers as well as inventions based on current computer games have been created by children to send to parents in jail.

Ask children lots of questions in your letters. Ask about school, friends, TV, pets and sports.

See if there is a book that your child is reading that you could get from the prison library. When parents and children read the same book, lots of great conversation can happen on the phone, in letters and in visits.

See if your prison has a program where you can read a book to your child on audio or video tape.

Encourage your child to send you school papers and report cards. Ask your child to even send

papers that aren't so good. Then you can help your child with school by writing ideas in your next letter or talk about it on the phone.

Remember not to be harsh or overly critical about your child's work, drawings or letters, even when you are disappointed about their grades, or the frequency of their letters to you. When you need to correct them or voice concern, emphasize what they did right as well as what needs improvement.

Even if you do not know where your child is, your letters are returned, or you have been asked not to write...write anyway. Letters written but not sent can be stored away for a time when the child will be able to read them. At that time the child will know that she or he was thought about and cared for from a distance.

Many parents in prison had trouble learning to read in school. If you have trouble reading, you are not alone. Hold on to the letters until you find a friend or counselor that you trust and ask for help. Find out if there are adult or family literacy classes at your prison.

## **Communicating by Phone or in the Visiting Room**

It's often hard for parents and children to communicate, even without the barriers of incarceration. Teens and pre-teens, who seem to be able to talk endlessly to friends, and "live" on the phone have a hard time talking with parents for more than a few minutes. For prisoners and

their children, opportunities to talk are limited. Finding things to talk about is challenging. The parent often feels pressure to make the conversations count, to make the communication meaningful. Parents may feel rejected when the child has little to say. In this stressful situation, parents often resort to asking a million questions—questions that children experience as intrusive. Parents and children alike, worry that talk of the outside world will be upsetting to everyone.

What really counts is the parent listening to the child. The subject of the conversation is not so important. Whether talking in the visiting room or on the telephone, here are some tips for prisoner parents.

Don't be afraid to ask about the child's life. Not asking may make children feel that you are not interested, or worried about the answers.

Remember that children like their privacy. They may not want to reveal some things about their lives, or they may want to tell you things slowly over time.

If children react as if you are invading their privacy, back off.

Do things "together-apart." Read the same book, plan to watch the same TV show, do amateur astronomy and watch for changes in the moon or stars.

Ask about topics like the weather, sports and music. These are part of the everyday lives of most kids.

# Children of Prisoners Library

*CPL #107: Communication Tips for Families*

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## **Games to Help to Keep Communication Going**

Some prisons will have toys and games available for visits.

A deck of cards can be made by drawing hearts, spades, clubs and diamonds, along with numbers and letters, on small pieces of paper.

Create and expand each other's stories. The parent or child begins a story, and they take turns adding to it.

Most prisons allow writing paper and pencils for word games like hang-man, tic-tac-toe, guessing games, and math games.

Phone games include riddles, developmentally appropriate jokes and "I spy something..." saying that you see something of a specific color or shape and letting the child guess what it might be.

Make sure everyone gets a turn when playing games on the phone or in a visit.

## **Long Distance Discipline**

Trying to discipline a child from prison is difficult. For some families it gives relief to caregivers and helps keep the prisoner parent involved. For other families it causes resentment and stress for one, or both of the adults. For most families, too much focus on discipline can use up valuable communication time and leave children feeling hurt and angry.

Parents in prison can help guide or correct children's behaviors.

They can listen to the child's feelings and talk about family rules and values. They can reinforce the consequences imposed by the caregiver and give advice about dealing with problems in the future.

Sometimes the child is brought to the visit by the caregiver just to be reprimanded by the prisoner parent. The custodial parent or grandparent may ask the incarcerated parent to discipline the child on the telephone. Outside adults should be careful not to use the visit or phone time only for discipline, or to tell all the "sins" committed by the child. The child will lose interest in visiting and talking to their parent if every contact feels like a lecture or reprimand. Parents in prison should resist the temptation to preach about their own mistakes and trouble with the law. Let the child's behavior stand separate from the parent's crime. Children who can communicate freely and often with their incarcerated parent will also be more open to discipline from them.

## **Promises, Promises**

Sometimes the lack of comfortable topics for conversation will lead incarcerated parents to speak about how it will be when the parent and child are reunited. It is wonderful to keep hope alive. But promises about what the parent will do, buy, and get for the child are easy to make, and hard to keep. Promises shift the relationship from today into an uncertain future. Children need help coping with reality, not living in a dream.

Usually it's hard to sustain a conversation for the length of the visit. Depending on the age of the child, games can be created. Most prisons allow writing paper and pencils, enabling word games, hang-man, tic-tac-toe, guessing games, and math games.

## **When Children Don't Want to Communicate**

There are times when children may not want to talk or visit. There is no simple answer to what should be done about this. There are many possible reasons the child does not want contact with the parent in prison. The child's relationship with the parent prior to incarceration may have been strained. The prison environment may feel threatening, awkward or embarrassing. Traveling to visits can be stressful and boring. The visiting process itself can be humiliating and tedious.

Some or all of the above may be issues for most children of prisoners. So it is not surprising that children sometimes resist contact with their inmate parent. Notice if the child resists both phone conversations and visits. This may suggest there is a problem in the relationship. If the child only avoids visits, perhaps the time or conditions of visiting are the problem. At some

# Children of Prisoners Library

CPL #107: Communication Tips for Families

ages children have busy lives. At those ages they have little time for their parents, incarcerated or not. Sometimes children don't like to go to prison because they feel ignored, they feel tension between their family members or they are bored during the visit. It is best not to force children to visit or talk. Sometimes, however, parents give up too easily and don't try to convince a child to communicate. To children, this can seem to confirm that contact wasn't a good idea.

## When Children Resist Contact

Let children know that you expect them to talk or visit sometimes.

If a child's reaction to this expectation is extreme, back off and try again in a few weeks.

Don't give up calling or asking to see them no matter how rejected you feel.

## An Important Exception

Sometimes, a child's resistance to contact is the result of abuse by the parent. These children need counseling. Visits and phone calls could interfere with treatment.

Remember also that more than three out of four prisoners have histories of addiction and abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Children of alcoholics and drug addicts may be almost relieved to have contact with their parents in jail because they are more likely to be sober. They may have anger and resentment that needs to be resolved before they can trust

their parents enough to talk or visit.

When children don't want to visit for any reason, parents in prison need to seek help from counselors, social workers and friends. It's hard to cope with a child's rejection. Many prisoners do not want to be reminded of the hurt they have caused. The anger of their children speaks volumes about the damage done.

Some prisoners are focused on their own pain and can't see the impact they have had on their children. Some children are focused on getting on with their lives and can't see the need for a relationship with their imprisoned parent. Patience, support from family and friends and good information about how children of prisoners cope will help.



## About the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL)

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## In Appreciation

The Children of Prisoners Library is supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with additional support from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Jack DeLoss Taylor Charitable Trust and the Heidtke Foundation.

We are also grateful to our sponsoring organizations: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.-Southern Region, Children and Family Networks, Hour Children, The National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families and The Osborne Association.

Special thanks to the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York for permission to revise and publish material from the three volume set of pamphlets, *How Can I Help?*

The Children of Prisoners Library was written by Ann Adalist-Estrin, who adapted material from *How Can I Help* and authored other materials in the Children of Prisoners Library. It was edited and published by Jim Mustin.

