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## What to tell children when a parent or family member goes to prison

*Should you tell? Who should tell? What could you say?*

### Some guidelines

When a parent or family member goes to prison, often, the family's first reaction is to protect the children by not telling them the truth.... or to tell them only part of the truth. Perhaps, the parent in prison is afraid what the children will think of him or her? Afraid they won't love and respect them anymore?

The reality is that **children usually find out the truth anyway**. They hear adults talking, or a friend may tell them or they simply figure things out for themselves. So, what is the best thing to do? While every family must decide for themselves, here are some key things to keep in mind.

- Children need to trust the adults who take care of them. **You build their trust when you tell the truth – even if it hurts**. Besides, if they find out you lied about a loved one in prison, they'll be hurt twice as hard...about the imprisonment and your deception. Also, if you lie about this, what else are you not telling the truth about?
- **Children are smart**. While you may believe that you can explain a loved one's absence with a vague answer (they are in the hospital, working for the state or away at school) children usually find out. Phone calls and letters declare when someone communicates from a correctional facility, or the children see the barbed wire when they visit, or their loved one never comes home – even if they beg or it's a holiday. These are just **some of the clues** that even the youngest of children can put together.
- If children aren't given an explanation that makes sense – they will tell themselves **something** to fill in the gap. That something may be worse than the truth. If you want them to come to you for information or comfort, you must demonstrate the "door is open" for honest communication. Be open and patient when they approach you.
- Children need to hear explanations they can understand. Keep in mind their age and experience. Keep it simple. **It's not a one - time discussion**. Often, once children have had an opportunity to think about things, they'll come back with other questions or feelings. Be open to talk about the crime, prison life and the safety of their parent or loved one.... **for most children, the number one priority is knowing that their parent or loved one is safe!**

- Provide children with guidance about **what to tell people outside the family**. Should they say, “you’re separated” or “he’s away” or “in prison”? Every situation is different – so help children prepare for questions, teasing or offers of support from others.
- Holidays, mother’s day, father’s day and birthdays are especially difficult. Schools may do special projects. **Be proactive**. Talk to your children about what’s coming up and ask them how they want to handle things. **Provide guidance in advance**.
- **Prepare your children about what to expect** during visits, phone calls or letters. Children experience time differently than adults. Help them understand how long someone will be gone or when the next contact may be.
- Separate how **you feel** about the imprisoned adult from what **the child may feel** or want. It’s normal for children to want the adults in their lives to be good caregivers. Many children believe that once a parent comes home from prison they will be the mother or father they always wanted. Listen to their hopes and fears. Let them know what they may realistically expect, without bias or judgment.
- If possible, **include the imprisoned parent or loved one in the discussions**. Discuss what you want to say in advance and practice with one another. Children feel better when the adult who is imprisoned says he or she is safe and cared for – and that the child is not at fault for anything. Reassure them that even though prison is not a place where anyone wants to end up - the adult will be okay.
- Finally, **just because an adult does a bad thing doesn’t necessarily mean he or she is a bad person**. Separate the two. The incarcerated person made a mistake that he or she must be accountable for. Although walls may separate them, they still can love one another very much.