



# The Osborne Association

*Helping people involved in the criminal justice system achieve self-sufficiency, adopt healthy lifestyles, enter the workplace, rebuild their families, and rejoin their communities.*

## **Visiting Tips for Families: Supporting Children Visiting their Parents**

Visiting a parent in jail can be a positive experience that can bring up a lot of emotions, both for children and for you, their parent or escort.

Though challenging and often difficult, visits are 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 the unique and special bond that children and parents have.

However, some of what children see when they are on a visit and the fact that they have to leave their parent behind at the end of visit can be upsetting for children.

**Preparing children for visits can help a lot.**

Before a visit, it is important that the child have answers to the following questions:

- ✓ **Where is my parent?**

**Tell the child where you will be going.** It is important to be honest with children in an age-appropriate way. They do not need to know all the details of what happened but telling them the truth maintains their trust in you, which is very important.

Depending on the age of the child, you may explain that the parent made a mistake, made a bad decision and now has to be away for awhile as a result (like a “big time out”). In explaining this to children, be sure to include:

- that the child has done nothing wrong,
- that they and their parent are good people;
- that the parent loves them;

Since others outside the family (including other children) may judge or tease the child or not understand the situation, you can also tell the child that they may not want to talk about this with everyone, but that you are there to talk about it with them and want them to share their feelings.



✓ **What the visit will be like?**

**Having information is reassuring—for the child and for you. It is a good idea to explain to the child what can and can't happen during the visit** (yes, you can hug each other; no, the parent cannot leave with you), whether there are toys and games to play with, a table to sit at, vending machines, etc. Explain to the child that the parent will be wearing a jumpsuit (a “uniform” that everyone here wears) and that they might look slightly different (in case he/ she does).

✓ **Can my Mommy/ Daddy leave with me?**

**It is very important that the child understand that the parent cannot return home with them at the end of the visit** (young children may need to hear this more than once). While this is hard (to say and to hear), you can emphasize that the visit is a special time and that the parent loves them and looks forward to coming home.

It can be helpful to acknowledge that they (and you) may feel sad at the end of the visit and this is normal.

**At the end of the visit:**

While the end of the visit can be painful, difficult and sad, there are some things you can do that may help make the goodbye time easier:

- ✓ Let the child know when the visit is coming to an end, starting about 15 minutes before the end. This way they have time to start getting ready to say goodbye and are not shocked when they have to leave the parent.
- ✓ Have some kind of goodbye habit or “ritual,” something that the parent and child can do together at the end of each visit, like a song they sing, a game they play, a special handshake, a rhyme they say. This can help children transition and routines can be reassuring.
- ✓ If possible, photos can help children say goodbye because then children can leave with the parent's photo and talk and hold the photo in place of the parent. While not the same thing, this helps children feel the parent's presence.
- ✓ Though you may want to make the child feel immediately happy and go for an ice cream or buy them a gift afterwards, often the best thing to do is ask children how they are feeling and give them space to talk about this. You can help them name their feelings and allow them to feel these feelings. Often, when given the space and support to feel sad and talk about their parent, children will then be able to “bounce back” but will feel that their connection to their parent is supported.

You can also support a child by not saying bad things about the parent in front of them (even if you are frustrated or angry with them) and by acknowledging that this situation is difficult and painful.