



Statewide Correctional Initiatives Supporting Children with Incarcerated Parents

AN ACTION PLAN FOR POLICYMAKERS



Project Funders

Support for this publication was provided by the Sills Family Foundation and The Tow Foundation. Points of view or opinions in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the funders or The Council of State Governments.



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IN MEMORIAM

Ann Adalist-Estrin

We are deeply saddened by the passing of our dear colleague and friend, Ann Adalist-Estrin, on April 11, 2024. Ann was a true visionary whose life's work forever transformed how we understand and support children and families impacted by incarceration. Ann's vision and leadership were instrumental in shaping this report. The idea for a statewide initiative for children with incarcerated parents grew out of her tireless advocacy and insight. We are grateful to her for planting the seeds that made this action plan possible, and we wish she could have seen it cross the finish line. We hope this report stands as one more accomplishment alongside her many others in a career that saw her named a [White House Champion of Change](#) and honored with a national [conference in her name](#). We admire the empathy, wisdom, and persistence she brought to her work and consider ourselves fortunate to have been her colleagues. Her [obituary](#) provides much more on her life and legacy.

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We are indebted to the members of our advisory group who dedicated their time and provided expertise, without which this action plan would not be possible.

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Suggested Citation: Ann Adalist-Estrin et al., *Statewide Correctional Initiatives Supporting Children with Incarcerated Parents: An Action Plan for Policymakers* (Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy, 2025).



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Executive Summary

Introduction

Many American young people have had a parent incarcerated.¹ Because of the potential for negative outcomes,² states have an interest in fostering resilience in children.³ Since the 2009 landmark publication *Children of Incarcerated Parents: An Action Plan for Federal Policymakers* by The Council of State Governments Justice Center,⁴ emphasis has shifted to states. The focus of the current action plan is on state departments of corrections (DOCs) and how they can implement statewide initiatives to foster strong, supportive relationships between children and their incarcerated parents.⁵

State DOCs across the country are doing substantial work on supporting children of incarcerated parents. We summarize these efforts below along with recommendations related to four areas: child-friendly visiting, parenting programs for incarcerated parents, communications support, and prison nurseries. In addition to the potential to benefit youth, these recommendations and initiatives can also benefit public safety, as there is evidence of a connection to lower recidivism among incarcerated parents for the types of initiatives we describe.⁶



Child-Friendly Visiting

Visiting initiatives can address parent-child relationships and parent identity by keeping the child connected to the incarcerated parent during incarceration. In the full action plan, we highlight a child-friendly visiting space in North Carolina, extended visiting spaces in Montana and Virginia, and furloughs in Maine. We also discuss staff preparation initiatives in North Carolina and Virginia, child and family preparation initiatives in Connecticut and Virginia, and initiatives to enhance visits through family activities in Alabama and Montana.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We make three general recommendations as well as specific recommendations in five topic areas:

General Recommendations

1. Examine the entire visiting process.
2. Include children, custodial caregivers, and incarcerated parents in examining visiting processes.
3. Turn changes into department policy.

Space (Including Visiting Spaces and Other Spaces)

1. Paint and decorate spaces to be appealing to children.
2. Set up spaces to engage children and parents.
3. Provide books, games, and activities.
4. Create outdoor activity spaces (e.g., playgrounds).
5. Provide special spaces for extended family visits.
6. Consider having a separate family entrance.
7. Design the lobby to be child friendly.

Staff Preparation and Procedures to Support Children and Families

1. Train staff in trauma-informed practice.
2. Consider how staff are assigned to visiting.
3. Design procedures so that families have left before incarcerated parents are searched.

Visit Preparation for Children and Families

1. Help children and families understand visiting procedures and what to expect.
2. Provide coaching for a high-quality visit.
3. Consider families' schedules to provide an accessible visiting schedule.



Physical Contact During Visits

1. Allow physical contact to the extent possible.
2. Be clear about what contact is allowed.

Video Visiting

1. Offer a video option as a supplement or alternative to, but not a replacement for, in-person visiting.
2. Offer video visits at no cost to families.
3. Provide a normalized space for the incarcerated parent that is free of distractions and conducive to conversation with a child.
4. Support families' access to technology.

Parenting Programs for Incarcerated Parents

Parenting programs have long been the intervention of choice for states, and they can both help parents build and maintain relationships while incarcerated and prepare for reunification. In the full action plan, we highlight several existing programs: one that is specific to a state (FamilyWorks in New York), two that are commercially available (Parenting Inside-Out and Inside-Out Dad), and one that is a more general approach (supporting programs created by people with lived experience of family incarceration).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Implement a program with appropriate content (e.g., including a focus on challenges faced when parenting from prison).
2. Consider existing evaluation evidence (from both quantitative and qualitative studies).
3. Promote eligibility and access.
4. Develop a clear strategy for disseminating information to interested parents, including the incarcerated parent and the custodial caregiver.
5. Provide adequate capacity for enrollment.



Communication Support (Phone and Video Calls, Mail, Email, and Other Approaches)

Communication is critical to child-parent relationships and can involve longstanding approaches such as mail, as well as newer technology such as tablets. Highlights in the full action plan include states offering free phone calls, online information for caregivers and family (including websites for caregivers in Maryland and Virginia, a website for children in Connecticut, and a handbook for caregivers in Louisiana), and a program for parents to be recorded reading to children in Indiana.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Consider providing communication technologies (e.g., tablets).
2. Provide free or subsidized communications (voice or video calls and email).
3. Provide staff support for making good use of calls.
4. Review (and improve) current information for families on websites.
5. Review policies regarding calls and consider where barriers can be reduced.
6. Review policies regarding mail.
7. Consider other ways to facilitate incarcerated parents' role in children's lives (such as teleconferencing for parent-teacher conferences and recording parents reading to children).

Prison Nurseries

The goal of prison nurseries is to develop a bond between mother and infant that promotes children's resilience. Nine states currently have prison nurseries. Rather than provide highlights, we describe existing nurseries' characteristics including capacity (number of beds), eligibility requirements and child's maximum age, exclusion criteria, services/programs offered, reasons for removal from the nursery, and funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Consider whether to create a prison nursery (we acknowledge uncertainty about potential advantages and disadvantages).
2. When implementing a nursery, structure policy to maintain mother-infant relationships and design the nursery to be child-centered.
3. Consider other sentencing approaches for pregnant women (such as alternative sentencing).
4. Provide birthing support.
5. Provide lactation support.
6. Explore sustainable funding.

Considerations for Future Work

Finally, we discuss the need for more work on how states can support children and families affected by incarceration. Future work should address issues such as initiatives to support children and families through state agencies other than corrections (e.g., child welfare and education) and implementing initiatives in local jails.

State involvement is critical in promoting resilience among children with incarcerated parents. We recommend that states consider our recommendations and the example initiatives we highlight, keeping in mind that these examples are not intended to be exhaustive and if implemented, will need to be adapted based on state resources and needs.





Statewide Correctional Initiatives Supporting Children with Incarcerated Parents

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Introduction

In 2020–2021, an estimated 4.5 million youth had a parent who had been incarcerated during the youth’s lifetime—that amounts to 1 in 16 children, or 6 percent of all youth in the U.S.⁷ This percentage ranges considerably by state: The Kids Count Data Center reports state values as low as 3 percent (in 6 different states) and as high as 12 percent in 2020–2021.⁸ These statistics are sample-based estimates because there is no system for recording how many U.S. children have an incarcerated parent. Also, the values based on these surveys may be underestimates, given evidence of underreporting of stigmatized information such as criminal legal system involvement.⁹ Although the number of people incarcerated has declined in recent years, high incarceration rates continue and have created a large cohort of affected youth who will live with long-lasting repercussions.

In this action plan, we make recommendations and provide examples of statewide initiatives that can promote resilience in children with incarcerated parents. In addition to the potential to benefit youth, these initiatives can also benefit public safety. For all types of initiatives we describe, there is evidence of a connection to lower recidivism among incarcerated parents, including receiving visits,¹⁰ participating in a parenting program while incarcerated,¹¹ having phone calls with family,¹² and caring for a child in a prison nursery.¹³ While only one of these studies used a randomized trial, the evidence is consistent with the idea that connection to children and family while incarcerated may promote public safety after release.

Background Research: Promoting Resilience Among Children with Incarcerated Parents in the Face of Trauma and Toxic Stress

States face the task of assessing the needs of children and families impacted by incarceration and implementing initiatives that address these needs. Since The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center released an action plan for federal policymakers in 2009,¹⁴ there have been many published sources that can inform states’ efforts. This work spans a number of disciplines, such as criminology, medicine, epidemiology, child welfare, demography, sociology, and psychology, making it challenging for policymakers to integrate and digest the literature. Our framework for providing guidance on state policy is based on the considerable amount of relevant research compiled in the [Background Literature Summary in the appendix](#).

The research literature has important implications for state policy, particularly regarding how states can address the needs of children affected by parental incarceration. To illustrate this, we highlight two key insights from the research. First, decades of studies underscore the harmful impact of parental incarceration on children and families. For example, family incarceration has been considered an “adverse childhood experience” (ACE).¹⁵ Second, more recent research involves a focus on resilience in children with incarcerated parents, shifting from an examination of the well-documented harm caused by parental incarceration to an exploration of strategies to mitigate harm. We argue that states can promote resilience by addressing the challenges children face. This might involve fostering a connection with the incarcerated parent (such as through visiting, other forms of communication, and providing parenting programs) or providing other supports.



Historical Perspective: The Past as Prologue

Children and families with incarcerated loved ones began attracting worldwide attention in the 1970s. In the U.S., a few programs that primarily served parents incarcerated in prisons and jails began to offer parenting programs to incarcerated mothers, then fathers. Subsequently, children were included through visiting programs. More visiting and parenting programs continued to emerge throughout the next two decades. The seeds of child-friendly visiting were planted then, when correctional facilities collaborated with community programs to design and create spaces within designated visiting areas that included toys, books, art supplies, and sometimes snacks. These visits were often connected to parenting programs. Programs provided parents with pre- and post-visit supports and, in some cases, resources that could be shared with the children's caregivers. These pioneering programs were joined by more and more initiatives during the 1990s as pilot sites funded by The Federal Resource Center on Children of Prisoners.¹⁶

The policy shifts of the early 2000s launched an often unnamed campaign against connecting children with their incarcerated parents that focused instead on supporting children in the community. Funding for mentoring programs was based on a rationale that children needed positive role models (which it was assumed that incarcerated parents could not be) and that children's negative outcomes from parental incarceration were due to the parent's criminal role modeling rather than separation trauma and loss. Funding did not typically allow for programs to budget for visiting or communicating with incarcerated parents or assisting caregivers. Fueled by the myth that "the child is better off without the parent," visiting programs in many jails and prisons became more restrictive.¹⁷

Beginning in 2008, the focus on children and families impacted by incarceration shifted from raising awareness of needs and serving children in community programs to also advocating for changes in policy and practice within systems serving the children and their families. This shift included the Obama administration's systems assessments and initiatives that provided tools and resources for child welfare,¹⁸ child support enforcement,¹⁹ and law enforcement.²⁰

A landmark document published in 2009 by the CSG Justice Center was a part of this national analysis. *Children of Incarcerated Parents: An Action Plan for Federal Policymakers* provided guidance at the federal level for supporting children and families.²¹ Important federal initiatives followed, including those mentioned above.





Over the past decade, shifting political perspectives have led to fluctuations between continued focus on federal guidance and an emphasis on state-level policies and practices affecting children impacted by the criminal legal system. State-level policymakers have shown significant interest in developing statewide interventions to support children and families affected by incarceration—especially those that include youth and families in identifying problems and shaping solutions. States are responsible for the well-being of youth within their jurisdictions as well as for policies and costs associated with health care, education, foster care, and child support enforcement. They are seeking assistance with implementing best practices via new initiatives or supplementing or updating existing policies and practices. The next section details states’ requests for assistance.

Information-Gathering from States

This action plan is based on two kinds of information gathered from states:

1. States’ requests for assistance in developing initiatives, which established the need for the plan
2. Information about what states are currently doing to support children and families affected by incarceration, which provided a significant part of the plan’s content (such as highlights from the field)

States’ Requests for Assistance

As director of the National Resource Center for Children and Families of the Incarcerated (NRCCFI), Ann Adalist-Estrin frequently engaged with state policymakers and agency staff. From 2015 to mid-2023, she tracked states’ requests for assistance (such as examples of what other states have been doing to support children and families). Requests have come from people in a range of positions including



those who work in agency offices, staffers, administrators in governors' offices, and agency directors. The number and range of these requests show a strong interest from states:

- Forty-one states have made requests for assistance since 2015.
- Requests have come from various functional areas including departments of corrections (DOCs), child welfare, education, and others.
- There were 17 requests per year from 2015 through 2020 (101 requests total over 6 years).
- There were 32 requests per year from 2021 through mid-2023 (79 total over 2.5 years).

Ms. Adalist-Estrin also gathered information on states' needs informally through trainings and technical assistance meetings. Policymakers discussed the challenges they face and asked questions about how to implement policies and practices. Ms. Adalist-Estrin also routinely asked questions during such meetings about participants' assumptions and opinions (such as their beliefs about what percentage of children with incarcerated parents are also in the child welfare system). Responses shared in these meetings informed some of the content of this action plan (such as addressing misconceptions about children and families of the incarcerated).



Gathering Information on What States Have Been Doing

Many states expressed interest in learning about strategies other states have been using to support children and families impacted by incarceration. The team who developed this action plan began working in 2017 to document statewide initiatives. Activities included the following:

- 2017: Information gathering began
 - Online survey sent to state policymakers with the assistance of the National Governors' Association
 - Search of databases for relevant legislation by the National Council of State Legislatures
 - Convening held with state policymakers, people impacted by family incarceration, and experts in family incarceration to discuss existing initiatives and what families would value
- 2018–2023: Continued monitoring of a changing landscape
 - Gathered information informally through technical assistance meetings on states' policies and practices and on new legislation
 - Conducted extensive reviews (repeated periodically) of state government websites, including state agency and governor's office pages, to identify policies and practices relevant to families impacted by incarceration



Structure of the Action Plan

This action plan focuses on providing guidance to state-level policymakers regarding the types of statewide correctional initiatives they might consider. The focus is on corrections because this is where many current initiatives exist and there is significant interest. But we acknowledge that efforts to support children with incarcerated parents touch a variety of state agencies and services, such as departments of child welfare, education, and health—essentially, any systems that serve children. We noted earlier the varied effects of parental incarceration, including mental and physical health, educational achievement, and change in economic status and residence (including possibly foster care). The 2009 CSG Justice Center action plan for federal policymakers highlighted the importance of coordination across systems and we reiterate that point. Future work should explore initiatives within and across other types of agencies, as well as broad, governor-led initiatives and legislative initiatives.

The action plan describes highlights from the field within corrections, drawing from initiatives implemented by state governments that can support parenting identity and relationships between children and incarcerated parents. Examples provided can be useful to those in governors' offices, state DOCs, and state legislators as well as advocates and others with an interest in state-level policy. Recommendations are included to guide state policy and practice. The action plan is organized around the following types of initiatives:

- **Child-Friendly Visiting**²²
- **Parenting Classes**²³
- **Communication Support** (phone and video calls, mail, email, and other approaches)²⁴
- **Prison Nurseries**²⁵

An initiative must have met the following criteria to be included as a “highlight from the field”:

- Is implemented statewide, state-mandated, or state-funded, or the state provides oversight
- Exists now (or in certain cases, has existed in the past)
- Was designed specifically to benefit children with incarcerated parents. (There were exceptions to this criterion. For example, incarcerated people making free phone calls in the [Communication Support section](#), as free phone calls are not limited to children and can be made to anyone).

The range of initiatives included as highlights is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, inclusion reflects the judgment of the advisory group and the authorship team about initiatives that have the potential to significantly improve the lives of children and families. Readers may be interested in evidence-based practices, but the necessary evidence is not available for most types of initiatives for children with incarcerated parents. Initiatives highlighted are presented not as evidence-based practices, but rather as those judged to be promising. It is also important to note that initiatives will need to be adapted to a state's goals, needs, and resources.



General Principles for Statewide Correctional Initiatives to Support Children with Incarcerated Parents

Below, we provide general principles for state policymakers on implementing initiatives that have the potential to support resilience among children with incarcerated parents. Guidance and examples for specific types of initiatives are described later.

- **Consider ages and developmental needs of children with incarcerated parents.** Federal initiatives (such as on mentoring) have tended to focus on older children, but more than half the children of people in state prisons are age 9 or below,²⁶ so initiatives should be designed with young children as well as older youth in mind.
- **Distinguish children with incarcerated parents from other youth populations,** such as those in the child welfare system or the juvenile justice system. Children with incarcerated parents do face challenges, some of which may overlap with those of other groups of youth, such as economic deprivation. But most children with incarcerated parents are not in the child welfare system, in unloving homes, or involved in the juvenile justice system themselves. Appropriately distinguishing children with incarcerated parents from other populations has implications for the design of websites (for example, some state websites ostensibly meant to convey information about children with incarcerated parents include links to forms for reporting child abuse), the use of service models designed specifically for children with incarcerated parents, and possibly other types of initiatives.
- **Consider racial and ethnic disparities when designing initiatives.** Given the overrepresentation of Black, Latino, and Native American children among children with incarcerated parents, we recommend examining who will have access to benefits, how staff are trained to implement initiatives, and more.
- **Recognize that a change in state leadership (such as a new governor or new legislative leaders) can impact statewide efforts.** Initiatives might see a change in priorities or even get shut down. We recommend considering ways to make initiatives robust such as writing them into state law (as has been done with free phone calls and the existence of some prison nurseries).





A Note on Language Regarding Children with Incarcerated Parents

Language is continuously changing. It is important to be mindful of how language may be perceived; words or phrases that some of us have long considered standard terminology may be seen as stigmatizing by others. In writing this action plan, we have tried to use language that considers the perspectives of people with lived experience of parental incarceration. Examples include terms such as “incarcerated person” or “incarcerated parent” instead of “inmate” and “criminal legal system” instead of “criminal justice system.” We encourage states to consider carefully the language used in policies and communications such as websites providing information to families. Additionally, we recommend engaging directly with impacted families whenever possible when determining which terminology to use to ensure the language is not stigmatizing and effectively conveys the intended message.

Resources for Training and Technical Assistance

States preparing to implement initiatives to support children and families affected by incarceration may want to seek training or technical assistance. We offer a list of potential providers who have contributed in some way to the work represented in this action plan. This list is not exhaustive; other providers may be available.

- [National Resource Center on Children & Families of the Incarcerated](#)
- [The Council of State Governments Justice Center](#)
- [Connecticut Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative](#)
- [Osborne Association](#)
- [National Institute of Corrections](#)



Child-Friendly Visiting

Child-Friendly Visiting

Visiting initiatives can address parent-child relationships and parent identity by keeping the child connected to the incarcerated parent during incarceration and by fostering parent identity. There is considerable evidence showing lower recidivism among people who are incarcerated and receive visits.²⁷ While some visiting initiatives have shown good results for children, overall the evidence is mixed.²⁸ Research indicates that family members sometimes have negative visiting experiences.²⁹ It is important to note that visits vary in numerous ways (including whether contact is allowed, length of time, etc.) and that these factors may influence a child's experience. We also note that the COVID-19 pandemic led to significant disruption of visiting.³⁰ Video or remote visiting existed prior to the pandemic³¹ but came to the fore with COVID-related disruption of in-person visiting. We discuss later the role that video visiting can play, providing a way for families to connect when in-person visiting is difficult or impossible.

We have three general recommendations followed by more specific ones pertaining to five topic areas. For training and technical assistance resources, see [our list of potential providers](#).

General Recommendations

- **Examine the entire visiting process.** Consider children's experience throughout the visiting process, including how they are treated by staff upon arrival at the facility, the physical environment of the waiting and visiting areas, and any relevant policies and procedures (such as searches and allowing physical contact with the parent). An inventory of what a state is currently doing can help identify areas where change can have the largest impact.
- **Include children, custodial caregivers, and incarcerated parents.** As the visiting process is examined, involve people with lived experience including children. Children could be particularly helpful in informing decisions about the design of visiting spaces and books, games, and other activities to provide.
- **Turn changes into department policy.** An overriding consideration for the various types of initiatives we recommend is sustainability. Pilot programs can serve an important function, potentially demonstrating the usefulness of a new practice or helping to experiment and see what works well. But without further action, new practices can be discontinued if funding is scarce or if there are changes in leadership. We strongly recommend focusing on turning initiatives into official department policy, which increases the likelihood that changes are sustained.

Recommendations by Topic Area

SPACE (INCLUDING VISITING SPACES, WAITING AREAS/LOBBIES, AND EXTENDED VISITING SETTINGS)

How spaces are designed can set the stage for successful visits, keeping children, incarcerated parents, and caregivers engaged and minimizing stress on families and staff. Recommendations include the following:

- **Paint and decorate.** Paint walls of visiting areas and waiting areas/lobbies with children in mind by using bright colors and murals. Include other decoration as appropriate (see the initiative in North Carolina highlighted later). Consider engaging incarcerated people to do some of the painting and decorating.



- **Consider the set-up of the space.** Some visiting spaces are very institutional, consisting of a large room with tables and wooden or plastic chairs throughout. In other cases, spaces have been designed specifically for families (such as by resembling a home living space). An in-between approach could be an institutional space with some informal features such as couches and comfortable chairs.
- **Provide books, games, and activities to engage children (and parents).** Books and activities can minimize boredom and can be enjoyed by parents and children together. This can help break the ice for incarcerated parents, who don't always know what to say or how to say it. It is important to consider children of different ages and what will engage them, for example, having things for 16-year-olds to do. One idea is providing books about parental incarceration and resilience; possible titles can be found on the [National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated website](#). Another idea is to make snacks easily available (not through vending machines).
- **Create outdoor activity spaces (e.g., playgrounds).** [Playgrounds have been installed on prison grounds in some states](#), and at least one is planning a garden. Outdoor activities provide opportunities for families to enjoy each other's company in situations that normally occur outside of prison. They can also appeal to children of varied ages and encourage family involvement in activities they can do after incarceration at little or no cost.
- **Provide special spaces for extended family visits.** Family bonding could be promoted by creating special spaces in which families can have longer visits designed for normal family activities. These visits might be day-long or even overnight, providing time for families to be together in a way that is like the life they experienced before the parent's incarceration and can experience afterward. Extended visiting spaces necessarily have a different character, looking more like a home or a camp (see highlights later involving Virginia's Family Reunification House and Montana's CAMP MT).
 - **Provide guided activities.** Extended visiting can be an excellent way for families to bond, but it poses the challenge of how to take advantage of the substantial available time. Providing guided family activities can help families use the time well and possibly prepare them to continue family activities after the incarcerated parent's release. Activities should be flexible enough to be appropriate (or adaptable) for young children as well as teens. Community partners can help plan and facilitate appropriate activities.
 - **Provide travel assistance to families.** Travel costs can be a significant barrier to children spending time with an incarcerated parent. Assistance could involve funding to offset the cost (as highlighted later for Montana) or possibly providing transportation directly to correctional facilities.
 - **Provide lodging.** Extended visits involve a substantial time commitment and may also involve significant travel for families. Lodging may be necessary if visits take place over multiple days or if the distance makes a round trip unfeasible in one day. Providing lodging at no cost to families can be extremely helpful, and it can be off site (as currently happens in Montana) or on site (see Virginia's Family Reunification House).





- **Consider having a separate family entrance.** Depending on the set-up of a facility, it may be possible to have a separate entrance for families (see the highlight on Alabama’s extended visits later). A separate entrance could prevent children from seeing areas they might find intimidating (such as where people are being booked).
- **Design the lobby to be child friendly.** The lobby is the first space inside the prison that children and families see, and they may spend significant time there waiting to visit. Preventing children from feeling anxious or bored can increase the chances of a positive visiting experience. Consider the same factors as discussed earlier for visiting spaces. Another idea is to provide a video explaining the visiting process.

STAFF PREPARATION AND PROCEDURES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

- **Train staff in trauma-informed practice.** Staff have a clear interest in maintaining security and safety, and child-friendly practices need not get in the way of that goal. States can consider providing staff training in a trauma-informed approach to visiting (we also suggest exploring the newer healing-centered approach³²). Topics could focus on understanding child development, how a history of trauma could affect children’s reactions to visiting, and how to interact with children so they feel comfortable. Examples of staff training are highlighted later for Virginia and North Carolina.
- **Consider how staff are assigned to visiting.** Be thoughtful about assigning staff to visiting. Ideally staff will be trained in trauma-informed practice, but it may also be useful to identify staff who are most qualified and/or have interest in working with children and families.
- **Design procedures so that families have left before incarcerated parents are searched.** It could be upsetting to children to see their parent searched after a visit. Find ways to avoid this, which might involve waiting or conducting searches in an area not visible from the visiting space (see North Carolina highlight later).

VISIT PREPARATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

- **Help children and families understand visiting procedures and what to expect.** Visiting procedures may involve the use of dogs, metal detectors or wands, etc. It can be very helpful to explain why procedures exist and what will happen (e.g., with a video) so there are no surprises. Knowledge of what to expect can help minimize children's fear or anxiety. See highlights about Virginia's [animated video](#) and [online caregiver guide](#) and [Connecticut's children's website](#).
- **Provide coaching for a high-quality visit.** Incarcerated parents and custodial caregivers sometimes say they are not sure what to talk about or how to engage children during visits. Coaching families³³ can help with conversations that are child-centered and age-appropriate. High-quality visits can support the parent-child relationship, children's development, and a sense of parental identity. Reviews of visiting literature have suggested that "enhanced" visiting programs (e.g., including interventions such as coaching) show more benefit for children than unenhanced visiting.³⁴
- **Consider families' schedules.** Making visiting accessible to children likely requires holding visiting hours on weekends and in the late afternoon (after school) on weekdays.³⁵ This requires arranging staff schedules during these times.

PHYSICAL CONTACT DURING VISITS

- **Allow physical contact to the extent possible.** A 2013 report indicated that a number of states had policies limiting physical contact during visits.³⁶ But families find physical contact restrictions distressing, making it harder to maintain relationships.³⁷ The Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents (which has been enacted into law by at least one state) says, "I have the right to speak with, see, and touch my parent."³⁸ Further, hugging and physical contact are associated with parent-child attachment and feelings of security.³⁹ In short, the more physical contact is allowed, the more child-friendly a visit can be. We recommend considering what restrictions are necessary and allowing families as much latitude as possible.
- **Be clear about what contact is allowed.** Be clear with families about whatever restrictions are in place regarding physical contact (such as allowing a hug only at the beginning and end of a visit), so they know what is acceptable and can ensure that children are aware and prepared.

VIDEO VISITING

We believe that in-person visiting must be an option that supplements but does not replace in-person visits.⁴⁰ Video visiting has been an option in many states for some time, with increased emphasis during the COVID-19 pandemic when all states suspended in-person visits and some made video visits temporarily available at no cost to families.⁴¹ Having done that, it can be tempting not to return to contact visits, as non-contact requires less staffing and fewer worries about security risks. From a family perspective, video visits can be convenient and a nice option to have, but there can also be a variety of difficulties (e.g., poor quality video; visits ending abruptly without a chance to say goodbye). Sometimes, video visits can only be done at a facility, so families need to travel but do not have the benefits of an in-person visit.⁴² Our recommendations for video visiting are based largely on a [publication by The Council of State Governments \(CSG\) Justice Center](#). The publication includes excellent recommendations, some of which apply to visiting



in general. Here, we focus on those specific to video visiting; please see the CSG Justice Center document for a more comprehensive discussion.

- **Offer a video option as a supplement or alternative to, but not a replacement for, in-person visiting.** Video visits can be a useful option for families. For example, depending on the location, a video option might allow families to avoid travel time and costs. However, video visits are not the same as in-person experiences; there is no opportunity for physical contact, and video might sometimes have technical problems. We consider in-person visits to be a crucial way for children and incarcerated parents to spend time together and bond.
- **Offer video visits at no cost to families.** Cost is a significant issue for families working to maintain contact.⁴³ We discuss this in more detail in our [section on Communication Support](#). Here, we reiterate the recommendation to provide means of contact at no cost to families. The CSG Justice Center report suggests pursuing funding options such as grants or using the agency's operating budget.
- **Provide a space for the incarcerated parent that is free of distractions and conducive to conversation with a child.** A space for the incarcerated parent should be designed so the child's view of the parent seems as non-institutional as possible (the CSG Justice Center document suggests artwork on the walls to normalize the experience for children). Another normalizing idea is to allow incarcerated parents to wear regular clothes during the visit. It can be problematic if distractions are present, such as other people who are incarcerated and visible to the family. It can also be problematic if the family on video is potentially visible to other people who are incarcerated.
- **Support families' access to technology.** Families may lack adequate devices or Wi-Fi. The CSG Justice Center report notes that one approach to address this is to provide devices at no cost or assistance with Wi-Fi. Providing a contact person for families is a good strategy in case issues occur during visits. One way to provide families with access could be to partner with library systems, as the [New York State system does with the Brooklyn Public Library](#). Incarcerated parents also need well-functioning technology inside the institution.



Highlights from the Field

VISITING SPACES

A number of states have created noteworthy child-friendly visiting spaces, involving either the transformation of existing spaces (e.g., North Carolina) or creation of innovative new spaces for extended visits (e.g., Montana and Virginia). We are unaware of states having creatively designed lobby spaces.

- **Child-Friendly Spaces**

- **North Carolina.** In a North Carolina initiative, 13 of the state’s prisons designated as preparing incarcerated people for reentry have been working to make visiting spaces child-friendly, according to a 2023 news article.⁴⁴ The North Carolina Department of Adult Correction partnered with Melissa Radcliff of [Our Children’s Place of Coastal Horizons Center](#). Ms. Radcliff provided education for correctional staff to lay the groundwork for making changes. She also conducted assessments of each facility and provided a list of possible changes. Changes are ongoing at the time of this writing and will differ across facilities, but examples in the works include a mural designed to appeal to children (painted by incarcerated people), games and art supplies for children and parents, comfortable seating, and availability of snacks. A structural feature includes a fence in an outdoor visiting area so children cannot see searches of their parents taking place.

- **Extended Family Visit Spaces.** Some states have created innovative spaces within which to conduct extended family visits (e.g., day-long or overnight).

- **Montana – CAMPP MT.** The Montana Department of Corrections established “CAMPP MT” (Connecting Adults and Minors Through Positive Parenting) in 2019. The physical space is set up as a camp on two acres located within the much larger Montana Correctional Enterprises campus. The site includes calves and baby goats.

CAMPP MT occurs quarterly with two sessions for different age groups, one for children ages 1–11 and another for youth ages 12–17. Families spend 3 days at the site engaging in activities to promote bonding and positive communication.⁴⁵ Families can receive financial assistance for travel and are housed overnight before coming to the camp to be with the incarcerated parent. Housing is currently off-site, but staff are looking into on-site housing.

- **Virginia – Family Reunification House at Virginia Correctional Center for Women.** The Virginia Department of Corrections established the Family Reunification House at one of its women’s prisons, operated in collaboration with community partner AFOI. The two-floor facility is an attractive living space as shown in videos.⁴⁶ The house includes a kitchen, a dining room alcove, two living room areas, two bedrooms (one for adults and one for children), 2.5 baths, and a basement. There are also two office areas for use by the Department of Corrections and the community partner.

Two-day overnight visits take place on Saturdays and Sundays. Mothers gather on the Tuesday before the weekend visit to prepare. During the weekend visit, a correctional officer, a family services officer, and a community partner staff member are present when children are in the living space. Staff who are present support the family’s involvement in lessons and activities. Staff allow family privacy if security protocols are met.



- **Furloughs.** Another option is to provide opportunities for visiting in the community during furloughs.
 - **Maine.** The Maine Department of Corrections makes furloughs available to people in residential settings for a variety of purposes including family visits. The policy states, “Furloughs may also be granted to visit with family at an approved location. A furlough to visit with family must be in order to attend a significant family event, such as a graduation, birth of a baby, or wedding; reconnect with a family member who will be part of resident’s support system upon release; or learn life skills needed for life in the community after a long term of imprisonment.” Transportation and expenses during a furlough are the responsibility of the resident.⁴⁷

STAFF PREPARATION

At least two states have put in place training to prepare staff for child-friendly visiting.

- **Virginia.** The Virginia Department of Corrections requires trauma-informed training for all staff.⁴⁸ Staff receive 1.5 hours of video training to understand the effects of parental incarceration and the potential for prison visiting procedures to re-traumatize children. A discussion guide accompanies the video. The training is embedded in a normal staff training period and includes learning ways to make the process less threatening and more supportive for children (such as calmly explaining the steps to children as they move through security checkpoints). The training emphasizes that a child-friendly approach does not sacrifice safety and security.
- **North Carolina.** North Carolina’s Department of Adult Correction has implemented training for staff at all facilities designated as preparing people who are incarcerated for reentry. Training takes place in person and is provided by a community partner, [Our Children’s Place of Coastal Horizons](#). Content includes child development (behaviors at different ages), how a parent’s incarceration can be traumatic for the child and parent, and the importance of visiting and the relationship between a child and their incarcerated parent. There is discussion of how staff can support family visits and how this approach does not compromise safety and security.

VISIT PREPARATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Some states prepare children and families by providing information to help people understand the visiting procedures. Information about security checkpoints and what happens when a visit ends can help ease children’s anxieties.

- **Virginia.** The Virginia Department of Corrections helps prepare children for visiting procedures with a [six-minute animated video](#) intended for children, which is available online. Correctional facilities have also been given the video and may sometimes show it on a screen in the visiting area. The video is narrated by a child who explains rules such as not petting dogs (you can wave to them) and hugging only at the beginning of the visit. It also provides advice, such as going to the bathroom before the visit so you don’t need to take time during the visit to do so. Virginia also provides an [online caregiver guide](#) with information adults can use to get ready to visit. The content dives into how to prepare for the visit, such as confirming the correct facility and visiting time and making sure to bring identification.





- **Connecticut.** The Connecticut Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative has a [children's web page](#) described in the [Communication Support](#) section, which can be useful for visiting preparation. The site has information on a variety of topics related to a parent's incarceration, one of which is [the prison itself](#). Children can explore a virtual visiting waiting room and click images to learn about things like metal detectors, lockers, sign-in procedures, and contact vs. non-contact visits. A friendly cartoon dog named Chip also answers questions about things like how often children can visit, whether they can hug their parent, and how long they might have to wait at the prison for the visit.

VISIT ENHANCEMENT THROUGH FAMILY ACTIVITIES

Preparing families through visit coaching, as discussed earlier, is an important enhancement to normal visiting. In this section, we highlight states that have worked to transform family visiting by guiding families through activities in a family-oriented environment. The examples we highlight involve extended visits (day-long or overnight), during which there is considerably more time than in normal visiting. With longer visits, there is a greater need to provide structure for families.

- **Alabama.** Two of the Alabama Department of Correction's women's facilities (Montgomery and Julia Tutwiler) hold family days. Families use an entrance separate from normal visitors, and correctional staff do not wear normal uniforms but rather shirts with a community partner's name ([AIM](#)). The community partner facilitates structured activities (such as games and crafts) for the incarcerated parents, children, and custodial caregivers. It is important to note that family days incorporate a number of features discussed earlier, including a space designed to be child-friendly, staff training, and visit coaching. Incarcerated parents take a class in preparation, and visits are facilitated by a community partner. There is also a plan to install playgrounds. Discussions with corrections staff indicate that they value the opportunity to be involved in family days and see incarcerated mothers more humanely.
- **Montana.** The Montana Department of Corrections' CAMPP MT was described earlier, focusing on the camp setting where families spend 3 days. The extended visit is part of a 12-week intervention with programming for incarcerated parents, children, and families, involving a number of community partners. The goal is to prepare for reunification. During the extended visit, families are engaged in activities to promote good communication and family bonding. Community partners provide guidance during activities, which may include creating a family mural, scavenger hunts, skits, and journaling.



Parenting Programs for Incarcerated Parents

Parenting Programs for Incarcerated Parents

Parenting programs have long been the intervention of choice for states. All state prison systems offer some form of parenting program, some of which have been operating successfully for decades (for example, a number of New York State men's prisons have used the FamilyWorks program since 1986⁴⁹). Literature reviews,⁵⁰ as well as a scan by Ann Adalist-Estrin, indicate that the topics covered vary widely across different programs. One review⁵¹ found that almost all programs included content on communication and parenting skills, about two-thirds included material on child development, only half or less focused on parenting while in prison, and relatively few included anger and stress management.

These variations may reflect different states or facilities tailoring content for their populations, but they may also reflect different assumptions about incarcerated parents. NRCCFI's most recent scan indicated that some states' parenting programs were designed for families in the child welfare system or for parents with substance use disorder (SUD). This suggests an assumption that incarcerated parents are likely to have SUDs and/or child welfare involvement. But input from people with lived experience has challenged this assumption. Incarcerated parents vary widely in their parenting skills, experience, and approaches, and while there is some overlap between incarceration, child welfare involvement, and addiction, many incarcerated parents do not fit these categories. It is also true that while some incarcerated parents can benefit significantly from parenting education, not all need it.

On the other hand, in some cases, programs designed for parents in general are used with incarcerated parents.⁵² This is problematic because such programs may assume parents have frequent contact with children to practice new skills, which incarcerated parents may not have. Such programs also may not deal with situations incarcerated parents may face, such as how to engage with a young child on a weekly phone call when the child doesn't want to talk (such as when the child is distracted by an activity they've been enjoying at home).

Families' feedback has also highlighted the need for states to provide parenting programs and classes that are relevant to the realities and circumstances of their populations. This includes focusing on how to parent while incarcerated, as well as ensuring that content is culturally appropriate, such as for Black and Latino parents.⁵³ We discuss below ways of focusing the curriculum on parenting issues that incarcerated parents face while maintaining enough flexibility to accommodate parents with different experiences and skills. For training and technical assistance resources, see [our list of potential providers](#).



Recommendations

- **Implement a program with appropriate content.** Content is the most important issue in choosing or developing a parenting program. The combined wisdom of people with lived experience of incarceration and people running programs tells us that the content needs to directly address parenting issues that incarcerated parents face.
 - **The program is developed for incarcerated parents.** Avoid implementing programs designed for general parent populations or for parents in other systems like child welfare or recovery. There are widely available programs focused on incarcerated parents such as those highlighted later. Even so, states should examine the curriculum carefully to ensure appropriateness.
 - **The program focuses specifically on challenges faced when parenting from prison.** Programs, even if developed for incarcerated parents, may focus on preparing for parenting after release and fail to include content about parenting while still in prison. Important issues include parenting within the limitations of prison policies on visiting, phone calls, and so on. For existing program models that may need to be adapted, consult with the program’s developers about fidelity of implementation and the possibility of modifying content.
 - **Ensure content is culturally responsive** to the state’s (or individual facility’s) incarcerated population.
 - **Use qualified facilitators.** Skillful facilitators are very important.⁵⁴ Facilitators can include correctional staff, civilian staff, employees of community providers, or volunteers. “Credible messengers” (people with backgrounds like those of program participants) might also be used; this approach has shown success in mentoring.⁵⁵ Whoever the facilitators are, they should have the knowledge and skills to effectively deliver the program material. A related issue concerns staff changes. If a facilitator becomes unavailable, it is critical to make sure their replacement is qualified.

Two general strategies for ensuring qualified facilitators are to either (a) identify people who are already qualified and ready to facilitate effectively or (b) provide training to new facilitators to build qualifications. In either case, facilitators should have qualifications including the following:

- Understanding of parenting in prison and after release
- Understanding of a trauma-informed approach to facilitating
- Understanding of the cultures and dynamics of the populations being served, such as Native fathers
- Ability to connect with participants to encourage openness and sharing
- Ability to faithfully implement the program model
- Ability to exercise appropriate flexibility, such as to accommodate parents who do and do not receive visits from their children



– **Include people with lived experience.** To help ensure that content is appropriate and helpful for parents who are incarcerated, we recommend the following strategies:

- Ask participants about relevance in program evaluations.
- Have an advisory group including incarcerated parents and custodial caregivers. People with lived experience are in a good position to advise on what content is appropriate in a particular setting and what policies (such as eligibility criteria) might promote the best outcomes.
- Do annual “upgrades” or revisions.
- Offer tip sheets to course facilitators that allow for changes based on relevance.

- **Consider existing evaluation evidence.** When adopting an existing program, it is critical to consider evidence from prior evaluation work. Unlike most types of initiatives we discuss, there is some strong evaluation work (both quantitative and qualitative) on parenting programs, and we discuss this work later in our highlights. But we also caution that while we highlight programs that have an evidence base and have been designed and evaluated for incarcerated parents, we are not in a position to recommend any specific curriculum over another. We understand the interest in using an evidence-based practice and strong evaluations (such as randomized controlled trials), but an evaluation showing effectiveness in a particular context does not guarantee effectiveness in other contexts.⁵⁶ Each state should consider its specific population and whether the curriculum is relatable and therefore likely to have the best impact. Incarcerated parents’ needs can also vary greatly across facilities, and later we make recommendations for choosing appropriate content and allowing for flexibility.

We encourage taking a thoughtful approach to the use of evaluation findings, considering the findings along with appropriateness of content and advisory input. A thoughtful approach also involves considering characteristics of the sample included in the evaluation and how well the sample’s characteristics align with a given context. For example, some of the programs we highlight were evaluated on primarily White samples and others on primarily Black or Latino samples.

- **Promote eligibility and access.** A 2010 report indicated that only 27 percent of incarcerated mothers and 11 percent of incarcerated fathers took part in parenting programs.⁵⁷ A recent survey of facilities in 6 states⁵⁸ asked staff what percentage of incarcerated parents participated in programs, but many either left the item blank or responded that they did not know. This survey suggests that good evidence on participation rates is hard to find. Information NRCCFI has collected from parents indicates that many perceive it to be difficult to access parenting programs while incarcerated.

– **Construct eligibility criteria with an eye toward making the program as broadly accessible as reasonably possible.** Relatively low participation may be partly due to prisons’ eligibility requirements that limit the number of parents who can participate.

- **Reconsider exclusion of parents convicted of violent crimes.** This exclusion is significant because recent data shows that 58 percent of people in state prisons were convicted of violent crimes.⁵⁹ Discussions with correctional staff during NRCCFI’s technical assistance indicated a belief that people convicted of violent crimes are harmful to their children and should





not receive parenting programming. But Sara Wakefield and Kathleen Powell⁶⁰ noted the broad variability within the category of violent offenses and suggested that policy based on this category may not benefit children because the violent versus nonviolent conviction does not do a very good job of representing risk to children. In any case, it is good for parents to improve their parenting, and we urge states to consider whether exclusion criteria are beneficial to children.

- **Reconsider exclusion of people with a parenting role who are not named on a child’s birth certificate.**

Some states require being named on a child’s birth certificate to access classes. But adults who have a parental role without being so named can benefit from parenting programs (as can their children), and states should consider how they define parenthood for the purposes of access.

- **Develop a clear strategy for disseminating information to interested parents, including the incarcerated parent and the custodial caregiver.** Another factor limiting parents’ participation may be lack of information on program availability. NRCCFI’s scan of state department of corrections (DOC) websites indicated it is often difficult to find information on whether a program is available at a particular prison. Challenges facing state prisons include not only designing eligibility criteria that make classes accessible to many parents but also disseminating information about programs so that parents can easily find it. We recommend considering the following:

- Electronic posting for incarcerated parents via tablets, kiosks, and television
- Signs posted within housing dorms
- A well-designed, up-to-date website with current information about programs for custodial caregivers. See the [section on Communication Support](#) for additional information.

- **Provide adequate capacity.** While some facilities have low numbers of participating parents, NRCCFI has gathered information from families across the country indicating that some prisons have long wait lists. It is important for states to provide resources for adequate capacity, which includes ensuring that facilitators have appropriate training as discussed earlier.



Highlights from the Field

We highlight several parenting programs in current use to focus on aspects that states might consider when making programming decisions. As we explain below, we are not recommending any specific programs. States must consider their context and choose an approach that is appropriate for their incarcerated population and consistent with their goals, needs, and resources.

We used several factors to determine which programs to highlight. First, we included only programs that focus specifically on incarcerated parents (not on programs intended for more general populations or for specific populations such as child welfare). Second, we generally focused on programs that have a reasonable amount of information that is publicly available (such as from websites or published evaluation work). Third, we included programs demonstrating a variety of approaches (such as targeted at fathers only vs. mothers and fathers; with vs. without a visiting component). Finally, we excluded programs intended for mothers and children in a prison nursery in favor of programs more generally applicable to incarcerated parents.

Each program is described in terms of several features including (a) population of focus (i.e., incarcerated mothers, fathers, or both), (b) development, (c) curriculum and structure, and (d) evaluation evidence. There are many existing programs beyond the ones we describe here. For information on additional programs, see a report from [The Council of State Governments Justice Center](#)⁶¹ and a book chapter providing a comprehensive review of programs' evaluation results.⁶²

FAMILYWORKS

The FamilyWorks program is offered by the Osborne Association in New York State prisons.⁶³ Information on FamilyWorks comes primarily from Cramer and Jones's 2022 evaluation report of the Harlem FamilyWorks program.⁶⁴

Target population. Incarcerated parents (primarily fathers)

Development. FamilyWorks was developed by the Osborne Association to serve incarcerated parents based on its "Healthy Relationships" curriculum, helping parents "reflect on their own experiences growing up and on how those experiences have impacted their parenting styles."⁶⁵ Later, a community component was added to involve children, which included visiting as well as community activities. The Harlem FamilyWorks program was adapted as described by Cramer and Jones. Participants in one component did not necessarily need to have family in the other component (for example, parents could participate in Healthy Relationships even if they did not have a child in a community program).

Curriculum and structure. Cramer and Jones described the FamilyWorks program as including "14 one-hour sessions on parenting, coparenting, child development, and communication and relationship-building skills." The community component includes in-person and video visits, recreational programs and camps, and a Youth Action Council for older children. The Youth Experience Success (YES) program for youth was also developed, consisting of 30 one-hour sessions.

Evaluation evidence. Cramer and Jones's 2022 report described a multimethod process evaluation of the Harlem FamilyWorks program (an adapted version of FamilyWorks), including both Healthy Relationships for incarcerated fathers and YES for children. Data were collected using a variety of methods such



as examination of program materials, observation of sessions, and interviews with participants and staff. YES participants were all age 13 or older, and a majority were at least age 18. A large majority of incarcerated parents and youth were either Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino. Fifty-six percent of incarcerated parents were female and the rest male.

Findings showed that participants felt that Harlem FamilyWorks was helpful in strengthening family relationships. Other findings revealed that there were challenges recruiting parents and youth from the same families, that it was valuable to have staff with relevant lived experience (staff turnover was also a challenge), and that maintaining participant attendance was challenging (the original program was shortened, and stipends were offered to increase attendance).



PARENTING INSIDE OUT

Parenting Inside Out (PIO), provided by the Pathfinder Network,⁶⁶ is commercially available. Information about the program comes from the program's website as well as several published evaluation reports.⁶⁷

Target population. Incarcerated parents (mothers and fathers)

Development. PIO was developed in Oregon as a multisystemic intervention for incarcerated parents. PIO was based on a parent cognitive behavioral approach called parent management training (PMT). According to one source, "The core elements for PMT are the 'family management' skills of positive involvement, encouragement, noncoercive and nonaversive discipline, monitoring and supervision, and problem solving."⁶⁸

Curriculum and structure. PIO has several versions including a prison version (two lengths: 90 hours and 60 hours), a jail version (24 hours), and a community version (48 hours).⁶⁹ Topics include communication and problem-solving, connecting with your child (such as through letters and visits), child development, healthy families, and more.⁷⁰

Evaluation evidence. The 90-hour (36-session) version of PIO has been evaluated with a randomized controlled trial in Oregon prisons, examining short-term⁷¹ and long-term outcomes.⁷² Participants included a mix of mothers and fathers who were within 9 months of release, with 194 assigned to the program group and 165 to the control group. The evaluation sample was predominantly White (59 percent), with children ages 3–11.

The evaluation found that after program participation but while still in prison, parents reported experiencing less parenting stress and depression than control group parents, having greater positive interaction with their children, and being more likely to play an active role in their child's life. Other outcome variables did not show more favorable results for the program as compared to the control group. Long-term evaluation found differences favoring the PIO group on all three outcomes, with parents showing lower substance use problems, criminal behavior, and arrests.

INSIDEOUT DAD®

InsideOut Dad is commercially available from the National Fatherhood Initiative.⁷³ Information about the program comes from the program's website as well as two published evaluation reports.⁷⁴

Target population. Incarcerated fathers

Development. InsideOut Dad was developed for incarcerated fathers based on an existing program, Long-Distance Dads.⁷⁵

Curriculum and structure. InsideOut Dad has English and Spanish versions and consists of 12 core sessions with additional optional sessions. Example topics of core sessions include handling emotions, relationships, fathering from the inside, and others.

Evaluation evidence. Two evaluation reports are summarized here. First, InsideOut Dad was evaluated in New Jersey prisons with a sample of 309 program participants and a non-equivalent (not randomly assigned) control group of 104 fathers.⁷⁶ A large majority of each group were Black (71.7 percent of program participants and 81.9 percent of control group fathers). No information was provided on children's ages or the time remaining before participants were to be released. Short-term (post-program) outcomes were collected via surveys. The evaluation found evidence that, in comparison to the control group, the program group showed increases in several areas including calling children, fathering confidence, and parenting knowledge. Other outcome variables did not show more favorable results for the program as compared to the control group.

A second evaluation, which took place "in a western state," did not include a control group but examined pre-post differences on survey measures.⁷⁷ The evaluation included 713 fathers, all of whom were people of color, with 67 percent being Hispanic or Latino. Findings indicated that 3 out of 4 outcome variables showed better post-program scores compared to pre-program scores with decreases in partner conflict and distress and an increase in social support.





PROGRAMS CREATED BY PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF FAMILY INCARCERATION

Our final highlight features an approach rather than a specific program, and it involves some significant advantages and important caveats. The approach is for DOCs to consider supporting and fostering parenting programs created by people with lived experience of family incarceration. We provide brief descriptions of two examples followed by discussions of advantages and considerations about this approach.

Examples

Extended Family for Life – Alabama. Extended Family for Life is designed for incarcerated mothers and is offered in Alabama’s Julia Tutwiler Prison. The program resulted from a partnership between Extended Family (a nonprofit organization supporting children with incarcerated parents) and the Alabama Department of Corrections. The curriculum, which draws from Extended Family’s experience serving family members, consists of 15 sessions focusing on topics such as managing stress and healthy relationships, and is flexible enough to be appropriate for mothers with varying levels of contact with their children.

Fathering From Afar – Connecticut. The Fathering from Afar program was developed by an incarcerated father, William Holmes, in Connecticut’s Corrigan-Radgowski Correctional Center. Mr. Holmes developed and offered the program with some assistance from correctional staff. The program was shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic and had not reached the point of manualizing a curriculum.

Advantages and Considerations

Advantages of This Approach. A grassroots approach to program development is likely to have a number of significant advantages. We have recommended elsewhere that people with lived experience be involved in developing initiatives, and supporting parenting programs developed by impacted people could be an excellent way to capitalize on their knowledge.

- **Relevance.** One major advantage is that knowledge of needs and challenges faced by incarcerated parents and their families can be translated into content that is relevant to parents building or maintaining strong relationships while incarcerated and preparing for reentry.
- **Cultural and gender responsiveness.** People with lived experience will probably represent the culture and demographics of incarcerated parents in their state. A likely advantage is that their lived experience and cultural understanding will allow them to create content that is responsive to incarcerated parents' needs.

Considerations About This Approach. While this approach has significant advantages, there are also considerations that a DOC should think through.

- **Need for support.** One consideration noted earlier is that people with lived experience may not have the resources to fully develop and implement a program (particularly if the developer is incarcerated). Correctional staff may need to play a significant role, such as in facilitating partnerships, searching for materials and sources to flesh out and formalize a curriculum, and training facilitators.
- **External support.** A grassroots initiative almost by definition will begin outside a DOC. This means that to some extent, correctional staff must have an opportunity provided to them in the form of a willing partner. We acknowledge that this makes the approach different from any other initiative we have described, but we also suggest that correctional staff might seek out organizations that serve families of the incarcerated to explore interest.
- **Evaluation.** The two examples we briefly described have not, to our knowledge, been formally evaluated. It is likely that such grassroots programs will need a supportive partner to pursue evaluation. For example, correctional staff might work on establishing partnerships with evaluators. (We also note that most of the initiatives discussed in this action plan have not been evaluated using strong evaluation designs, so parenting programs developed by people with lived experience are not unusual in that sense.)
- **Sustainability.** A consideration related to program developers' need for support and resources involves sustainability. A program that depends on a limited group of people (or even a single individual) for its continuation is vulnerable to discontinuation. A DOC taking this approach should think about and plan for institutional support to sustain the program for the long term. Specific considerations might include providing resources (such as to develop the curriculum), training facilitators, and writing policy.





Communication Support: Phone and Video Calls, Mail, Email, and Other Approaches



Communication Support: Phone and Video Calls, Mail, Email, and Other Approaches

Technology has changed how families communicate and how state departments of corrections (DOCs) think about providing services. An analysis of 2016 data indicated that the most common way incarcerated parents and children had contact was still through letters (70 percent of parents sent a letter and 57 percent received one from their child), but phone calls were also common (60 percent of parents had phone calls with children). One-third of parents received visits and 13 percent received email from their child.⁷⁸

The landscape has shifted since 2016. A great deal of communication now involves smart phones and tablets for messaging, calls, and video chat. Widespread use of video chat, in particular, has changed communication—it allows for chat that is more like an in-person experience (though we emphasize that video should not replace the opportunity to visit in person).

With the advancement of technology, states are offering more ways than ever to communicate, and vendors have emerged to provide the technology, such as phone service and tablets, in correctional facilities. The shift toward newer technology for communication support was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person visits were widely suspended.⁷⁹ While COVID-related restrictions have eased,⁸⁰ DOCs must decide how best to provide communication support. Voice or video calls, U.S. mail and email, and providing information for families on DOC websites can supplement in-person visits to enhance parent-child relationships, helping to buffer the stresses of family incarceration. For some children who are unable to visit, communications discussed here might be the only ways to maintain the relationship. Further, frequent communication can help incarcerated parents maintain their parental identity, smoothing the ultimate reunion upon the parent's release.⁸¹ All forms of communication are subject to important institutional restrictions and can bring significant costs for families. We urge states to consider ways to make many forms of communication as accessible and flexible as possible for families.

Note: Our recommendations draw heavily on a recent Urban Institute report titled *Model Practices for Parents in Prisons and Jails: Reducing Barriers to Family Connections*.⁸²

For training and technical assistance resources, see [our list of potential providers](#).

Recommendations

- **Consider providing communication technologies.** Communication can be facilitated by providing parents with electronic resources such as kiosks or individual tablets, which proliferated when in-person visits were curtailed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These devices can be used for a variety of purposes such as email and voice or video calls. A number of states have contracted with vendors to provide these technologies, though there are concerns about associated costs.⁸³ If a DOC considers providing tablets or other technologies, we urge thinking about how to minimize or eliminate costs to families. Also, as we note in the section on **Child-Friendly Visiting**, we strongly recommend not using technology to replace in-person visits but rather as an additional means of communication.
- **Provide free or subsidized communications (voice or video calls and email).** Families often pay prohibitively high fees for phone or video calls (or video visits) and emails,⁸⁴ which may reduce the frequency of contact between children and incarcerated parents. States can support families by making all forms of communication free to incarcerated people and families. Several states mentioned later have done this with phone calls.⁸⁵ We urge other states to consider this and to extend the practice to all forms of communication including video calls and email. Considerations include the following:
 - **How to initiate the policy.** As of our writing, all states with free phone calls have used a legislative approach, but a DOC could also be the originator. For states interested in a legislative approach, links to existing legislation in the Highlights section below serve as models.
 - **How to provide funding.** Funding could come from the operating budget of the DOC, from an outside source, or from a community partner willing to pick up at least some of the cost.⁸⁶
 - **Communicating clearly about policies including limitations.** Families should be informed about free communications as well as any limitations, such as on how frequently free calls can be made. Our reading of legislation and DOC websites found that this is not mentioned for states with free calling, except for Massachusetts, which sets a limit of 1,000 minutes per month.
 - **Whom to include.** We strongly recommend these services be offered to incarcerated people in general, rather than targeting parents (e.g., those in parenting programs). Limiting free services to certain groups is likely to be controversial.





- **Provide staff support for making good use of calls.** Voice or video calls are immediate ways to communicate, which can be satisfying but can also be challenging in the moment, with no opportunity to reflect or regroup (e.g., if a child seems bored or experiences negative emotions). The Urban Institute report cited earlier⁸⁷ suggests that staff could provide support to parents ahead of time and afterward to maximize the value of the time they have with children. For implementation, states might borrow from resources on support for visiting,⁸⁸ which discuss things like pre-planning to build on the parent's strengths and address children's needs, preparing to deal with a variety of reactions from children, etc. Staff might also work with parents to reflect on how calls went and how challenges might be addressed in the future.

- **Review (and improve) current information for families on DOC websites.** Informative and easy-to-find websites can provide valuable information on communication through

visiting, calls (voice and video), mail, and email. Lacking clear information on policies about calls, email, etc. can be a barrier to family communication. We recommend that DOCs do the following:

- **Review current information offered for families on department websites.** Analyses of state corrections websites in 2020 and 2023 found that sites often did not provide very high-quality information about calls, mail, etc. Staff may find that existing content is not easily accessible from the site's main page, lacks detail, is out of date, or is not particularly easy to navigate. Sites should also provide important current information, such as about changes to visiting schedules (note that in 2014 New York passed ["Ashley's Law" requiring prisons to keep visiting schedules up to date](#)). An initial review can help determine where improvements are needed.
- **Consider providing caregiver guides to complement information about phone calls, mail, etc.** A well-designed caregiver's guide or handbook can be made available on a DOC website. Caregiver guides tend to be in document form and are longer and more detailed than typical website content. In addition to policies on communications, a guide can also provide tips on co-parenting with an incarcerated parent, how to answer children's questions, etc. See examples highlighted later from Louisiana and Maryland.
- **Seek input from family members of incarcerated people on how easy it is to find information and what information they would find useful.** Getting input from people who need the information is critical. This might be done by requesting feedback from people who visit the web page or by recruiting a sample of people, then asking them to find information and discuss their experience.⁸⁹
- **Explore other states' websites (including those highlighted later) for ideas about content and format.** States will need to decide what information to provide, how detailed it should be, and the appropriate format. Examples highlighted later show several different approaches that can be effective.

- **Review policies regarding calls and consider where barriers can be reduced.** While voice calls are very common between incarcerated parents and children, there are barriers that may keep some families from participating, and we urge policymakers to consider them. If they are deemed necessary, it is critical to provide clear information regarding policies on the department website. We recommend the following:

- **Consider eliminating announcements that a call originated in a prison.** When a call is received from an incarcerated person, sometimes it begins with a recorded announcement that the call originated in a prison. Some parents and caregivers have decided that their children will not be told where the parent is, so the caregiver may avoid calls to prevent unwanted disclosure. It can also be problematic if others (e.g., non-family) are within hearing distance.
- **Provide clear information on calling policies.** It is important for families to have clear information on calling policies such as how to provide payment, what could cause calling privileges to be lost, if there are any limits on free calls (in states that have them), whether a dropped call counts as a call, etc. Lacking this information can act as a barrier to parent-child communication.

- **Review policies regarding mail.** Letters are the most common way incarcerated parents and children communicate.⁹⁰ Compared to visits or calls, letters are less immediate but can allow different kinds of communication. In writing, children may be better able to express feelings of anger or hurt⁹¹ while parents can think about and plan what to say.⁹² Letters and emails can also be saved and reread. A review of communication with incarcerated parents showed mail to be associated with positive child outcomes such as lower depression.⁹³

DOCs have restrictions on what can be sent through the mail, and some of these restrictions can limit children's ability to express themselves to parents. Examples include prohibiting greeting cards or mail that includes paint, chalk, crayon, or markers. Another policy in some states is to deliver only black and white copies of mail. Writing letters is less common in society today, and some children do not know how to write them.⁹⁴ Prohibitions can make letter-writing more difficult or less fun, and less likely to happen. We therefore urge states to be sure restrictions are necessary and to clearly communicate the restrictions to families (e.g., on a website as discussed later).

- **Consider other ways to facilitate incarcerated parents' role in children's lives.** In addition to voice or video calls, mail, and email, there are other ways DOCs could make it possible for incarcerated parents to act in the parenting role. Examples include the following:
 - **Allowing parents to be recorded.** Incarcerated parents can be recorded reading books ("books on tape"), singing lullabies, etc. and the recordings can be sent to their children.⁹⁵ Indiana's "Read to Me" program, highlighted later, is an example.
 - **Setting up teleconferencing.** Teleconferencing could allow an incarcerated parent to participate remotely in school meetings (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, IEP meetings), children's medical appointments, or child welfare meetings. For an example, see Washington's website about teacher conferences⁹⁶ or Florida's law requiring incarcerated parents to be included in case planning for all child welfare cases.⁹⁷
 - **Allowing access to parenting-related websites.** Access to limited online sites could be provided. For example, sites with parenting information could be an excellent resource.
 - **Providing materials to create cards for children.** It is possible to create opportunities for parents to draw, paint, etc., to make cards (e.g., birthday greetings) for their children.





Highlights from the Field

FREE PHONE CALLS

At the time of this writing, five states have made phone calls free to incarcerated people: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Minnesota. Each of these states used a legislative approach to implement the initiative (see the endnote for links to legislation; [**New York City has also made phone calls free to people held in city jails**](#)).⁹⁸ It could also be possible for a DOC to implement a policy funded with a budget item. Examples of statements about free calling policies on DOC websites include those for [**California**](#) and [**Minnesota**](#). We note two important things. First, in all five states, calls are provided for free to incarcerated people in general—they are *not* targeted at a particular group (e.g., those in parenting classes). Second, there do not appear to be specified limits to the frequency or duration of calls mentioned in the legislation or the websites for any of the states except Massachusetts, which has a limit of 1,000 minutes per month.⁹⁹

ONLINE INFORMATION FOR CAREGIVERS AND FAMILY

We highlight several states' websites, each using a different approach to provide information that can support family communication.

- [**Virginia's Website with Information on Communication Policies**](#). This website has separate tabs for information on Sending Mail, Phone Correspondence, and Visiting an Inmate. Each one is easy to read and informative, with information on what is allowable (e.g., "Who Inmates Can Call"; "Dress Code" for visits), what limitations there are (e.g., length of calls; what can and cannot be mailed), and how to make contact (e.g., "Funding Inmate Phone Calls"; "Apply for Visitation"). One useful feature is a [**video**](#) clearly describing mail policies and procedures.
- [**Louisiana's Informational Handbook for Caregivers**](#). Louisiana's handbook is a document posted online, rather than a web page, and it is much more extensive and detailed than typical web pages (e.g., the handbook consists of long-form text rather than bullet points). Some chapters provide specific information on communication such as "Visiting



a Parent in Prison” with visiting policies and “Communicating with a Parent in Prison” with information on mail, email, and phone calls. Other chapters provide tips on parenting such as “Co-Parenting,” “Stress Points in the Criminal Justice System,” and “Answering Children’s Questions.” In addition to the comprehensive handbook, individual prisons in the state have web pages with visiting information.

- **Maryland’s Website (Including Pages for Each Facility) with Information on Communication Policies.** Maryland’s website is similar to both Virginia and Louisiana. The site has a button linking to visiting policy information like Virginia’s site. There are also links for “Keeping in Touch” (phone services), “Sending Mail,” “Sending Packages,” and “Sending Money.” Additionally, there is a menu item for “Incarcerated Individuals Reference Guide (PDF),” which links to a document with information on visiting, phone contact, etc. in handbook form.
- **Connecticut’s Children’s Website.** The State of Connecticut has the first legislatively funded statewide Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative. The initiative has a children’s website designed to share accurate information relevant to having a loved one who is incarcerated. A friendly cartoon dog named CHIP whose mom is incarcerated helps children learn about prison (e.g., difference between contact visits and non-contact visits) and court (where children can find out what words like “witness” and “defendant” mean). They can also ask CHIP questions and receive a response. Other states might consider linking to this site if their information is substantially similar.

PROGRAM FOR PARENTS TO BE RECORDED (“READ TO ME” PROGRAM)

The Indiana Department of Corrections’ libraries established a partnership with the Indiana State Library Development Office to offer the “Read to Me” program.¹⁰⁰ The program began in 2000. In 2023–2024, the library provided books and other supplies (e.g., DVDs and CDs) to 5 correctional facilities.¹⁰¹ The program is partially supported by donations of books to the state library. During 2023–2024, about 165 incarcerated parents made recordings, which were mailed to over 315 children. A personal communication received from the state library indicated that challenges include the use of DVDs and CDs, which are not preferred recording media for many families, and staffing shortages. The state library is exploring other options.





Prison Nurseries

Prison Nurseries

There are currently 9 states with prison nurseries. New York operates the oldest at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, established in 1901.¹⁰² The newest and ninth nursery opened in January 2025 in Missouri.¹⁰³ (The [Federal Bureau of Prisons has nursery programs](#), but this action plan addresses only nurseries in state prisons.) In nursery settings, infants are allowed to remain with the incarcerated mother for periods ranging from 12 months to 3 years. An important goal for prison nurseries is to develop a bond between mother and infant, which should promote children's resilience.

We note that while a number of states' rationales specifically focus on mothers, bonding with fathers is also critical and states should recognize this (e.g., including fathers if considering alternative sentencing approaches, which we recommend later). For training and technical assistance resources, see [our list of potential providers](#).



Recommendations

- **Consider whether to create a prison nursery.** The incarceration of a parent can be traumatic for children due to separation. When an infant's mother is incarcerated, there is concern about the child's ability to form secure attachments;¹⁰⁴ a large literature demonstrates the importance of attachment for healthy child development.¹⁰⁵ Attachment theory says that children need a consistent relationship with a responsive caregiver,¹⁰⁶ and prison nurseries are intended to facilitate this by keeping a child with the mother during incarceration. But there is little evidence of the extent to which prison nurseries promote attachment, and there have been critiques suggesting that they are not well-suited to the promotion of attachment and well-being.¹⁰⁷ If a state is considering a prison nursery, it should prioritize maximizing the likelihood of attachment by designing nursery policies that minimize separations or by implementing alternatives to incarceration for pregnant people.
- **When Implementing a Nursery:**
 - **Structure nursery policy to maintain mother-infant relationships.** It is important to structure nursery policy (including mothers' eligibility, length of stay, and policies regarding violations and removal) so that mothers and infants remain together, both during incarceration and afterward. One option to help maintain mother-infant relationships is to design policy so that the child does not "age out" of the nursery before the mother's release. Another example is policy for handling mothers' behavioral issues. It is important to ensure that, while the possibility of removal from a nursery (and separation of mother and child) exists if there are significant safety issues, this possibility is not used as a punishment or as a threat to encourage behavioral compliance. A restorative justice approach—as opposed to a punitive disciplinary one—could reduce the likelihood of a mother's

removal from the nursery and separation from the child. It also seems reasonable that when a mother with a newborn child becomes incarcerated, the mother and newborn could enter a nursery and experience the same benefits realized by those who are pregnant upon incarceration.

- **Design the nursery to be child centered.** A child-centered nursery would be designed with children’s needs as the primary goal, and we make two types of recommendations.
 - **Promote healthy child development.** All aspects of children’s development should be considered including cognitive, social, emotional, and psychomotor. Example recommendations include the following:
 - **Partner with community organizations with relevant expertise.** Children can benefit from having staff with expertise in social work and child development,¹⁰⁸ and community partners can potentially fill that role. A community partner might either operate the nursery (such as Hour Children for New York’s nurseries¹⁰⁹) or provide high-quality services (we later highlight Washington Corrections Center for Women’s partnership with an Early Head Start provider¹¹⁰).
 - **Provide a variety of positive experiences for children.** Positive experiences can involve play, socializing, exploration, outdoor activities, and sensory stimulation. Sensory stimulation includes interesting things to look at (such as brightly colored murals), to touch (such as a variety of textures and objects), and to listen to (such as music and being read to).
 - **Minimize stress on mothers and children.** It has been argued that prison nurseries may lead to stress and trauma due to constant observation, the potential for discipline (including removal of the child), and sometimes difficult relationships between people who are incarcerated.¹¹¹ A challenge is to design an environment that minimizes stressors for mothers and children. We want to be clear that the concerns about stressors do not preclude children from spending time with their incarcerated parents, either in a nursery or while visiting. On the contrary, we argue that it is in children’s best interest to have strong relationships with their parents and that any time children spend inside a correctional institution should be in an environment designed to be child-centered and to support the child-parent bond. We recommend the following as example strategies:
 - **Be thoughtful about assigning staff to a nursery.** We made a similar recommendation regarding visiting staff (see [Child-Friendly Visiting](#)). Ideally, staff will be trained in trauma-informed practice as well as child development basics and show an interest in working with mothers and children.
 - **Provide as much privacy as possible.** Provide individual rooms or cells for each mother and child, ideally with soundproofing. Other ideas include movable partitions or curtains in a common area and private visiting spaces separate from the general population’s visiting area.
 - **Build a sense of community.** One way to build community is by establishing strong communication between and among security staff, mothers, and community organizations.
- **Consider other sentencing approaches for pregnant women.** Two recent policy briefs¹¹² summarize state laws addressing incarceration and family separation. Many of the laws focus on sentencing (such as alternatives to incarceration for pregnant and postpartum people). This focus seems warranted given



anecdotal reports that during the COVID-19 pandemic, some jurisdictions stopped sentencing pregnant women to incarceration. If that change could be made for disease prevention, it could be made to promote children's well-being. The briefs also provide information on eligibility requirements and funding.

- **Sentence mitigation due to caregiving.** One approach involves a law requiring consideration of caregiver status at sentencing. An example is an [Illinois law](#) that allows parenting status to be considered as a factor in avoiding or minimizing a sentence of incarceration.¹¹³
 - **Alternative sentences.** Another approach is to create alternative sentencing programs. Alternative sentencing laws vary considerably. Examples include [Illinois's law](#) allowing pretrial electronic home monitoring for pregnant people and [Tennessee's law](#) allowing, in some cases, a temporary furlough of up to six months for childbirth and mother-child bonding.¹¹⁴ Washington's Department of Corrections has [a clear website explaining the state's Parenting Sentencing Alternative](#).
 - **Community-based alternatives.** A number of state laws provide for sentencing pregnant or postpartum women to community-based residential settings where they can live with their children. Examples include [Texas](#) and [Wisconsin](#), whose laws establish nurseries in community settings for mothers and their children.¹¹⁵
 - **Proximity laws.** Some states have laws focusing on minimizing the distance of incarceration from a child.¹¹⁶ An example is a [New York law](#) requiring a parent to be placed in the correctional institution closest to their child's home.
- **Provide birthing support.** Some states without prison nurseries provide pregnancy and birthing support by doulas through nonprofit organizations. See links in the endnote for more information.¹¹⁷
 - **Provide lactation/breastfeeding support.** A number of states have implemented programs to support lactation or breastfeeding. The endnote provides links for more information.¹¹⁸
 - **Explore sustainable funding sources.** One option for funding is the state department of correction's (DOC) operating budget. Other sources might include federal funding through TANF grants, Medicaid including CHIP, and the WIC nutrition program. We also note the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' approach to raising funds through a vendor surcharge (the "First Chance Trust Fund"), which could be applied to a prison nursery.



Characteristics of Existing Prison Nurseries

Rather than highlighting specific state efforts as we do for other types of initiatives, we offer summaries of six topic areas related to prison nurseries. We then provide summaries of how nine states' nurseries are approaching these areas along with important considerations to keep in mind. We take this approach because we generally do not have a clear idea of what nursery characteristics are most likely to promote mother-child attachment, healthy child development, and parental identity.

Prison nurseries vary in a number of ways. States wishing to initiate a prison nursery must make many decisions, and the characteristics of currently operating programs can be helpful in defining the major features. We describe some of these features based on information from DOC websites, journal articles about specific nurseries, a 2018 article providing information on all existing nurseries,¹¹⁹ and documents published by community partners providing services. Information on each nursery appears in Table 1 along with citations. We contacted state DOCs to try to verify the information in Table 1 whenever possible.



CAPACITY (NUMBER OF BEDS)

Summary. Nursery capacity is typically defined in terms of number of beds for incarcerated mothers. Of the existing nurseries for which information could be obtained, the smallest is 10 beds in 2 nurseries at Illinois's Decatur Correctional Center and the Indiana Women's Prison. The largest is 26 beds at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York. (Note that the Taconic Correctional Facility across the street from Bedford Hills has an additional 15 beds.) Most appear to allow only a single child for each mother, but Ohio's nursery has space for one mother with twins. Note that we do not generally have information on how many mothers and children currently reside in nurseries, though one state reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, they did not admit new mothers because courts were not sentencing pregnant women to prison and that, of this writing, they did not have any mothers or children in residence.

Considerations. An important consideration is estimating how many eligible mothers a state is likely to have. If a good estimate is not available, reviewing existing state data on the number of incarcerated women who gave birth in recent years during their imprisonment and records pertaining to potential eligibility criteria the state is considering could assist with formulating a capacity estimate. Further, consider the staff to incarcerated mother/child ratio, residential and programming space requirements, and whether additional medical or other space will be necessary to operate a successful nursery program within each facility. Additionally, a state might look at existing nurseries described in Table 1 and consider the capacity of an existing nursery in a state with a similar population.



ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS AND CHILD'S MAXIMUM AGE

Summary. It is very common for nurseries to require the participating parent to (a) be pregnant when incarcerated and (b) have an expected release date within a certain time period. The period sets a de facto limit on the maximum age for children in the nursery (though some nurseries grant requests to extend the stay). The shortest period is 12 months for nurseries in New York and Texas, and the longest is 36 months (3 years) for Ohio's nursery. The most common period is 30 months (3 nurseries), with a median of 24 months.

Considerations. One consideration is determining a maximum age for children in a nursery. It is not clear to the authors what would be an optimal maximum children's age, and this lack of clarity was also expressed in a recent symposium on prison nurseries worldwide.¹²⁰ Another practical consideration regarding eligibility requirements concerns the number of eligible mothers; the shorter the maximum sentence, the smaller the group of eligible mothers will be.

EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Summary. Documentation for specific exclusion criteria was available for only some nurseries. All nurseries exclude mothers for certain types of convictions, particularly violent crimes and crimes against children. Other exclusion criteria may involve medical or health issues (including mental health) or functional impairment.

Considerations. An important consideration is how restrictive exclusion criteria should be. We argued earlier that it can be problematic to exclude any parent with a violent conviction from parenting classes. We understand that prison nurseries are different from parenting classes and that states have a keen interest in the behavior of parents raising their children within a correctional facility. But we also acknowledge the wide range of crimes deemed violent and encourage states to consider carefully what types of crimes warrant exclusion from a nursery. Another consideration is that mothers will likely parent their children after their release from incarceration, and it is in both the child's and the mother's best interest that they have as strong a bond as possible (which can be promoted by inclusion in a prison nursery).

SERVICES/PROGRAMS OFFERED

Summary. Documentation shows that all prison nurseries provide support services and programs. Many require participation in parenting classes, and participation may be required in other services (such as therapy) as well. Health-related services are also frequently available for mothers and children, as are services to prepare mothers for reentry (such as family sessions and GED classes).

Considerations. This is the one area in which we feel comfortable highlighting an existing state initiative. We recommend collaborating with community partners who can provide evidence-based services. An example is the nursery at the Washington Corrections Center for Women, which partners with an Early Head Start provider, Puget Sound Educational Service District.¹²¹ Services are provided by trained teachers, and mothers get assistance with their children from caregivers (other incarcerated women) while engaged in other tasks. Early Head Start has shown effectiveness at improving young children's cognitive, language, and emotional development and reducing aggressiveness.¹²² This type of partnership for evidence-based services has the potential to provide substantial benefit to the child and the mother.





REMOVAL FROM NURSERY

Summary. Reasons for removal from a nursery were generally not discussed in the documentation we reviewed. When this information was available, examples of reasons included child abuse or neglect and fighting.

Considerations. We note that removals are very consequential, given that (a) a critical goal of nurseries is to promote parent-child bonding and (b) that bond can be disrupted with potentially harmful consequences upon premature removal. Policy regarding removals is therefore vitally important and should be drafted with careful consideration of effects on children. For example, while we acknowledge that removal could conceivably be warranted to safeguard children, it should not be used as a punishment for mothers.

FUNDING

Summary. Documentation of prison nurseries rarely addresses funding, but in two cases states indicated that nurseries were funded (at least initially) by grants and donations. One is Indiana's Wee Ones Nursery (WON) and the other is West Virginia's Keeping Infant Development Successful (KIDS) nursery. Missouri's nursery is also funded at least partially through a "Correctional Center Nursery Program Fund" (established by the law creating the nursery).

Considerations. An important consideration with funding is sustainability. An example of a funding strategy that might endure is a Pennsylvania law, nicknamed the "First Chance Trust Fund,"¹²³ which applies a 1 percent surcharge on vendors with DOC contracts exceeding \$5 million. Funds from that surcharge are deposited into an account seeking to provide supportive programming and scholarships to youth considered at higher risk, including youth who have experienced the incarceration of a caregiver. A similar funding stream could be considered to support prison nursery programs. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, establishing partnerships with community providers could offset costs while encouraging sustainability through collaboration. Finally, states might also consider federal programs that could support the care and programming of children and mothers participating in the nursery program such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grants; Medicaid, including the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP); and the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program.

Table 1 | Prison Nursery Characteristics

Maximum Child Age (Months)	Capacity (Number of Mothers)	Eligibility	Exclusions	Services	Removal from Nursery
Illinois (est. 2007) ¹²⁴					
24 ¹²⁵	10 ¹²⁶	Pregnant with less than 18–24 months to serve ¹²⁷	Screening for mental and physical health and criminal background ¹²⁸	Individual and group therapy and family services counseling after release ¹²⁹	NA
Indiana (est. 2008) ¹³⁰					
26 ¹³¹	10 ¹³²	Pregnant with 26 months or less to serve ¹³³	Must be reviewed if charged with a sex crime or any type of violence, abuse, or endangerment of a child; severe functional impairment ¹³⁴	Child development program; educational (GED) and vocational training; substance use treatment ¹³⁵	NA
Nebraska (est. 1994) ¹³⁶					
18 ¹³⁷	NA (but there have been as many as 11) ¹³⁸	Release date no more than 18 months after child's birth; agrees to complete prenatal classes ¹³⁹	Segregated status; history of violence; conviction for serious child abuse ¹⁴⁰	Parenting classes mandatory; GED classes required if mother lacks high school diploma ¹⁴¹	Main reason reported in 2001 was fighting with other people who are incarcerated ¹⁴²
New York – Bedford Hills (est. 1901) ¹⁴³ and Taconic (est. 1990) ¹⁴⁴					
12 ¹⁴⁵	26 (Bedford Hills) ¹⁴⁶ 15 (Taconic) ¹⁴⁷	Pregnant when incarcerated and meet program criteria ¹⁴⁸	Not fit for program as determined by medical or mental health staff; ¹⁴⁹ history of arson or child abuse ¹⁵⁰	Prenatal class and parenting program ¹⁵¹	NA
Ohio (est. 2001) ¹⁵²					
36 ¹⁵³	20 ¹⁵⁴	Mother gives birth in custody ¹⁵⁵ and is serving 4th or 5th-degree felony with a release date in at most 36 months ¹⁵⁶	Crimes against children ¹⁵⁷	Family training courses ¹⁵⁸	Failure to maintain appropriate conduct and follow rules ¹⁵⁹
South Dakota (est. 1998) ¹⁶⁰					
1 ¹⁶¹	12 ¹⁶²	Pregnant with eligibility for parole or next review date within 30 months ¹⁶³	37 offenses (violent, sexual, or crimes against children); child abuse; pending charges or outstanding warrants may also be considered ¹⁶⁴	South Dakota DOC provides a list of required parenting programs ¹⁶⁵	Mental health issues ¹⁶⁶

Maximum Child Age (Months)	Capacity (Number of Mothers)	Eligibility	Exclusions	Services	Removal from Nursery
Washington (est. 1999) ¹⁶⁷					
30 ¹⁶⁸	10 (could expand to 20) ¹⁶⁹	Pregnant upon arrival; approved by Child Protective Services; minimum security; sentence of at most 30 months at time of birth ¹⁷⁰	Contact order with minor children; conviction for a crime against children or a sexual offense and/or sexual motivation ¹⁷¹	Programs in parenting, child development, family life skills, and others; Early Head Start ¹⁷²	A number of reasons, e.g., violation of guidelines, change in security level, incapable of caring for children, not in compliance with case plan, provides false info during screening, DCYF/CPS recommends termination, participation presents a serious/imminent danger to the health/safety of the child(ren) ¹⁷³
West Virginia (est. 2009) ¹⁷⁴					
18 ¹⁷⁵	5 ¹⁷⁶	Pregnant and eligible for release by 18 months; eligible for Early Head Start ¹⁷⁷	Court order directing no contact with minors; history of sexual or violent offenses, crimes against children, or other offenses that might put children in jeopardy ¹⁷⁸	Educational and transitional programs ¹⁷⁹	Mother's or child's health requires discharge; disciplinary status requires discharge; abuse or neglect ¹⁸⁰
Missouri (est. 2025) ¹⁸¹					
18 ¹⁸²	14 ¹⁸³	Give birth while in custody; release date within 18 months ¹⁸⁴	Conviction for dangerous felony, sexual offense, or offense against family ¹⁸⁵	NA	NA

Note: "NA" = Not Available





Considerations for Future Work



Considerations for Future Work

This action plan focuses on how state departments of corrections (DOCs) can use statewide initiatives to support children and families with incarcerated parents. The focus is on corrections because this is where many current initiatives exist and where there is significant interest. But we acknowledge that states can make efforts in other areas, which we discuss here.

Areas to Be Addressed in Future Work

- **Initiatives to support children and families through state agencies other than corrections.** Examples might include departments of child welfare and education (e.g., providing training to caseworkers and teachers regarding needs of children and families with an incarcerated parent). Another possibility involves state police; for example, New York recently passed a law directing the superintendent of state police to implement a child-sensitive arrest protocol.¹⁸⁶
- **Broad-based state initiatives.** The focus of broad-based initiatives is not on a single agency and may involve a task force or other coordinating body with a broad mandate. Children with incarcerated parents touch a variety of state agencies and services including corrections, child welfare, education, and health. Their engagement with numerous systems highlights the value of providing support that is not siloed within a particular agency. The 2009 CSG Justice Center report for federal policymakers highlighted the importance of coordination across systems, and we reiterate that point.¹⁸⁷ Future work should focus on initiatives with a broad mandate to advocate for children with incarcerated parents, which might include working with different state agencies to promote coordination, organizing or providing appropriate training to professionals in various agencies, advocating for specific legislation or policies, etc. Examples of current initiatives include the [Connecticut Children with Incarcerated Parents initiative](#), [Illinois' Commission on Children of Incarcerated Parents](#), and [Oklahoma's Children of Incarcerated Parents Advisory Committee](#) (part of the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth).
- **Information-sharing initiatives.** While we encourage future cross-agency coordination, we have some concerns with sharing information across agencies about children who have an incarcerated parent. We do see real



potential benefits to data sharing. A good example is a California policy to suspend child support enforcement if a parent becomes incarcerated.¹⁸⁸ We support this policy, which requires sharing information. We're also aware of conversations happening among state legislators and district administrators about sharing information with schools so schools can support children whose parents become incarcerated.

But sharing this information across agencies raises concerns about privacy and stigma. Any sharing needs to be well thought through and include solid protections and guardrails, keeping children's and families' well-being at the forefront. Future work should provide guidance and examples, but right now we note that steps can be taken without sharing information to support children with incarcerated parents. One example involves schools—a [CSG Justice Center publication](#) describes ways that educators can build supportive environments in which children feel they can talk about their experiences.¹⁸⁹

- **Examples of existing initiatives from other jurisdictions.** This action plan focuses only on highlights from state DOCs, but other jurisdictions may also have implemented initiatives worth considering. Local jails might provide useful examples of visiting practices, parenting programs, communication support, etc. There also might be helpful models from prison systems outside the U.S., e.g., for nurseries such as one at Germany's Preungesheim prison.¹⁹⁰
- **Implementing initiatives in local jails.** At any given time, jails incarcerate fewer people than state prisons, but numbers are still large (in 2022, local jails held 663,100 people¹⁹¹ compared to 1,070,834 in state prisons¹⁹²). We do not know of a specific estimate of children with a parent held in a local jail, but the number must be considerable. Local jurisdictions should therefore consider how their jail systems can support parent-child relationships and parental identity. Many of the same issues identified in this action plan will apply to local jail systems. Communication support should be provided to facilitate phone calls, mail, etc., and our recommendations for prisons implementing child-friendly visiting will likely be relevant to jails (we note Jane Siegel and Laura Napolitano's research indicating that jail visitors and incarcerated people receiving visits showed relatively low satisfaction with visiting hours, visiting rooms, and treatment of children, and a belief that child-friendly modifications would be helpful¹⁹³).

But jails will also have some different considerations, such as incarcerated parents making more frequent transitions due to relatively short sentences and use of jails for pretrial detention. This could affect participation in parenting programs, which can still be useful but would likely need to have a relatively short duration (note that Parenting Inside-Out has a jail version that is shorter than prison versions¹⁹⁴). We also note that jail systems may be able to leverage other local (e.g., county) resources, potentially partnering with county health or social services departments to implement supports for incarcerated parents and their children. Local jails present a different context from state prisons, and we therefore recommend work focusing specifically on implementing initiatives in jails.

- **Evaluation work on initiatives to support children and families.** We noted earlier the relative lack of strong evaluation work in this area. Some parenting programs have been assessed using strong evaluation designs but even there, it would be helpful to see how well findings generalize across states with different populations of incarcerated people. Evaluation with long-term follow-ups and child well-being outcomes is particularly needed. Evaluation work on all types of initiatives could help identify evidence-based practices, providing significant guidance to states in determining what initiatives to implement. States can play a role through willingness to engage in evaluation work (e.g., partnering with organizations with relevant expertise).





Conclusion

Children with incarcerated parents face significant challenges, and the 2009 *Action Plan for Federal Policymakers*¹⁹⁵ was an important step toward promoting resilience. We reiterate the federal action plan's point that improving children's outcomes "...requires the commitment and cooperation of the many systems that provide services for, or come in contact with, incarcerated parents and their children." Many of these systems exist at the state level and their involvement is critical.

The focus on DOCs in the current action plan is a logical starting point because a majority of state requests for assistance to NRCCFI have come from corrections. Further, DOCs' policies significantly affect the type and frequency of contact incarcerated parents can have with their children. That said, we see the current action plan as a first step and recommend future work broadening the scope to other state agencies as well as to local jail systems.

DOCs wishing to implement initiatives will have many decisions to make. We believe that having information about issues and challenges to consider and examples (highlights) of existing initiatives can help state policymakers think through the available options to make better informed decisions.

Appendix

Background Literature Summary

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Toxic Stress

- Incarceration of a child's family member is recognized as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) with potential for long-term effects on behavior and physical and mental health.¹⁹⁶
 - It is important to note that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) distinguishes different types of ACEs, with family incarceration falling in the “household challenges” category; it is not considered a type of child maltreatment (in other words, it is different from abuse or neglect).¹⁹⁷
- Toxic stress overwhelms a child's ability to cope, especially in the absence of a buffering adult relationship.¹⁹⁸
 - It affects bodily systems, including the brain, increasing susceptibility to future stressors.
 - It can increase the likelihood of behavioral problems, mental and physical health problems, and learning difficulties.

Exposure of Children with Incarcerated Parents to Stressors

- Stressors can include witnessing the arrest,¹⁹⁹ traumatic separation from a caregiver,²⁰⁰ shame and stigmatization,²⁰¹ change of residence and/or caregiver (even homelessness or foster care),²⁰² and economic deprivation.²⁰³

Caregiver Stressors

- Custodial caregivers may suffer from some of the same stressors as children (such as economic deprivation, shame and stigmatization, and change in residence), reducing their ability to cope and support children.²⁰⁴

Incarcerated Parent Identity

- Early adulthood (when many people are incarcerated) is a formative time for identity that is central for developing into adult roles. “Agency,” or feeling in control of decisions and results, is key to identity development.²⁰⁵
- Parent identity may be difficult to maintain while incarcerated, as increased difficulty performing expectations of the parent role undermines the parent's sense of agency.²⁰⁶

Role of Race, Marginalization, and Poverty

- Black, Latino, and Indigenous people have disproportionate likelihood of incarceration,²⁰⁷ and their children have disproportionate likelihood of parental incarceration.²⁰⁸
- Overrepresentation of parents in the criminal legal system²⁰⁹ combines with disproportionate racial representation in child welfare systems,²¹⁰ disparities in health care,²¹¹ and disparities in education.²¹²
- The total adversity from all sources (including child welfare system, health care, and education) can increase the chances of experiencing parental incarceration as a toxic stressor.

Recent Theme: Youth- and Community-Participatory Research

- Research has been shifting to a participatory approach using qualitative methods to emphasize the voices of youth²¹³ and community members²¹⁴ regarding the experience of family incarceration and their recommendations.
- Recommendations are far-reaching, including making visiting and phone calls more accessible (or free),²¹⁵ providing resources for maintaining mental health (including counseling and informal support networks),²¹⁶ and involving youth and families affected by incarceration in developing policies and practices to serve them.²¹⁷

Recent Theme: Promoting Resilience

- Youth have objected to stigmatization based on earlier quantitative research; they have advocated for a focus on their resilience and flourishing, recognizing their pursuit of hopes and dreams (such as academic achievement)²¹⁸ and “honor[ing] our inner strength.”²¹⁹
- Recent quantitative research supports a focus on resilience (for example, many young people thrive despite having a parent or family member who is incarcerated).²²⁰
- A focus on resilience does not mean we can rely on resilience, leaving youth to fend for themselves and “be resilient.” While recognizing resilience, it is critical to advocate for policies that support youth and address the challenges they need to overcome.
- Building or maintaining relationships with adults can help support resilience by buffering the effects of trauma and toxic stress.²²¹
- Quantitative research supports two avenues, associated with positive outcomes, for building or maintaining supportive relationships for children with incarcerated parents: ²²²
 - Relationships with parents (both custodial caregiver and incarcerated parents) are associated with higher academic achievement and mental health.²²³
 - Relationships with teachers and other adults at school are associated with higher academic achievement and lower depression.²²⁴

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