

How to talk about . . .

Jails and Prisons

. . . with Children

A Caregiver's Guide



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The mission of the Oregon Department of Corrections is to promote public safety by holding offenders accountable for their actions and reducing the risk of future criminal behavior.

Revised by the Children's Justice Alliance, 2010

Why this booklet was created.

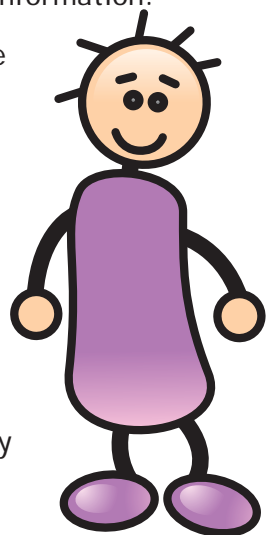
When parents are arrested or put in jail or prison, their children are often scared, confused and upset. This is not a rare event. According to US Department of Justice, in 2008, there were 1.5 million children under 18 years old with an incarcerated parent. Twenty-two percent of these children were under 5 years old. Often, people don't talk about having a family member in prison because it is very personal information. Children, though, may have a lot of questions.

Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is for caregivers, for family members of the child, and for youth who are seeking their own information. This booklet is designed to help moms, dads and caregivers answer children's questions about jail and prison. When children and families receive accurate information, they can understand and cope with some of the stress they may experience when a relative goes to jail or prison.

Most children are curious about jails and prisons, and many adults don't know what these institutions are like. The Oregon Department of Corrections has put together some questions and answers to provide factual information.

This booklet is written to provide accurate information to families of inmates. It is intended to promote open and honest communication between children and adults. Ideally, even children old enough to read it on their own will read it with their caregiver. Children too young to comprehend it on their own can also benefit if an adult talks with them about the topics in this booklet. Children and youth benefit if guided by adults through the experience of talking in an emotionally safe, comforting, and nurturing way.

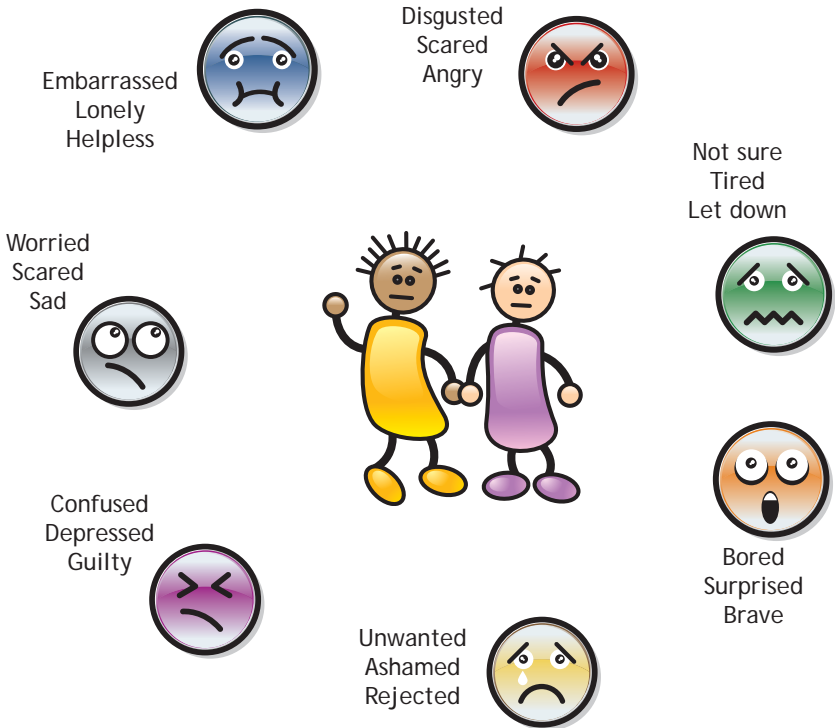


Feelings and Emotions

When family members, such as Mom or Dad, go to jail or prison, it may be very difficult for everyone involved. For some children, the experience can be emotionally devastating, while for others it is less serious. Sometimes it is a relief. The child's age, understanding of the situation, and the reactions of others, particularly of family members, all play a part in the overall impact the experience will have on the child. Children may have different feelings, and sometimes even several feelings at once, or one right after the other. Some children might feel sadness, fear, guilt, disbelief, anxiety, anger, and/or powerlessness.

How do I feel today?

Caregivers may use these pictures to help children identify their feelings:



Caregivers may use these words to help children identify their feelings:

Angry	Disgusted	Guilty	Nervous	Scared
Annoyed	Disappointed	Happy	Optimistic	Shy
Bored	Embarrassed	Helpless	Pessimistic	Surprised
Brave	Envious	Hopeful	Proud	Undecided
Confident	Excited	Hurt	Regretful	Unsure
Confused	Exhausted	Let down	Rejected	Worried
Determined	Friendly	Lonely	Relieved	
Depressed	Grieving	Miserable	Sad	

Children may experience many mixed emotions from the time of the parent’s arrest to well after his or her release. While these feeling may be expressed at any time, they are more likely to come to a head at certain stages: arrest, trial, sentencing, incarceration (and often most strongly during and following visiting), and at the time of release. Often, the most stressful time is in the weeks and months following release. It can be difficult for an absent parent to reconnect with a child who has grown accustomed to living without him or her.

Common Questions

To help children work through their feelings, including curiosity, we’ve repeated some common questions we hear from families and offer suggestions for helping caregivers to respond.

What is the difference between jail and prison?

Jails and prisons are places where people who have been accused or convicted of crimes are confined or incarcerated. People who are incarcerated are often called inmates. Most people stay in the county jail if they are awaiting a trial or are waiting to be sentenced. If they are sentenced to less than one-year, they will stay in the county jail to serve their sentence. If they receive a sentence of more than one year they will go to prison.

Are there alternatives to being in jail or prison?

Sometimes people are allowed to serve their sentence in some type of alternative incarceration program. These programs may include community service, electronic monitoring, work crews, forest camps, or treatment programs. People that are allowed to serve their sentences in these programs must first be approved to be in these programs and then must work hard and be on their best behavior to remain in these programs.

What happens after people get out of jail or prison?

Most often, after a person gets out of jail or prison they are placed on community supervision. This period of community supervision is called probation, parole, or post-prison supervision. During this time, the person is supervised by a probation or parole officer in the community where they live. "Supervised" means that the person must follow certain rules called "conditions." If these conditions are not followed, the person may be found in "violation" and could be required to go back to jail or prison. The probation or parole officer can also help the person with such things as finding housing, employment, getting into treatment, and identifying other resources that will help the person to be successful.

Why did Mom or Dad go to jail or prison?

People are sent to jail or prison because they break the law. Laws are rules that tell us how people should and should not behave.

Do kids go to prison or jail?

Children have rules of behavior, too. When children break the rules, they may get a time out or lose privileges. Sometimes, even a child (depending on age) who breaks the law (commits a crime such as seriously hurting another person) could go to jail or prison like some adults who break the law. Children usually are sent to a special jail or prison for young people.

What will happen to me?

Children may have a lot of change in their lives when a parent goes to jail or prison. It is OK to ask questions, and even to ask them repeatedly, because circumstances may change or where the child will live may not be known yet. No one likes to feel insecure. The following questions from the child can guide discussion, and even answers, to provide reassurance:

- How long will my parent be in jail or prison?
- Will I live in the same place?
- Will I have to move?
- Whom will I live with?
- Will I be able to live with my parent when he or she gets out of jail or prison?

Is it my fault?

NO!

Many children feel guilty when their parent goes to jail or prison. They may believe that they caused it to happen. It is very important for children to have a non-judgmental, relaxed, unhurried, and safe place to express feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about why a parent was incarcerated. It is important for children to realize:

- There are negative consequences when a parent breaks the law.
- They are not responsible for either the parent's behavior or the consequences of that behavior.



Will I go to jail or prison, too?

Just because a parent goes to jail or prison doesn't mean the child will. Children need to understand that each person

is responsible for his or her own choices in life. Explain that who is in your family and who you are friends with does not determine if you go to jail or prison. You only go if you break the law. It is easier to avoid breaking the law if you don't associate with people who do.

What is it like in jail or prison?

The popular cartoon image of inmates in striped suits with leg irons on a desert island is not much like real jail or prison life. Some jails and prisons are located in towns and cities; others are in remote locations. The main difference with community living is that inmates don't live with their family, they don't have much choice in where they can go and when, and life is very routine and often very boring. However, there are opportunities for personal growth, such as counseling, treatment, educational and job training programs, and parenting for those who chose to take advantage of them.

Where do people in jail or prison live?

Sometimes, people live in dorms, but most people share a room, called a cell, which has two bunks, a sink and a toilet. The cells are usually very small and look alike. People who are unable to follow the rules of behavior are housed in a prison within the prison known as Segregation or "the hole". When people are sick, they may live in the Infirmary or Mental Health Infirmary until they are well enough to live in "General Population".

What do people in jail or prison wear?

Different institutions have different dress codes. In Oregon, prison inmates wear jeans and a denim shirt or a navy T-shirt. In other places, they may wear clothes that look like a doctor's scrub suit. When they go out to appointments, they may have to wear bright colored jumpsuits and chains around their wrists and ankles. In some places, they wear their own clothes.

Where do people in jail or prison eat, and what kind of food?

Most people eat in a dining room that looks a lot like a school cafeteria and may serve food similar to that of a school cafeteria. The food is served cafeteria-style, with inmates lining up with trays as they choose their food. In some prisons food is brought to the people on trays. There are usually some choices for people with special needs, such as vegetarian meals, pork-free diets, or low-salt diets. People can also order from a commissary or canteen. They can order “junk food” and treats including ice cream or candy as well as other items such as colored pencils, make-up, shoes, and personal care items.

Do people in jail or prison have a TV, library, bathroom/shower, and can they go outside?

In some prisons people can buy their own TVs, but usually there are special TV rooms. The programs may change as different groups of people take turns choosing the channels that they like. There are libraries in most facilities. Every jail and prison has a law library so that people can work on their own court cases. Showers are shared by inmates in each housing unit, and there may be assigned showering times. There is usually recreation time, or “yard time”, when groups of people can go outside for an hour or two. People can walk or jog around the yard, play sports or lift weights - different facilities have different activities available.

Do people in jail or prison work?

In Oregon, most people in prison are required by law to work. They earn money for canteen, to pay fines, to send to their families or to build a nest egg. Some also attend school or special classes.

How do people in jail or prison spend their time?

People in jail or prison are required to spend their time productively. They work or go to school or attend special programs such as alcohol and drug treatment, parenting classes or anger management classes. Many also pursue hobbies, especially art, or they can read, write, watch TV, or exercise when they have spare time. People can also attend religious services.

Are people in jail or prison safe?

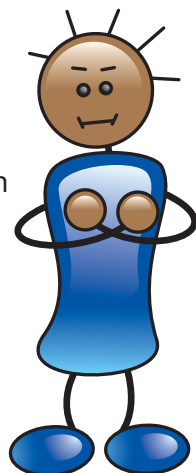
Correctional officers make sure the jail or prison is safe. Sometimes, there may be concerns that people have “contraband” or items that should not be in the cell or are illegal, such as drugs or weapons. In these cases, the officers may have to do cell searches and check a whole unit or cell block or dorm thoroughly for such items. Occasionally, there may be a fight where people can get hurt, or even killed. That is why it is important to have good security measures in place.

What happens if my parent gets sick?

If inmates have a medical or dental problem, they may ask to be seen by a nurse, doctor, or dentist in the facility. Sometimes, people may need special health care outside of the prison or jail.

Can I see or talk to Mom or Dad when they are in jail or prison? Do I have to?

Many children can see or talk to Mom or Dad even while they are in jail or prison. Some children crave contact with the parent. Other children, however, may be so angry or hurt when a parent is incarcerated, that they do not want anything to do with him or her. It may be helpful to ask why. Talking about and validating the child’s feelings can help. The child may change his or



her mind, so it is good to ask again. Sometimes, visiting may not be possible. For example, the child may prefer to avoid contact or distance may be a problem. Also, a restraining order or DOC rule may prevent the parent from having any type of contact with the child.

When visiting is an option, it can usually be arranged, but requires some time and preparation. The Visitor's Handbook, available from the Department of Corrections or on the Internet at www.doc.state.or.us can provide information on visiting and other forms of communication with the Oregon prison system. Each jail may have a different process. Information can be obtained directly from the jail.

Children who want to maintain close contact with their incarcerated parent should be encouraged to write, draw pictures, talk on the telephone, and visit as much as possible. Studies show that maintaining contact and allowing children to visit, if possible, helps the children.

Who knows that my parent is in jail or prison?

Every situation is different, so caregivers should address this question with the child.

What do I tell other people?

Many people are ashamed to talk about having someone close to them in jail or prison. It is really up to the child to decide how much information to share and with whom. It is possible to be honest but reserved in how much information is divulged.

It may reassure children to tell them that:

1. Other children have parents in jail or prison.
2. "Two of every 100 children have had a parent in jail or prison."
3. "YOU didn't do anything wrong. People who try to make you feel guilty or ashamed are wrong."

4. "Sometimes, it is easier not to talk about a parent who is incarcerated, but you may never learn that there are plenty of other kids in the same situation. Talking about it with people you trust may help."
5. "It's OK to love your Mom or Dad who is in jail or prison, even if some people don't think you should."

In some communities, there are groups of kids who have a parent in jail or prison, and they meet to talk about such issues. This is called a support group. It can be very helpful to have peers to share feelings and coping strategies. County community corrections and social service agencies should be able to assist in finding an appropriate support group.

How can I learn when my parent will come home?

People in jail or prison usually know the approximate date they will be released. People can look on the Internet (www.doc.state.or.us) or call the Department of Corrections to find out the release date from prison, which is public information.

Where can I get help?

Sometimes adults don't talk about the incarcerated parent because they are afraid it will upset the child. However, when the child is upset or hurt or confused, it is better to express those feelings to others than to let the emotions stew inside. Children are likely to worry, and believe things are worse than they really are if a parent "disappears" and no one talks about it or lets them talk about it. Children should be encouraged to reach out to those they trust. They can be encouraged to make a list of people to talk to.

People to talk to:

Someone in my family _____

Someone at my school _____

Someone at my place of worship _____

Another adult I know and trust _____

A close friend _____

Sometimes, children and families need more help than family and friends can provide. County information and referral staff can help to find further resources, and most libraries have Internet access.

Some places to get help or information include:

- Oregon Department of Corrections www.doc.state.or.us (Family members may speak with the inmate's counselor at the prison if the inmate provides consent)
- County health and mental health departments
- Counselor/therapist
- Caregiver/Grandparent Support Group
- Community Organizations
- CURE (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants) (503) 287-9258 or www.users.qwest.net/~tbs2k/Cure
- Family and Corrections Network (804) 589-3036 or www.fcnetwork.org (This site lists books for parents, caregivers, and professionals to read with children of prisoners.)

Youth/Adolescents may also seek help from the following:

- Teachers
- Mentoring Programs
- Caseworkers
- Internet Blogs

Notes for Caregivers

To summarize, children of incarcerated parents need:

- To know the parent's incarceration is not their fault.
- To know what is happening to their parent.

- To know if they can have contact with their parent, and if so, when and how.
- To know where and with whom they will be living and going to school.
- To know what will stay the same and what will change while their parent is incarcerated.
- To know it is OK to still love their parent, and it is OK to be angry sometimes, too.
- To be encouraged to express, in safe and healthy ways, their feelings about their parent and their parent's incarceration.
- To visit and maintain contact with the incarcerated parent as much as possible, when permitted and appropriate.
- To have stability and consistency in their living situations and daily routines.
- To feel safe.
- To have fun.
- To realize that people make choices in life that lead to different consequences.

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Project

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Project is a multi-agency effort to evaluate policies and procedures that may impact the wellbeing of children of justice-involved parents and to identify effective, targeted programs to meet the diverse needs of children of justice-involved parents.

The statewide Children of Incarcerated Parents Project aims to include representatives from Oregon Department of Human Services, child welfare, Oregon Department of Corrections, law enforcement, community corrections, legal services, early childhood education Oregon Youth Authority, Oregon Department of Education, community colleges, the Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE), court

administration, housing and community services, judges, Commissions on Children and Families, research entities, mental health and alcohol and drug treatment agencies, and others. Partners are currently convened by the Children's Justice Alliance and embrace the following core principles.

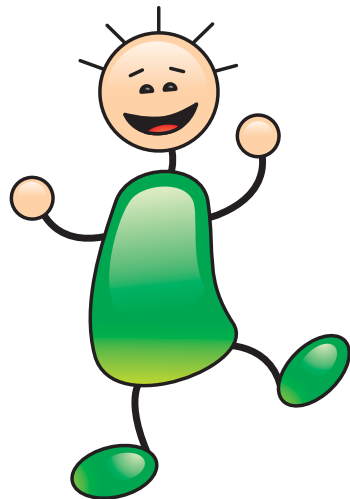
Core Principles

Principle #1 - We believe that children are the priority and that we as a community have a collective responsibility to protect and parent children at every stage of their parent's involvement in the criminal justice system.

Principle #2 - We will create a coordinated systemic response to serve the needs of the children, their justice-involved parent and the caregivers.

Principle #3 - We will support justice-involved parents and keep their children safe in their absence.

Principle #4 - As a caring community, we are dedicated to restoring or creating a sense of family for our children and their justice-involved parent.



Principle #5 - We believe primary responsibility for development and well-being of children lies within their family but the entire community must empower and support families as they raise their children.

Principle #6 - We are committed to provide parenting skills for justice involved parents and the caregivers and to build stable family support systems for children, families and caregivers who are separated by incarceration.

Principle #7 - We believe that children and families exist as part of an interconnected system and children do better as parents do better.

Principle #8 - Children should be informed when decisions are being made about their parent and their needs should be considered.

Principle #9 - Children should have a voice when decisions are being made about them.

Principle #10 - children should be able to speak with, see and touch their parent, when it is appropriate, possible and safe.

Questions?
Call 503-945-9090

Download Booklets
<http://www.childrensjusticealliance.org>