

Parenting from Prison

A Co-Parenting Guide for Divorced and Separated Parents

Divorce is a stressful process for families. One parent being incarcerated further complicates several aspects of the family relationship, such as communication, custody arrangements, child support and relationship maintenance. Although the incarcerated parent is physically separated from their children, they can still be involved in making decisions on issues concerning their children. Children need both parents in their lives, especially during a divorce, so parents must work together to maintain communication and contact with their children. You could mail a copy of this guide to the incarcerated parent so both parents can benefit from this information.

Effects of divorce

Divorce is a stressful time for children, custodial parents and incarcerated parents. Divorce affects each family member differently and depends on how long a parent has been in prison, why they are in prison and the state of their relationships with their children and the children's primary caregiver.

Children

Children of divorce with an incarcerated parent often have difficulty adjusting to these family circumstances. They are more likely to have behavioral and emotional problems at school and at home, but children of different ages often have different reactions to their parents' divorce and incarceration.

Infants might be fussier than usual depending on how much contact they had with their absent parent before incarceration. Many young children — toddlers, preschoolers and school-age children — feel sad, confused, guilty, abandoned and worried about their relationship with their absent parent. They might have separation anxiety about their incarcerated parent and blame themselves for their parents' absence, which can result in problem

FOCUS on Kids



This guide is part of a series aimed at helping families in which parents are separated or divorcing and who share parenting responsibilities for children. We will use the terms divorce and separation interchangeably to describe parents who are separated from each other.

behaviors such as bed-wetting, nightmares, sleeping problems, loss of appetite and tantrums. Children might be ostracized or teased by their peers about their parent's incarceration, which can lead to social and emotional withdrawal.

Preteens and teenagers might be similarly ostracized or discriminated against by their peers because of a parent's incarceration. To avoid rejection or embarrassment,

children of this age might distance themselves from their incarcerated parent. They might also fear ending up in prison like their incarcerated parent.

Witnessing conflict between parents can lead to problem behavior and mental issues in children of all ages. In extreme cases, such as when children witness their parent's arrest, they might experience post-traumatic stress disorder. In such cases, the custodial parent should consider therapy or counseling for their children. The incarcerated parent can help by maintaining contact with their children and reassuring them that they still love and care about them.

Children respond in different ways depending on their age, so parents need to be aware of how they can help their children cope:

- Provide infants and young children with consistent routines and schedules that include regularly set times for visiting the incarcerated parent.
- Reassure children and adolescents that they will always have at least one parent to meet their needs. Children should also know that their custodial parent will try to stay in frequent contact with the incarcerated parent. Encourage them to also stay in contact with their incarcerated parent.
- Take children to visit the incarcerated parent as often as possible. Check the criminal justice system's specific visitation policies beforehand.
- Comfort the child when leaving the prison visitation. The child might get upset knowing they have to leave their other parent. The custodial parent might want to briefly explain that the security of the prison keeps their parent safe for the next visit.
- Give children of all ages respect, care and support. Children and adolescents will not cooperate if they feel they are being treated with disrespect. Parents should monitor their tone of voice and language when talking to their children about their behavior.

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Caregivers

Caregivers for children of an incarcerated parent face many challenges in dealing with the criminal justice system and raising children without the other parent. This is often the custodial parent for children of divorce. On the one hand, custodial parents might be more comfortable being involved in the children's daily lives. On the other hand, they might feel overwhelmed and bitter about being left to care for the children alone. They invest time and energy in dealing with the responsibilities that come with divorce, children and incarceration. Shouldering responsibilities alone often leads to further stress and exhaustion.

Furthermore, custodial parents should see to their personal needs and might find it helpful to seek out support groups, counseling and close adult family members and friends to talk to about their concerns. Some effective coping mechanisms include breathing exercises or surrounding oneself with humorous things or people. Research shows that parents with primary custody of their children take better care of them when they are physically and mentally healthy. Therefore, primary caregivers should get enough sleep, maintain a balanced diet and get plenty of exercise.

Incarcerated parents

Incarcerated parents often feel stressed about being separated from their children without the right to see them when and where they want. Parents in prison might have trouble coming to terms with the effects of their incarceration on their children. For example, they might feel they have failed their children or be concerned about whether they have been a good parent while in prison. On top of this, the incarcerated parent is going through a divorce, which compounds feelings of guilt, stress, frustration and helplessness.

Some prisons have parenting education programs or classes that teach parenting skills. When reunited with their children after being released from prison, parents might want to seek out support groups or counseling services to deal with divorce and incarceration.

Co-parental communication

Communication is often difficult for co-parents when one of them is incarcerated. Parents must agree on a communication method that works for both of them. Use these tips to help divorced parents communicate between the prison and household:

- Use ex-etiquette communication. Discuss co-parenting details in a calm, friendly and pleasant manner. Listen patiently when the other parent is speaking. Demonstrate your understanding and respect for their opinions and suggestions.
- Be sensitive to what is said between one another and in front of the children. Do not put children in the middle of arguments or discussions. Children do not want to hear bad things said about either parent.

- Resolve conflicts sooner rather than later. Once divorced parents calm down after arguments, they should try to immediately resolve their issues, which reduces stress and tension.
- Outcomes tend to be better when the custodial parent includes the incarcerated parent in decisions concerning the children. All parties should be welcoming to the other's opinions and suggestions. You should also express appreciation for that parent's contribution to parenting and their interest in the children's lives.
- Discuss child care providers, schools, extracurricular activities and health care for the children. Custodial parents might also want to share the children's report cards, drawings, photos or other items with the incarcerated parent.

How to explain prisons to children

Children need honest answers from their parents, but explained in a way they can understand. False stories about the other parent's whereabouts can be harmful in the long run. For example, telling the children their other parent is out of town might lead to the child asking when their parent is coming back and why that parent does not want to see them. Custodial parents should tell their children the truth to build trust. Here are some suggestions for parents when answering their children's questions:

- **Why did [Mom or Dad] go to jail or prison?** When talking with young children, consider phrasing your answer, "People have to go to jail when they do not obey the laws and rules of their town. [Mom or Dad] disobeyed the law when [she or he] made some mistakes; like when children disobey rules and get put in time-out. Jails and prisons are like time-outs, but they last longer for adults." When the parent explains jail to an adolescent, it might be best to say, "All actions have consequences for breaking rules. When someone breaks the law, they might have to go to jail as a consequence of their misbehavior."
- **Is it my fault [Mom or Dad] went to jail?** Many children blame themselves for their parents' divorce, and they might blame themselves for their parent's incarceration. They might believe they did something wrong to send their incarcerated parent away. Parents should explain to their children that the other parent's actions broke the law and put them in prison. Parents need to also reassure children they are not responsible for their parents' divorce.
- **Where does [Mom or Dad] live in jail or prison?** "When people go to jail, they live in small rooms that all look the same. [Mom or Dad] lives in these rooms when they sleep. They usually have a bed, sink, desk and toilet. When they need to shower, they ask a guard to take them to a bigger bathroom with showers."
- **What does [Mom or Dad] do with their time in jail or prison?** "People in jail can take classes, work,

read books from a library and participate in programs that can help them. They can also have hobbies such as watching television or exercising.”

- **Can I see or talk to [Mom or Dad] when they are in jail or prison? Do I have to?** Children can stay in touch with their incarcerated parents in many ways. If possible, they should be encouraged to maintain contact with the parent in prison through visits, letters, cards and phone calls. On the other hand, children might not want to maintain contact with their incarcerated parent. Living far away from the prison might also make staying in contact difficult.

Children might feel uncertain about their incarcerated parent’s involvement in their life, so parents should discuss answers to these questions. When parents give their children a unified message, children will be less confused with the situation. Divorced parents might also want to be prepared for these questions their children might ask:

- How long will [Mom or Dad] be in jail?
- Where will I live?
- Will [Mom or Dad] come home when [he or she] gets out of jail?

Visitation

Children might not be allowed to visit their incarcerated parent because of the prison system’s rules. If visits are allowed, children might initially think the visit is scary or difficult. However, visiting an incarcerated parent is extremely important for children. They usually miss the incarcerated parent, even if it is not always obvious to the caregiver. Visits can reassure them of their parent’s safety and help maintain or build strong parent-child relationships.

Explain to children beforehand what visits to the incarcerated parent will be like to ease feelings of stress, worry and anxiety. However, parents should base how much they tell their children on their child’s age. Let them know if the visit will take place in-person, across a glass window or on a television screen. Let them know whether they can hug the incarcerated parent and remind them that their parent cannot come home with them. Mention that the parent might be wearing a uniform as part of the prison’s rules. Finally, let the child know what they will be able to do during the visit, such as play games, sit at a table and so on.

Tips for families with an incarcerated parent

Effective co-parenting can be a difficult process following separation or divorce. When one parent is incarcerated, more complex issues arise that can damage children’s relationships with their parents.

Children are better off when both parents maintain relationships with them through regular contact and involvement. Despite many prisons’ strict visitation policies, incarcerated parents should understand that their co-parenting relationship with the custodial parent will

probably affect how much contact they have with their children. These useful tips can help incarcerated parents effectively co-parent and maintain a relationship with their children:

- Try to work with the custodial parent and discuss each family member’s schedule. Parents who solve problems as a team tend to have lower stress levels.
- Be supportive of the other parent’s efforts. The custodial parent might be trying their best to help the incarcerated parent stay involved in their children’s lives. Incarcerated parents who express their appreciation of the custodial parent’s hard work and empathize with them might have a more positive co-parenting relationship.
- Write letters, send photos and call children and primary caregivers when possible, all of which often lead to positive adjustment among children and incarcerated parents.
- Stay positive during visits with children and caregivers. Incarcerated parents who focus on their children’s interests and needs instead of bringing up bad memories can build stronger bonds with their children.
- Keep a calendar of special celebrations in your children’s lives. If children have an upcoming birthday, graduation, competition or recital, they might appreciate a letter or email from their incarcerated parent. In addition to “good luck” or “congratulations,” incarcerated parents might want to tell their child how proud they are.
- Young children in particular need consistent reminders of their parents’ love and concern for them. They might also worry about their incarcerated parent, so let them know their parent is safe and that both parents love their children.
- Seek out information about parenting. Incarcerated parents might not have a strong relationship with their children but would like one. Ask if the prison has a parenting program for incarcerated parents or a library with books on the topic.

Incarcerated parents and children might go long periods of time without seeing one another. This is especially true if the incarcerated parent is far away. Parenting at a distance is difficult under the best of circumstances and complicated by incarceration. These creative and fun activities can help incarcerated parents with long-distance parenting:

- **For toddlers through adolescents:** Look for fun and personalized items to write letters and notes on to send to the child. Such items might include pictures of things the child likes, their favorite color of paper, an item of the parent’s that the child likes, or pictures of the parent and child in special or memorable locations. Consider cutting these personalized items into fun shapes.
- **For preschoolers and school-age children:** Ask children to cut out their favorite shapes and write down everything they are excited to do with their incarcerated parent when they are reunited.

- **For school-age children and older:** Make a list of reasons to be thankful and add meaningful things children do for their incarcerated parent. Send them those lists a few times each year.
- **For older children and adolescents:** Think of ways to help children accomplish their current or future goals.

Co-parenting tips for custodial parents

Many children with an incarcerated parent wish to see their parent more often than is possible. Incarcerated parents should maintain a positive relationship with the custodial parent to make it easier for children to maintain a relationship with the incarcerated parent.

Custodial parents can support the relationship between incarcerated parent and child to help their children cope with the divorce and incarceration. The custodial parent should encourage the incarcerated parent to stay involved in their children's lives by encouraging communication between them. Involve the other parent in making some decisions about the children. This might help the incarcerated parent feel more included and more a part of their children's lives. Additionally, primary caregivers should encourage children to maintain contact with their other parent. In addition to visiting the incarcerated parent, children can send letters, holiday cards and photos.

On the other hand, incarcerated parents might choose to be uninvolved in their children's lives because they worry about the physical and emotional well-being of their children visiting the prison. Strict prison visitation policies could also prevent incarcerated parents from seeing their children. Even so, primary caregivers should encourage incarcerated parents to stay involved in their children's lives. Parents should resolve any conflict to maintain their co-parenting relationship for the children.

There are several ways custodial parents can reassure their children while the other parent is incarcerated:

- Let children know it is okay for their family to be different from other families.
- Answer children's questions rather than shielding them because of their age. Children deserve to hear the truth from their parents, but ensure the truth is phrased appropriately for the child's age.
- Introduce new partners into the child's life gradually. Children need time to adjust and feel as though the new partner is not replacing their incarcerated parent.
- Explain to children when and how often they can see their other parent. The incarcerated parent might be far away or in another state, but children still need to know how frequently they can visit.
- Tell children that their incarcerated parent still loves and cares about them even though they cannot be present. Speak positively about the other parent, especially when the incarcerated parent is too dangerous to be near their children.

Reuniting with children and re-entering society

An incarcerated parent's re-entry into society and the life of their child affects the whole family. Research shows reunification is an important time for the relationship between an incarcerated parent and their children. As the formerly incarcerated parent readjusts to a more involved role, both parents might want to reconsider custody arrangements but continue their co-parenting relationship by working together and communicating.

Reunification and re-entry can be a difficult and challenging process. There might be existing conflict between parents or with children, or custodial parents might refuse to give up custody. To ease the transition, parents might want to plan out the reintegration into the child's life before the incarcerated parent is released from prison. Here are some tips for divorced parents with an incarcerated parent facing reunification:

- Discuss how the incarcerated parent can gradually reintegrate into their child's life in a way that works best for both parents.
- Communicate with the other parent on a regular basis. This process should begin before the incarcerated parent is released from prison.
- Children need time to adapt to their new family arrangement. If the incarcerated parent gains some custody, children need time to adjust to a new environment, such as a new school or home.
- Be patient with change and take time to adapt to new circumstances, such as finding employment and a place to live. Incarcerated parents might also want to build relationships with friends and family to help with the adjustment process.
- Join a support group to talk to others in similar situations, which can ease the incarcerated parent's transition back into society.

Many incarcerated parents feel that this is an opportunity for a fresh start with their children. Although incarcerated parents might not get custody of their children, they might realize that a gradual transition can strengthen their relationship rather than rushing back into their children's lives.

Conclusion

Divorced or separated parents dealing with incarceration should try to do what is best for their children. Successful co-parenting requires both parents to be kind, patient and cooperative with each other. Communication and contact are essential for the long-term adjustment of parents and children. Although these tend to be difficult circumstances, parents should try to work together to meet their children's needs.

Additional information

- MU Extension publication GH6202, *When a Child's Parent Is Incarcerated*: <http://extension.missouri.edu/p/GH6202>
- Parenting Inside Out: <http://www.parentinginsideout.org>
- The Rutgers University Children of Incarcerated Parents Library: <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/resources/library/children-of-prisoners-library>
- The Child Welfare Information Gateway: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/supporting/support-services/prisoners>

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