



# When a Child's Parent Is Incarcerated

Human Development and Family Studies Extension

## Should I tell my grandchildren that their parent is incarcerated?

This is a personal decision, although the truth is best in most cases. You have three options: You can be very open with your grandchildren and the outside world; you can tell the grandchildren the truth, but keep it private from the outside world; or you can tell your grandchildren and the outside world a “story.” Weigh the pros and cons of each option carefully before making a final decision. Here are a few things to consider:

- When children do not know their parents' whereabouts, they often feel confused, anxious and stressed. Children are often present when their parent is arrested, so knowing where their parent is can help answer their questions, and relieve their concerns and uncertainty. They may feel that the parent left because they are no longer loved or valued. By being truthful, it allows you to reassure your grandchildren that they have not been abandoned. Children often blame themselves for their parent's incarceration, so tell them it is not their fault that their parent went to prison. Tell them that their parent is in prison because of a poor decision.



- Lying about a parent's whereabouts may seem like a good solution, but this strategy often has negative outcomes. For example, many grandparents tell their grandchildren that the parent is attending school, working out of town, in the military or in the hospital. But children are smart and aware of their surroundings — they may find out that their parent is in prison. As a result, your grandchildren may no longer trust you and will withdraw from you. It is usually best to tell the truth. However, encouraging the child not to tell others may be appropriate in some cases. Your grandchild may be teased or humiliated by other children at school, and even school counselors and teachers do not always know how to provide adequate support to children whose parents are incarcerated.

- If you decide to tell your grandchildren the truth, be prepared to explain why the parent is in prison. Children need to understand that illegal behavior carries consequences. However, there is no need to disclose all of the details of a particular crime to your young grandchildren. They will be satisfied with simple answers, such as “Dad hurt someone” or “Mom took drugs.” Older children may ask for more specific answers.

- Tell your grandchildren the truth if they ask when their parent will come home, even if the answer is “I don't know.” In many cases, the prison sentence is a specific amount. Reassure your grandchildren that their parent is safe in prison. You will add to their distress by telling them about the possible hardships in prison. Your grandchildren mainly need to be reassured that they are safe, loved and not to blame for their parent's incarceration.

## Should I encourage my grandchildren to visit their parent in prison?

This depends on the children's ages and the relationship they had with their parent prior to incarceration. For many children, it is difficult to deal with their complex feelings about their parent's incarceration. While children may want to visit or talk to their parent, they also may be too upset, angry or scared to see their parent in prison. Encourage your grandchildren to share their feelings. Let them know that mixed feelings are normal and that they are entitled to feel angry, scared and upset.

Visiting prison also depends on your financial resources, the prison's policy, the prison's proximity to your home and the parent's preference. If possible, most grandchildren benefit from visiting their parent. Children will feel better knowing that their parent is okay and still loves them. However, it is also emotionally difficult to see a parent in prison.

If you do visit, it's normal to feel worried about sharing stories from everyday life. In most cases, it is best to share experiences and talk about prison as well as the outside world. Children may want to talk about school, difficulties and teachers. They may also want to write down questions or stories prior to the visit so they do not forget anything they want to discuss. You can also encourage the parent to write letters and stay in contact with the child.

## Is it healthy for my grandchildren to maintain a relationship with their incarcerated parent?

In most cases, regular contact will help your grandchildren emotionally, academically and behaviorally. Children have vivid imaginations and may imagine situations that do not reflect reality, so it can be best for the grandchild to see where their parent lives. Some children feel very upset being separated from their parents, and visiting allows them to express their feelings, ask questions and see that their parent is safe. Visiting the parent in prison also allows the parent to play a role in the children's lives. This is important for the future, especially if the parent and child will be reunited.

However, children may feel guilty after seeing and talking with their parent. Because children often blame themselves for the parent's incarceration, they need reassurance from their parent that they are loved and not to blame. This will help your grandchildren heal emotionally. It can also be therapeutic for your grandchildren to see that other children are in similar situations.

## It scares me to think that my incarcerated child will eventually want to take back the children or become a major part of their lives after prison. Should I be worried?

It makes sense that you worry about your grandchildren's future safety and well-being. Many incarcerated parents continue to play a limited parental role. They may also have the opportunity to take parenting classes while in prison,

which can help improve parenting skills and the parent-child relationship. During this time, it is important for the entire family to build positive relationships. Encourage the grandchildren's parent in his or her efforts while continuing your role as an active, caring grandparent.

## Do I simply take my grandchildren along when I visit the prison?

The regular visitation may not be ideal for children, so ask if the prison has a "Parent-Child Visitation Program." These programs feature flexible visiting hours and play areas with toys or activities, which support more relaxed and meaningful interactions between children and their incarcerated parents. In Missouri, the 4-H Living Interactive Family Education Program engages children and parents in activities. For more information, call 1-573-882-9360, or visit [extension.missouri.edu/fcrp/lifeevaluation/lifeprogram.htm](http://extension.missouri.edu/fcrp/lifeevaluation/lifeprogram.htm). Some prisons work with their local communities to establish "summer host families," where children can stay temporarily and be closer to their incarcerated parent. This also gives grandparents a much needed parenting break. Contact the prison to learn about available programs for children of inmates.

## How can I best meet the needs of my grandchildren?

Children and their needs are diverse. While some children have had minimal interaction with their parent prior to incarceration, others may have been close to their parent and possibly present during the arrest. Others may come from families where alcohol and drug abuse created an unpredictable

and chaotic home life. Such children may be relieved to be in their grandparents' care. Every situation is different.

However, all children need stability, reassurance and love from both their parents and grandparents. Children also need to hear positive things about their parent, despite the situation and crime committed. Children will be loyal to their parent and should not feel as though they have to defend their parent. Children also need a safe environment to express anger, anxiety, confusion and sadness. Most children will benefit from contact with their parent. They also need a supportive environment outside of family, including teachers, counselors and friends.

*This guide was written by Tanja Rothrauff, graduate student, Human Development and Family Studies, University of Missouri.*

*Megan Roodhouse, Human Development and Family Studies Extension, and Brian Bowles, MU Extension's ParentLink, reviewed this guide.*

## References

Children of Prisoners Library. (n.d.). Children of prisoners library. Retrieved November 24, 2007, from [fcnetwork.org/cpl/cplindex.html](http://fcnetwork.org/cpl/cplindex.html).

Johnston, D. (1995). Parent-child visitation in the jail or prison. In K. Bael & D. Johnston (Eds.), *Children of incarcerated parents* (pp. 135-143). NY: Lexington Books.

Barnhill, S. (1996). Three generations at risk: Imprisoned women, their children, and grandmother caregivers. *Generations*, 20, 39-40.

Block, K. J., & Potthast, M. J. (2001). *Girl Scouts beyond bars: Facilitating parent-child contact in correctional settings*. In C. Seymore & C. Finney Hairston (Eds.),

*Children with parents in prison: Child welfare policy, program, and practice issues* (pp. 93-110). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press.

Young, D. S., & Jefferson Smith, C. (2000). When moms are incarcerated: The needs of children, mothers, and caregivers. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 81, 130-141.

University of Missouri Extension. (2004). L.I.F.E. *The Living Interactive Family Education Program*. Retrieved November 30, 2007, from [extension.missouri.edu/fcrp/lifeevaluation/life-program.htm](http://extension.missouri.edu/fcrp/lifeevaluation/life-program.htm).

Reilly, J. (retrieved 2007). *Children of incarcerated parents. What is the caregiver's role?* University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, [www.canr.uconn.edu/ces/child/newsarticles/CCC743.htm](http://www.canr.uconn.edu/ces/child/newsarticles/CCC743.htm).

Call MU Extension's **ParentLink** WarmLine for free information on ANY parenting, relationship or nutrition question. Call about specific situations, developmental stages, or services you are looking for.

**Toll-free: 1-800-552-8522**

**En Espanol: 1-888-460-0008**

Printing of this guide is funded, in part, by the Missouri Parent and Information Resource Center.

To learn more, please visit the MU Extension Web site at:  
[extension.missouri.edu/](http://extension.missouri.edu/)



■ Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Thomas A. Henderson, Interim Director, Cooperative Extension, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211. ■ University of Missouri Extension does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability or status as a Vietnam-era veteran in employment or programs. ■ If you have special needs as addressed by the Americans with Disabilities Act and need this publication in an alternative format, write: ADA Officer, Extension and Agricultural Information, 1-98 Agriculture Building, Columbia, MO 65211, or call (573) 882-7216. Reasonable efforts will be made to accommodate your special needs.