

Families Outside - Support & Information Helpline

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7. Visiting a Scottish prison with your child

Visiting a parent or relative in prison is one way a child can stay in contact with them. Carers can help children to cope with separation by making it possible for them to visit their parents or relatives in prison. If you have not been to a prison visit before, you may find it helpful to make the initial visit on your own so that you will know what to expect. This may make it easier for you to prepare the child/ren to visit.

✚ Preparing children for a visit

It is important to prepare the child for a prison visit, especially if it's their first time. Prisons can be frightening places. Talking to the child/ren about the journey and what it is like when they arrive at the prison may help. Some children may not want to visit and they should not be forced, but talking to them about why they feel that way can help to reassure them.

✚ Explaining what will happen when they arrive may help to ease some of their worries:

They may have to wait for a while

There will be security procedures and visitors may be searched

There will be a lot of people in uniform

Doors will be locked

There will be a lot of other people visiting

Visit rooms can sometimes be noisy and busy places

The parent/relative will have to stay behind when you leave

✚ You may want to find out what facilities are available at the prison such as:

Are there play facilities in the Visitors Centre or prison visits room, and times when they are staffed?

What types of visits are available e.g. children's visits, family day visits, week-end or evening visits

Is there anything for older children to do?

Can the children play with their father and move around?

What can the children take in e.g. pictures, photos, and letters?

What about pushchairs, nappy changing and feeding?

✚ The Visit

You may find it helpful to plan your journey, especially if you are travelling a long way. It can be an anxious time as the visit draws near.

Visits are different at each prison and the length of the visit can vary. Tell the child/ren how long the visit will last.

When you arrive in the visits room take time to settle the child/ren. If there is a play area take the child there before the visit starts, so that they know it is safe for them to go again themselves during the visit.

Try to make sure the child/ren get special attention during the visit.

The time may go very quickly and leaving their parent/relative at the end may be very difficult. They may need reassurance about the next time they can be in touch, perhaps by another visit, telephone or letter. Planning when and how that will happen is important.

Let the child/ren know that it is OK to show, or to talk about how they are feeling, at or after the visit.

After the visit

It is likely that after a visit everyone will be a bit tired and may feel stressed. The child/ren may be feeling sad that they've had to leave their parent/relative behind. They may feel angry if the visit wasn't as they expected.

It is important that you allow the children time to talk about what's happened. Don't worry if they are upset. Try to see this as a healthy way of expressing feelings rather than having to bottle it all up inside. Pay attention to the child/ren's behaviour after the visit. If it is different or unusual for them, it may be their way of letting you know they need you to listen to them.

All children will cope with things differently. You may want to consider extra help or support for them, if you feel they are not coping with what's going on.

Your health visitor or GP may be able to suggest who to contact for specific advice.

It may also be helpful to talk to their teacher if they are at school about what is available there.

Where else can I get support?

Each prison has a Family Contact Officer (FCO) who should be available to talk through any concerns you may have about visiting with a child. They can be contacted at the prison through the telephone switchboard, or they may be available when you visit. Some prisons also have Visitors' Centres or Family Help Hubs, where you can access support and information from staff.

You can also call the Families Outside Support & Information Helpline on [0800 254 0088](tel:08002540088).

This information sheet is designed to help you, or a family member prepare for the possibility of imprisonment.

We would like to thank Barnardo's (Northern Ireland) for granting permission to Families Outside to reproduce excerpts from their booklet *"Supporting a Child when a Parent is in Prison"*.