

Families Outside - Support & Information Helpline

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8. Talking to children and young people about imprisonment

The imprisonment of a loved one can be overwhelming for everyone involved. It can bring about big changes and transitions for children and young people, but with your support they can emerge from it feeling loved, confident and strong. One of the most difficult challenges faced by families when someone goes to prison is what to tell the children. This information sheet may help you with this but you may also find it helpful to speak with your Health Visitor, GP or your child/ren's teacher.

Should I tell my child when a close relative goes to prison?

As a parent, it's normal to want to protect your children from bad news. At first you might think it's better not to share the news that their relative is in prison. But keeping it a secret can be difficult as there is no guaranteed way to protect children from finding out what has happened in some other way. Your child may already know and understand more than you realise.

It's natural to have concerns about telling your child about imprisonment, especially if your partner committed a crime against you, or if it was a violent or sexual offence. At times like this, it is very easy for adults in the family to be caught up in their own feelings and worries. But this can also be a difficult time for children and they will want to know where their parent is and why.

*“Why are you sad mummy? Where is Daddy? When is he coming home?
Can I see him? Did I do something wrong? Is that why he went away?”*

Children who are not told where their parent is can become confused. It may be damaging for your child and your relationship with them if they feel you are hiding something from them, and most children will sense this. They will feel less able to ask questions, and imagine things which will worry them more.

When, what, and how much shall I tell the children?

There is no right time or way to tell your child but it is best to get things out into the open as soon as possible. The age and development of your child will be important in deciding how much information and reassurance they will need.

It is not always necessary or helpful to give children details of the crime committed.

They just need to be able to trust that you have told them the truth. For example, many children can accept the explanation that their parent/relative has gone to prison because a court decided they have done something wrong.

They need to feel that they can ask questions, and find out what they need to know when they need to.

They may feel it is they who have done something wrong and that is the reason why their parent has gone away. If so, they need to be told clearly that it is not their fault.

The following steps can help you prepare to talk to children about imprisonment.

Step 1: Prepare for the conversation

It can help to plan when you are going to tell children so that you are sure you have plenty of time to talk and answer questions when you won't be disturbed. It may be helpful to tell them with another adult whom the children feel they can trust.

Think about your goals. You may want to consider (amongst other things):

- What your child needs to know about where their relative is and why they are there
- What prison is like
- How long they will be in prison and will they be able to talk to them on the phone or visit them
- How you can help your child understand what's going on
- What you can do to help your child cope
- How should the child handle talking with friends
- How you want your child to feel after the talk.

Step 2: Talk

Children need to feel that they are listened to and understood. Listening to a child, offering reassurance and trying to understand things from their point of view can help them cope with the situation. It may be helpful for them to talk to another family member or school teacher as children may not want to cause more upset by sharing their own worries and fears with those closest to them

Before you have the talk, check to see if your child is open to talking with you at the time. You might consider saying some like this *"I'd like to talk with you about something important. Is this a good time?"*

In some cases it will not be appropriate for a child to have contact with a parent in prison, especially if there is a risk of harm to the child. This will need to be explained to them

Step 3: Follow up

Remember, this talk is likely to be the first of many conversations about their imprisoned relative and prison life. As time goes on, it's very important to make sure that you and your child keep talking about what's going on and how they are feeling.

Keep in mind that your child may hear things about your relative's imprisonment from other people, which means that there may be times when you will have to help your child deal with people saying or doing things which upset them. You can support them and reassure them that they have done nothing wrong.

✚ Children's reactions

Children whose parents are in prison may feel:

WORRIED that you will be taken away too	SAD that the family has changed
ASHAMED about why their dad's in prison	RELIEF if there have been a lot of rows or arguments
ANGRY with dad for leaving them, or with the authorities for taking him away.	GRIEF because they are missing their dad and all he did for and with them
EMBARRASSED by what their friends will think or say	GUILTY in case they have been to blame somehow
FEAR OR CONFUSION about what will happen next	BURDENED if they have to keep the imprisonment a secret
AFRAID to ask questions or talk about dad	WORTHLESS - low self-esteem often follows on from these other feelings.

✚ Changes in children's behaviour

If there has been a change in the family situation, because their mum or dad has gone to prison, you may see changes in your child's behaviour. This is likely to be a sign that they are trying to deal with the many different feelings listed above. They may show this by going back to younger behaviour like bed-wetting or temper tantrums. They may find it difficult to concentrate at school. They may be aware that something has happened but feel too frightened to ask. You may find it helpful to speak with your Health Visitor or their teacher at school.

✚ How Can You Help?

As far as possible help children stay in contact with their parent or relative. You can do this by:

- Taking them on visits to see their relative
- Allowing the children to visit with another family member or friends if you don't want to take them yourself
- Answering any questions as honestly as possible in a way that makes sense to them
- Encouraging children to talk about their parent/relative
- Listening to their views on what they want to happen
- Not turning them against their parent/relative
- Reassuring them that their parent still loves them
- Keeping things as normal as possible
- Telling the school, so that they can support the child.

✚ Different ways of Keeping in Touch

Telephone calls - try to agree what time mum/dad will phone and make sure the child/ren are around. Leave time so they get to talk with them as well as with you

Scrap book - encourage children to keep a scrapbook of things they want to share with their parent/relative when they get home e.g. photos, schoolwork and pictures.

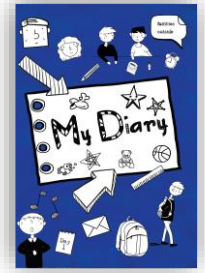
Letters - encourage them to write letters to mum/dad

Pictures/drawings - younger children could draw a picture and post it

Email - the emailprisoner service allows messages to be sent to a prisoner. For more information visit www.emailprisoner.com

Families Outside Children's Diary

Families Outside have developed a book for children, "My Diary", which follows the journey of a boy whose father is in prison. The book is a useful tool for any parent, carer or professional wishing to dialogue with children about the impact of imprisonment on them. If you would like a copy of "My Diary", please contact the Helpline on **0800 254 0088**.



It's No Holiday



This film was created in 2006 to help and support teenagers who may be affected by imprisonment of a family member. About young people's experiences of having a family member sent to prison, the film is an awareness raising and training resource which can be used with a range of audiences, from social work to school teachers, from police to lawyers. Originally a DVD, this has now been adapted to be a web based e-learning resource at the Families Outside **Vimeo** account. A postcard for the film is also available.

Kin

Kin is a creative arts project by and for young people aged between 14 and 24 years, who have experienced the imprisonment of a family member. Members of Kin use their own experiences to design resources for other young people affected by imprisonment. To watch the short film made by Kin visit <http://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/kin-video-young-people/>

Please contact Families Outside Support & Information Helpline on **0800 254 0088** if you would like a copy of the booklets, DVD or any of the other children's resources available on the website.

Information Sheet 7 provides more information, specifically on visiting a Scottish prison with your child and may help you both to prepare your prison visit.

The **No Offence** blog on how to speak to children about imprisonment may also be helpful: <http://www.no-offence.org/news-item/455-the-truth-will-out/>



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".