



## Incarcerated Parents

By Eliza Cook and Rachel Dunifon

Over 53% of prisoners today are parents and the percentage is steadily increasing year after year (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007). Incarceration presents challenges not only for the incarcerated parent, but also for their children and caregivers who step in to fill parenting roles. Below is some information, based on the latest research, that may help families who are in this situation.

### Recommendations for an incarcerated parent:

- **Communicate that it is not your child's fault.** Frequently youth blame themselves for their parent's behaviors. Take the time to assure your child that they are not to blame for whatever actions led to your incarceration.
- **If possible, maintain high quality contact with your child during incarceration.**
  - Visiting with his or her parent can decrease children's feelings of loss of separation and help address fears or fantasies about prison by seeing it firsthand. Such visits allow the parent to keep up to date on what is going on in the child's life and can make it easier for when the parent is able to re-enter the child's life after prison.
  - Visitations have benefits for the incarcerated parent, as well; they have been linked with lower rates of recidivism, increased self-esteem for parents, and more parental involvement with their children following release.
  - The child's caregiver should be brought into the visitation process as much as possible. This way the caregiver will be able to assess how visits affect the child. As you prepare for visits, ask the caregiver to bring in recent art projects, writing assignments, or other things that will allow you to learn more about your child's life as well as give you things to talk about with your child.
  - Before a visit occurs, think carefully about how to best approach it. One of the major concerns surrounding visitation are poor quality interactions. For example, a parent may be distracted or feel ashamed, not know what to say, or the jail atmosphere may frighten the child. A caregiver can help prepare your child for the visit (see recommendations below), but as the parent it is important to prepare yourself as well. Before your child comes to visit ask your caregiver to communicate updates about your child's life so that you know which questions to ask (i.e., what classes is he or she taking? What new hobbies? Friends? Latest successes? Etc.). You should also be prepared for your child to be

hesitant or even angry during the visits. Try to accept your child's feelings and understand them; they will likely lessen if you are able to keep talking with your child.

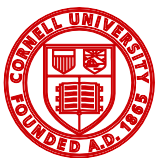
- If regular in person visits are not possible, think about other ways to communicate with your child, including letters and phone calls. As with visits, you can use these opportunities to address any questions your child may have, listen to their feelings, as well as keep up to date on their lives.
- Your child may have lots of questions about your situation, and while you can address them as directly as possible, it is also important to avoid giving your child scary or inappropriate information about life in prison.

### Recommendations for grandparents or other caregivers of a child whose parent is incarcerated:

- **If possible, enlist help.** When grandparents or other relatives accept primary responsibility for a child whose parent is incarcerated they tend to feel an increased burden on finances, personal health, and increased stress. Instead of trying to take on this new responsibility by yourself see if there are ways to engage others in this new transition. Perhaps other relatives are available to share the financial burden or provide childcare assistance when you need a day to recharge.
  - Your local Cooperative Extension office or other social service agencies may have programs or resources for people in your situation.
- **Try to separate the child from their parent's actions.** Research found that grandparents who serve as full-time caregivers have mixed emotions (guilt, anger, and shame) about their biological child who is incarcerated. Sometimes grandparents might want to vent or resolve issues about their incarcerated son or daughter with their grandchild, but it is important to avoid this. Try to view your grandchild separate from their parent's actions—venting or complaining to them may make them feel responsible for their parent's choices and conflicted of how to respond.
  - Connecting with a support group through a local service agency can provide you with a great outlet for the complex feelings you have about your child and grandchild.
- **Be mindful of the risks your child may face and stay involved.** Seeing a parent go to jail is very disruptive for children. Not only are they facing the temporary loss of a parent, but also may be embarrassed about their situation.
  - You may see increased crying, confusion, worry, anger, trouble sleeping, depression, difficulty concentrating, acting out and developmental regression (such as wetting the bed). Be prepared for these changes and sensitive to the shock these children may be facing. Seek professional

help if you are concerned about your child or feel overwhelmed. Your child's school counselor, local mental health agency, or local Cooperative Extension office may be able to provide assistance.

- Some children with incarcerated parents experience problems such as engaging in antisocial behavior, poor school performance, or disruptive behaviors. To minimize these risks stay involved in the child's life, ask questions and be mindful about who their friends are and how school is going. They may require additional help with homework or need extra attention in these areas. Do not hesitate to talk to your child's school counselor or other social service agencies to seek counseling or other supports for a child who is going through a hard time.
- **Prepare the child for visits.** One important role as a grandparent or caregiver is preparing the child for visits with their incarcerated parent. It might be wise to visit the incarcerated parent alone first to see how the process works and discuss with the parent details of future visits (will you as the caregiver be present at all visits? For how long? How frequent will the visits be?). Then, before coming back with the child talk through details of the visit to let him or her know what to expect. Discuss what their incarcerated parent will be wearing, what security measures you will have to go through, and other things about the visit. In addition, look for ways to positively connect the parent and child. For example, you could bring in school assignments or other recent projects the child has been working on and think about topics to discuss regarding current events in the child's life.
  - When visits are not possible, you can encourage the child to communicate with their parent through letters or phone calls.
  - However, be aware of how the child reacts to visits, letters, or phone calls. If they appear to be having a negative impact on the child, it may make sense to suspend contact while you work with the parent to develop a way to make communication more beneficial.



**Cornell University**  
**Cooperative Extension**

Visit the Parenting Project website at  
<https://www.human.cornell.edu/engagement/parenting-project>

©2012 Cornell Cooperative Extension  
Cornell University offers equal program and employment opportunities.