

Safeguarding the child-parent relationship

1. Speak carefully of the incarcerated parent.

Never speak ill of mom or dad, and don't allow others to make derogatory statements. No matter how badly that parent has behaved, they are still the child's mother or father. A child may tell you about ways their parent has failed them, ways that are sometimes hard to hear, but putting mom or dad down, no matter what the circumstances, breaks that child's trust. Assure the child that she can be angry at mom or dad, and still love them, even if they've done a bad thing.

2. Help children stay connected with their parent while incarcerated.

In general, children who stay in touch with an incarcerated parent tend to adjust much better than those who do not. But staying in contact can be complicated by many factors—prison policies and procedures, as well as caregiver and parental reluctance. As a teacher or child care provider, your ability to help children stay connected with a mom or dad in prison will depend on many things, and will vary with each situation.

phone calls

People on the outside cannot call incarcerated people directly, but people in prison can call family members who are on their “approved call list.” Phone calls from prison are very expensive and a parent may not have enough money to call home. (A recently announced FCC decision may ease these costs.) Some schools and child care centers will accept pre-scheduled collect calls from parents in prison, allowing them to speak with their child, and their child's teachers. They can also participate in conference calls about their child's progress.

mail

Exchanging letters through the mail is a vital, and less expensive, way of staying in touch. You may not send packages or gifts, only correspondence. As long as you meet the inmate mail regulations (see box below), you can include school work, newsletters, progress reports, photos or pictures a child has drawn. For holidays and birthdays, plan ahead: think of creative ways to help a child connect with their incarcerated parent. You might help them to create an add-on story, or drawing, where one starts it, the other adds something to it, and they keep exchanging back and forth. If a child makes something that can't be sent to prison because it doesn't meet requirements, you can photograph it and send the photo.

If you feel inclined, you may write to the incarcerated parent yourself to help build a connection. You might ask him or her to send a letter or drawing to the child at your school. Together, you might think of ways to keep a transitional object in your classroom — something that will be meaningful and reassuring to the child when they are struggling, missing mom or dad. Some correctional facilities have a program where a parent can read a book to their child, and record it.

mailing do's and don'ts

When you are sending mail to the prison, be sure to follow the specific guidelines below. If the item you are mailing violates these regulations, it will not be delivered. The incarcerated parent will receive a notice that they have a piece of mail that doesn't meet requirements; they will be given a black and white photocopy of the item and asked whether they would like it to be destroyed or returned to sender. They will be charged an inflated rate if they choose to have it returned.

Please note that requirements may be arbitrarily enforced and are not always consistent from one facility to another. There are no guarantees about what mail will get delivered and what won't, but following these guidelines will help.

No packages or gifts. No glitter, glue, stickers, labels, staples, tape, string, clips, gel pens, colored markers or crayons; no stamps or empty envelopes; no colored copies from computer printers or copy machines (photos have to be actual prints from a photo kiosk, not computer generated); no musical or plastic greeting cards; all mail must include complete return address with the full first and last name of sender, no initials. If you have a question about whether something will meet the requirements, you can call the specific correctional facility, and ask for the person who supervises mail.

3. Provide support around visits

Some children are able to visit their parent in prison and studies show that most children manage the crisis of parental incarceration better when they visit. While visits do help to reassure children, and strengthen their bond with mom or dad, visiting can also be difficult. Usually, it takes time for children to cope with the feelings that the visits raise. While not visiting might be easier on the emotions in the short run, out of sight is not out of mind. Not visiting leaves a lot of fear, confusion, questions, and imagined dangers for the child to deal with. These feelings may show up in problem behaviors, and can be damaging over time.

One of the ways in which you can support the child is by understanding that the immediate impact of a child's visit to a correctional facility may be rough. This can be especially true for visits to facilities far from home, when the child may have returned late at night. You may find yourself "picking up the pieces" the next morning. Keep in mind that visiting provides a forum for children to process the trauma surrounding their separation from mom or dad. Over time, this can reduce children's feelings of guilt, responsibility, and concern for their parents' safety. Children's experiences with visiting, and the emotions it evokes, can be greatly improved with preparation, support and debriefing.

The circumstances, rules, and requirements for visiting vary from one facility to another, and sometimes even from one corrections officer to another. It helps to know about visiting procedures at the specific facility so you can support the child in preparing for the visit, and make sense of what they might talk about later in your class. Visits can be especially trying for young children: seeing mom or dad only behind glass, the lack of physical contact, remaining seated with hands on the table, interactions limited to quiet talk for an hour. It can be scary and difficult, with the real possibility of having a visit terminated early if the child fails to meet expectations such as these. If you are aware that a child has had a visit with his or her parent, you might ask them if they want to tell you about it, what they liked and didn't like, and how they are feeling.

4. When the time comes, help the child to prepare for their parent's release

The release of an incarcerated parent is a time when care and attention for the feelings and needs of the child is critical. This is important regardless of whether or not the child will be reunited with their parent. Children wait for their parent's return and it can be exciting, or confusing, or frightening—or a combination of all of these. As the release date draws near, explore what the child's expectations are.

It is important to correct any re-entry fantasies and fears. Will it be like it was before? What will be different? If their parent will be released on furlough, probation or parole, you can ask how the conditions might affect the child. You can help the child to understand how their parent's release conditions might affect them, for example they might not be allowed to have internet in the house, or have friends come over. Perhaps their parent will not be allowed to drive. And what if they break a rule, will Mom or Dad have to go away again? Re-entry is a complicated time.

5. Seek help whenever you need it.

There are currently three programs in Vermont that specifically provide support, each in different ways, for children of incarcerated parents and their caregivers. Reach out for help anytime you have questions, need resources, or support.

- ***Resilience Beyond Incarceration***

RBI supports children, their parents and caregivers, and provides clinical case management for families in Lamoille Valley, and consultation and training for providers throughout Vermont. For more information, contact RBI at the Lamoille Restorative Center 802-888-0538 (<http://www.lrcvt.org>).

- ***Lund's Kids-A-Part***

This program helps to keep families connected, and offers special visits when a mom is incarcerated in Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility. 802-859-3227 (<http://www.lundvt.org/kids-a-part.html>)

- ***Vermont Kin As Parents***

An organization which supports relatives who are raising the children of an incarcerated parent. 802-338-4725 (<http://vermontkinasparents.org>)