

Creating a Personal Storybook with a Child

One of the best resources for a child who has a parent incarcerated is a personal story book, one that tells their unique story. Ideally, you will create it with lots of input from the child, deciding together what photos or drawings they want to include so their story is “just right” for them. A personal storybook can answer their – perhaps unspoken – questions and concerns about where their parent is, and why. It can affirm their parent’s love for them. And if, as a result of their parent’s incarceration, the child has moved to a new place, or has a new caregiver, a personal storybook can offer reassurance and create a sense of belonging. Ideally it will include photos of all the people who love and care for them, along with pictures of where they live and go to school, and some of their favorite things.

It is helpful to make several copies of the child’s book to share with their teachers, caregivers, and other supportive adults so that all members of the child’s team know their story and use the same language.

Before writing the narrative, you will need to gather some information from both the child and their parent or guardian. Below are some questions to guide you. (Please note: if the child was a victim of their parent’s crime, a personal storybook of this nature may not be appropriate.)

Ask a parent or guardian:

- Where does the child live now and who else lives in the home? Who has legal custody?
- How long ago did their parent go to prison and how old was the child?
- How was the child impacted by the parent’s arrest? Were they present?
- What questions do they ask about their parent? How do you answer those questions?
- What other adults in the child’s life know about their parent and their family situation?
- Do you know anyone else who is incarcerated (family/friend/neighbor)?
- Does the child understand any of these words/phrases?
 - Crime/break the law
 - Court hearing/judge
 - Prison/jail/incarceration
 - Arrest
 - Sentence
 - Correctional officer
- How long might their parent be in prison?
- What contact, if any, do they have with their parent now (phone, visits, letters, video visits)? Does the child seem satisfied with this contact?
- When their parent returns to the community, will the child live with them or visit?
- What photos do they have of their parent and other adults who love them?

Ask the child:

- What do you call your mother/father/grandparent/guardian?
- If you have a brother, sister, or pets, what are their names?
- What other people in your life care about you and help you (friends, teachers, counselors)?
- What are some of your favorite things (colors, places, foods, activities)?
- What did you enjoy doing with your parent before they went away?
- What is hard for you now that your parent is gone?
- Thinking about what to put in your book, is there anything else that would be important to you?
- Would you like your book to have drawings and/or photos?

Sample Text: My Dad (or Mom) Loves Me

Children who have a parent in prison often have concerns and questions. They wonder about where their parent is, why they are gone, if they are ok, when they will come home, and if their parent still loves them. The sample text below can be used to create a story that helps answer these questions and also addresses some of the many emotions a child might experience after losing their parent to incarceration. Modify the text as needed to make it personally relevant for a child, given their particular circumstances.

My name is _____. This is a picture of me.

This is a picture of my dad. (*Adjust for "Mom"*). He loves me even though he doesn't live with me now.

My dad is in prison. He is there because he broke a law. Laws are rules that grown-ups have to follow to help keep everyone safe. Sometimes, when grown-ups break a law, they have to spend time in prison. We don't know exactly how long my dad will be there, but it could be _____.

Even though my dad broke a law, that does not mean he is a bad person. Good people sometimes make bad mistakes. He's still my dad. Before he went to prison, we did things together, like _____.

When people are in prison, they have a bed in a room that they share with other people. They all eat together at tables and they might have jobs like doing dishes or laundry. They have a television, but they don't have a phone so I can't call him.

They aren't allowed to leave the building on their own, but they go outside together for a little while each day, kind of like recess. There are people who work in the prison called "correction officers". It's their job to make sure everybody follows the rules and they help to keep everybody safe.

I wish my dad had not broken the law. Sometimes I feel _____. When I feel _____ here is what helps me feel better _____.

I know my dad is safe in prison even though he doesn't want to be there. I wish he could be with me, and I bet he wishes that too. One of my favorite things about my dad is _____.

Sometimes I have really big feelings. I cry and get mad. My Gram tells me it's okay for me to feel sad or angry and to miss my dad. Lots of other kids have parents in prison and they have big feelings too.

When I feel sad or mad, I talk to my Gram. She says I can still love my dad AND be mad at him too.

When I'm upset, I can also talk to the other people who love me, like _____.

Lots of people take care of me, and they can help me too, like _____.

They help me remember my dad always loves me. He loves me forever, even when he can't be with me.

Sample Text: My Own Story Book

After a parent goes to prison, many children have to move to a new home or town, live with a new caregiver, or go to a different school. The sample text for this storybook helps to build a child's sense of security and belonging. It provides reassurance that, even though their parent is gone, they can rely on others to be there for them. In the process of creating this storybook, the child identifies several people who love and care for them. The text also acknowledges the relationship the child had with their parent prior to incarceration and reminds them that their parent loves them even though they are apart. Modify the text to make it meaningful and relevant, addressing the child's own situation.

My name is _____. Here is a picture of me.

This is a picture of my mother. She loves me even though she doesn't live with me.

This is my Grammy. She loves me and takes care of me. I live with her now. We like to _____ and _____ together. We also like to play _____. Sometimes we go _____. I help my Grammy by _____ and _____.

This is _____. He loves me and takes care of me. He is _____ and we do _____ together.

This is my _____. I call her _____. She loves me. We take care of each other. We like to _____. I help her by _____.

This is my dog/cat _____. We play _____. He likes _____.

This is my home and here is what I love about it:

This is where I sleep. Here is what I like about my bed (or room):

This is where I eat my meals. My favorite things to eat here are:

This is how I help at home:

This is the yard where I play. I like to _____.

This is where I go to school. I like school because _____. These are the people who care for me at school:

This is my friend _____. We like to _____.

Here's how we help each other _____.