

Safeguarding Children When a Parent is Arrested

WHAT OFFICERS CAN DO TO HELP

When responding to a call that may involve the arrest of a child's parent or caregiver, law enforcement officers must react quickly and effectively to a range of heightened emotions and behaviors. There is an obvious need to focus attention on the adults present. Yet you are also in a position to do some real good—and not create more harm—for the most vulnerable people in the room: the children. The strategies outlined below will minimize potential trauma to the children who are present when the police arrive. They will be more likely to experience the police officer as a source of safety, not a threat. There are certainly situations when it is simply not possible to do these things—but **whenever possible, to whatever extent you can do any of them, you will reduce harm.**

1. Secure the scene, ensure safety, and minimize chaos

A child's need for physical safety, as well as emotional security, carries additional responsibilities for on-scene officers if lasting trauma is to be avoided.

- Move children to the least chaotic area to prevent them from hearing and seeing violence.
- Keep children separated from agitated or out-of-control individuals.
- If older teens are volatile, you may need to separate them from others.

2. Calm and comfort

Remaining calm yourself is a powerful starting point. Demonstrating genuine care and concern for both the parent and child can help minimize trauma.

- Be patient if possible: give parents a chance to calm their child and manage the separation on their own.
- Get to eye level when talking with kids.
- Acknowledge how hard this is—having police in the house, arresting their parent—say something like **"This must be hard."** **"This must be scary."** **"Is your heart racing?"**
- For younger kids, offer a "comfort item" (wrap them in a blanket; offer a stuffed animal, favorite toy, or book; give them an item of their parent's clothing—like a sweatshirt or scarf—to hold).



- To help calm children, say, **"Let's take a deep breath together and count to 3."** Do this several times.
- Speak slowly and carefully: state your expectations clearly.
- Make one request at a time: be ready to repeat yourself without becoming impatient.
- For older kids, try to recognize rude, stand-offish, or hostile attitudes as expressions of distress and need. Don't take it personally, and don't assume your help isn't needed; you can also name it by saying something like, **"I feel your anger and believe me, I regret that we have to be here."**

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3. Provide information

Help kids get their “thinking” brains back to work. Moving them out of the emotional brain towards their other brain functions can help them to regain a sense of control.

- Give kids an activity (coloring, fidget toy, or puzzle) to engage thinking.
- Explain in simple, direct words why the police are there.
- Tell them what will happen next at the scene, and, as much as possible, in the days ahead; this is key to reducing anxiety—kids want to know what will happen to them and their loved one who cares for them.
- Expect to repeat information several times.
- Reassure kids that they’ve done nothing wrong, and that none of this is their fault.
- Help them recognize and talk about any feelings they have about what is happening.
- Ask if they have questions for you; answer as carefully as possible, and if you don’t know, say, “I don’t know.”
- Don’t make promises you can’t keep.
- Don’t overwhelm with too much information.
- Try to offer children choices: making even small choices enhances a sense of control.
- Respect a child’s right NOT to speak to you.
- If there are siblings, ask the older kids if they can

help calm the younger ones, and engage them in an activity.



- Ask older kids about their safety concerns—in their home, school, neighborhood, or with others.
- Talk to older kids about some of the feelings they may experience in the days ahead; assure them these reactions are normal.
- Help kids get connected to adults who can support them; give contact information.

4. Respect the parent and the child’s attachment to them

Regardless of what they might have done, the alleged offender is still the child’s parent and a strong attachment bond is critical for the child’s healthy development. Even when their actions have caused harm, treat the parent respectfully.

- Encourage the parent to take slow, deep breaths and remain calm so they can calm their child.
- Honor a child’s loyalty to their parent, their love for them, and attachment to them.
- Remember a child’s self-esteem and self-worth are closely tied to their image of their parent; whatever they hear about their parent affects the way they feel about themselves.
- Be patient with the actual separation—don’t rush it if you don’t need to.
- Allow the parent (and the child too if they’re old enough) to be involved in making arrangements for the child’s care.
- Offer to call a relative or friend; children do better when they are with someone they know.
- Listen to why the child may not want to go to another adult’s home.
- Make sure medications and favorite things are taken if the child must leave their home.
- Provide information to the parent about upcoming steps and, if known, when their child might be able to see them; make no promises.
- Talk to the parent about the potential for traumatic impact on their child; offer contact information for support services; try to assure a ‘warm transfer.’

Additional resources can be found on our website:

lrcvt.org/resilience-beyond-incarceration