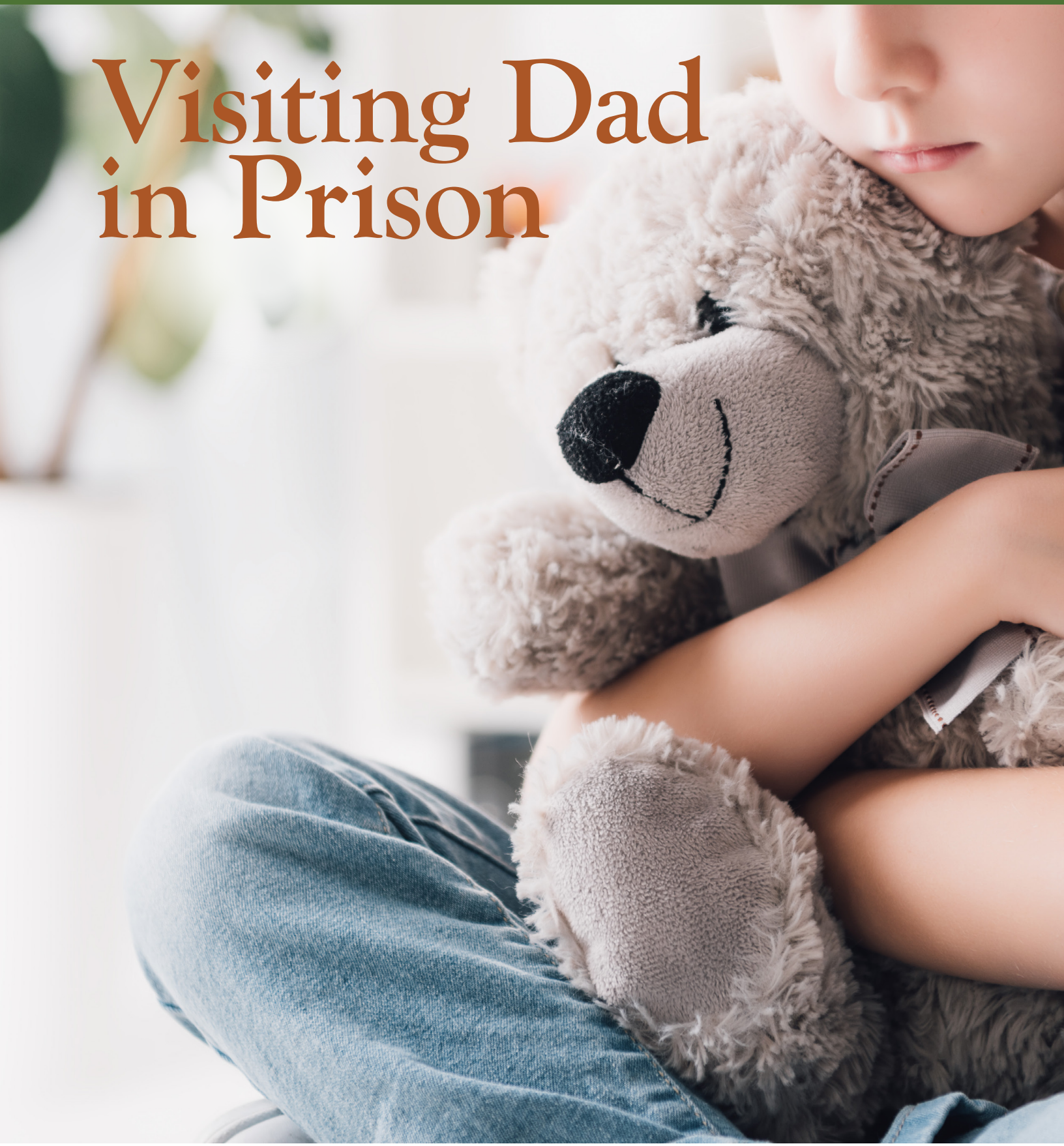
Visiting Dad in Prison



VIEWERS' GUIDE

Resilience
Beyond Incarceration
A Program for Children and Families

Introduction

This guide offers an opportunity to reflect on the experience of visiting a parent in prison and some of the questions, concerns, and emotions that may arise.

Visiting Dad in Prison provides a glimpse into a child's visit to her father in a Vermont prison. Narrated by a 9-year-old girl, the video acquaints viewers with the rules that often govern visits while conveying some of the feelings that can arise during the experience. The video also offers the chance to look at some of the places in prison that children are curious about but don't ever see—like where their parent sleeps and eats. All correctional facilities are different from one another; each with their own rules and visiting opportunities. The intent behind *Visiting Dad in Prison* is to provide an introduction to the experience of visiting in a fairly typical and restrictive visiting room environment.

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While some facilities are moving toward more child-friendly spaces with opportunities for parents and children to interact more naturally with one another, that is not yet standard practice. In Vermont such a space currently exists in the women's facility but not in any of the men's facilities.

For practical guidelines on facilitating prison visits and supporting children before, during, and after visiting, refer to the *Visiting a Correctional Facility Tip Sheets #1, #2,* and *#3* available on our website: lrcvt.org/resilience-beyond-incarceration

Intended audiences

Adults

Our intention in producing *Visiting Dad in Prison* is to increase awareness and compassion among adults who are in a position to:

- Facilitate visits between children and their incarcerated parent;
- Accompany children on visits; and
- Support children with their experiences and emotions before and after visiting.

These adults could include:

- Custodial parents, foster parents, and caregivers;
- Social workers, case managers, and mental health counselors;
- Teachers, support staff, school counselors, and nurses; and
- After-school program staff and child care providers.

The video could also be useful for:

- Correctional officers and facility staff who may interact with children at a visit;
- Guardians ad Litem, and child advocates; and
- Students in social work, education, and counseling degree programs.

Children

Visiting Dad in Prison is also intended for children (ages 5 to 14) who are or may be visiting their parent who is incarcerated. **Be sure to watch the video yourself before sharing it with a child.** Be thoughtful about the context within which the video will be shown and also the opportunity to support a child to process their experience. At the end of the video, read the closing message to any child who is not yet able to read on their own.

Children should **not** view the video on their own. A caring and supportive adult should watch along with the child. In this context the video and follow-up conversation can help to prepare a child for a visit. It also helps to ease the burden of isolation. Visiting a parent in prison is an experience that is likely to feel restrictive, to evoke strong emotions, and may seem frightening. It can be helpful to see that other children share this experience.

The video is not recommended for:

- Children who would be watching alone without a supportive adult present.
- Children who do not/will not have any opportunity to visit their parent in prison.
- Children who do not have a relationship with their parent in prison.
- Teens older than 14 years.

Addressing a child's questions, concerns, and emotions

Visiting Dad in Prison may evoke intense emotions. For children who have a parent incarcerated, it will be important to **provide time and space for a supportive conversation** or the opportunity to participate in an activity to help process whatever comes up. A child's emotional response could include feelings of sadness, loneliness, abandonment, anger, fear, grief, confusion, and anxiety.

For any number of reasons, this video may be unsettling for some children. They might have a very different visiting experience than the one depicted in the video. This could be confusing. It may help to **explain that each facility makes its own rules and decisions.**

Some children might also have a different relationship with their parent than the girl in the video has with her dad. Perhaps their parent has never sent them a letter or drawing. Perhaps the parent has never expressed pride in their child's accomplishments. Some children could experience grief, disappointment, envy, or resentment. It can help to **explain that parents have many different ways of expressing their love for their children.**

Anticipating a child's questions can help you feel better prepared to offer answers.

If a child watching the video has not yet visited a prison, they may have questions about some of the rules. They may wonder why there are so many restrictions. Others could worry that they might get locked in and not be allowed to leave. Younger children might wonder why their mom or dad can't go home with them when the visit ends. Anticipating a child's questions can help you feel prepared to offer answers. If you can take some time to **review the *Visiting a Correctional Facility Tip Sheets*** on our website before sharing the video with a child, you will find answers to many questions and feel better prepared to attend to the child's concerns.

Facilitating a discussion

The following questions are offered simply to encourage thoughtful reflection. There are no right or wrong answers. You can choose whichever prompts seem most relevant or helpful.

Reflection questions for adults:

- Consider your own bias and your opinions about people who are incarcerated. How will you keep any judgments or criticism about a child's parent to yourself? Why is this important?
- How and why might a child's view of their parent who is incarcerated be different from others' opinions about their parent?
- Parental incarceration often has a negative effect on how children feel about themselves. Knowing that a child's self-worth is closely tied to their image of their parent, how might you help them identify with their parent's positive qualities?
- If you were going to accompany a child on a visit how would you prepare ahead of time?
- A correctional facility is not a welcoming environment. Often, the experience of being inside a prison—even for a short visit—contributes to a child feeling like they are 'in trouble'. How might you help prepare a child for this possibility and provide reassurance if that feeling comes up?
- Knowing that visiting time can be short and visitors may have competing needs for attention, how would you help ensure that the focus of the visit stays primarily on the child and their experience?

Reflection questions for children:

- If you have visited your parent in a correctional facility, **how does your experience compare with the girl's in the video?** What do you notice that is the same for both of you, and what is different? (Ask about the visiting room and rules as well as the child's emotional experience. Be sure to create lots of opportunity for the child to talk about their own visit and be ready to validate their experience.)
- The girl in the video talks about a few of her friends who have a parent incarcerated. Some of them visit their parent and some do not. **What are some reasons a child might want to visit and what are some reasons they might not want to visit?**
- There are no right or wrong answers to the question of whether or not to visit a parent in prison or how often to visit. In the video, the girl says, "Some kids aren't allowed to visit, and some kids don't want to, some kids just live too far away." **When you think about visiting your parent, do you ever feel confused or pressured? What helps?**
- Some parents might not want their children to visit them while they are in prison. **What reasons might they have and what are your thoughts about this?**
- The girl in the video says the correctional officers look really serious. Often, they are not very friendly. Their job is to make sure everyone follows the rules and they try to keep everyone safe. **Has a correctional officer ever had a conversation with you? What was that experience like for you?**
- In the video, the girl's grandma goes with her to visit her dad. **Who goes with you to visit your parent?**
- **Are there other people who help you in different ways,** for example, other family members, teachers, neighbors, a librarian, or a friend? If so, **what is something that they do that is helpful?**

Other Useful Resources from Resilience Beyond Incarceration:

All of these and more can be found on our website: lrcvt.org/resilience-beyond-incarceration

- **Visiting a Correctional Facility Tip Sheets #1, #2, and #3**
- **Downstream: The Effects of Parental Incarceration:** 60-minute documentary. downstreamfilm.com
- **Downstream Discussion Guide**
- **Families Strong:** A Handbook for Supporters of Children and Families Affected by Parental Incarceration
- **Staying Connected:** Strengthening Relationships between Children and Their Parents in Prison
- **Even When We Are Apart,** a comforting book that creates an opportunity for sensitive conversations

Resilience Beyond Incarceration
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Produced by Resilience Beyond Incarceration, a program of Lamoille Restorative Center.
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