Why Maintain Relationships?

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

Adapted from How Can I Help?, published by the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York, used with permission.

Is prison visiting good for the child of a prisoner? Is it good for the parent in prison? Is it good for the family?

There is no one right answer for every situation or family. But there are many families and children that can benefit from maintaining family ties through the crises of incarceration.

Can contact with a parent in prison benefit children?

Each family situation is different. The potential benefit to children depends greatly on how much support they receive. There are many adults who are important in the lives of children of prisoners. Children can benefit when adults help with letter writing and phone calls. They can also benefit when these adults participate in preparing for and conducting visits.

Potential Benefits to Children

• Correcting frightening images

What the child imagines about the incarcerated parent's condition and circumstances is likely to be much worse and more frightening than the reality. As depressing as a prison visiting room may be, it is far better that what many children imagine.

• Talking face to face

Parents in prison can talk with their children about their crime and life behind bars in ways that can decrease the child's guilt and feelings of responsibility. Parents in prison can help their children feel worthy and lovable.

• Learning you are not alone

Seeing other children and families at prison visits helps families know their situation is not unique. There are people who understand.

• Preparing for release

Maintaining contact through visits, phone and mail is also important to prepare the incarcerated parent to be re-united with the family upon release. Without contact, the child may experience the parent's return as an intrusion. The child may be confused when the newly released parent brings a change in parenting style and rules to an established routine in the family. This can be true whether or not the parent will live with the child.

• Preventing termination of parental rights

For children placed in foster care because of parental incarceration, visits are important to avoid permanent placement. These visits assure children that their parents have not voluntarily abandoned them to strangers. In the lives of foster children, ongoing visiting creates continuity. Also, courts may be less inclined to terminate the rights of a parent who, while incarcerated, worked to provide parental support.
Children of Prisoners Library
CPL #102: Why Maintain Relationships?

- Healing grief and loss

The pain of separation can overwhelm children in foster care and other children of prisoners. Maintaining the relationship between the child and the parent in prison is important to the child's adjustment and healing.

Can contact with family members behind bars benefit families?

Families can benefit from bridging the gap between jail and community. Families are complex systems. The absence of a part of the system has a powerful impact on its functioning. Family members in prison can be a vibrant part of the family if communication exists.

While prison limits the activities that a family member can perform, a prisoner can still fill an important role in family life as mother, father, spouse, partner, or sibling.

But families can only benefit from their relationship with an incarcerated member when and if they stay in communication.

Can contact with families benefit prisoners?

The family is probably this country's most valuable weapon in fighting crime. Prisoners who receive visitors, maintain family ties, and are released to a stable home environment are more likely to succeed in leading productive, crime-free lives.

What the child imagines about the incarcerated parent's condition and circumstances is likely to be much worse and more frightening than the reality. As depressing as a prison visiting room may be, it is far better than what many children imagine.

Prison inmates clearly benefit from family efforts to stay in touch. Families can provide an incentive for prisoners to grow, learn and change. Families can help prisoners stay in touch with what's going on in the world, easing their transition back to society. Some parole authorities see strong family ties as an indicator that a prisoner is better prepared for release.

Many parents in prison can contribute positively to a child's upbringing. Prisoners who have failed as citizens can succeed as parents. Prison can be an opportunity to become a better parent—more caring, concerned and informed.

Prison may not be the best place to improve one's parenting, but it has been done. Around the country, there is growing interest in starting and expanding programs to help prisoners learn the skills of parenting. The Directory of Programs at www.fcnetwork.org lists many examples.

There are several ways children can benefit from visits to their parents in prison.

There are many reasons for families separated by arrest and imprisonment to keep in touch. There are also many reasons that doing so is difficult.

Children of Prisoners Library pamphlets are designed to make the process a little easier. For more ideas on maintaining relationships, see CPL pamphlets 103, 105 and 107 and 201 – 204.
About the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL)

Pamphlets may be downloaded without charge from the Family and Corrections Network (FCN) web site, www.fcnetwork.org. Duplication is permitted and encouraged, so long as the materials are not altered or sold.

Sorry, FCN is not budgeted to mail free copies.

Send comments to The Children of Prisoners Library at FCN, 32 Oak Grove Road, Palmyra, VA 22963, 434/589-3036, 434/589-6520 Fax, fcn@fcnetwork.org. Copyright Family and Corrections Network, 2003.

In Appreciation

The Children of Prisoners Library is supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with additional support from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Jack DeLoss Taylor Charitable Trust and the Heidtke Foundation.

We are also grateful to our sponsoring organizations: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.-Southern Region, Children and Family Networks, Hour Children, The National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families and The Osborne Association.

Special thanks to the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York for permission to revise and publish material from the three volume set of pamphlets, How Can I Help?

The Children of Prisoners Library was written by Ann Adalist-Estrin, who adapted material from How Can I Help and authored other materials in the Children of Prisoners Library. It was edited and published by Jim Mustin.
Communication Tips
For Prisoners and Their Families

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

Adapted from *How Can I Help?*, published by the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York, used with permission.

Communication is the Source of Relationships.

Communication produces, sustains and empowers relationships. For children whose parents are incarcerated, communication with the parent in prison is essential. Without communication, their adjustment and long term well being may be compromised. But opportunities for communication between children and their incarcerated parents are limited. These communications are carefully defined and rigorously controlled, both by the prison and by the children's adult caregivers.

For many children, the prison visit may be the first time their parents have really taken the time to talk to them, to share their thoughts and feelings, to listen to them, to spend time with them.

For many children, the prison visit may be the first time their parents have really taken the time to talk to them, to share their thoughts and feelings, to listen to them, to spend time with them.

Phone calls, children can be greatly sustained by a parent's encouragement, support, and listening ear. This is difficult at best—but meaningful communication between children and their prisoner parents is possible.

Conversations Parents and Children Can Have

Some of the questions children have are discussed in CPL 103, *Conversations: Questions Children Ask*. These questions usually arise around the time a parent is incarcerated. Over the months or years of an incarceration, and even after a parent is released, children will continue to ask questions. These questions and their answers are part of an ongoing relationship between a child and her/his incarcerated parent. This relationship will require and thrive on many kinds of communication.

Communicating by Mail

Letters are a valuable tool for communication between children and their prisoner parents. Letters to and from children can provide an opportunity to share feelings without fear of judgment or shame. Some children can better express their anger and hurt in writing and drawing—clearing the way for a closer relationship in the future.

Some incarcerated parents can better express their affection and remorse in a letter without the embarrassment they may feel in a personal conversation. Saving the letters from an ongoing correspondence can be like keeping a journal. Re-reading a parent's letters over time can give a child a tangible experience of a growing relationship.
To communicate with a parent by mail, children may need help. Most children have difficulty writing letters. For children of prisoners, letter writing is often complicated by an array of obstacles. These obstacles include prison regulations and caregivers who may not want to stay connected to the inmate parent. Also, children's feelings of sadness, abandonment, and rage are very difficult to put into words. However, when adults work together, they can help children cope with these obstacles.

How Caregivers Can Help with Mail

Talk with children often about things they wish they could tell their parent. Make a running list of these things that can be put in a letter to Mom or Dad.

Plan for holidays and special occasions. Most gifts are not allowed to be sent into a prison or jail. Find out what is allowed and use this list to help children choose items for birthdays or holidays.

Talk about other types of gifts that can be sent, such as a photograph of the child in a handmade paper frame.

When children make gifts at school such as clay pots and wooden items, encourage them to take a picture of the item. They can send the picture to Mom or Dad or keep a "treasure box" of these gifts to give to their parent upon release.

Other good items to help the child send are greeting cards (homemade or store bought), school tests and copies of report cards, diplomas and awards.

Send school papers to parents. Most children and their parents have an easier time with school work that received a good grade, but encourage children to send their less than perfect work as well. Some incarcerated parents feel more connected to their children when they see papers and tests that children need help with, especially when they can write back with ideas and questions.

For children who cannot write, an adult can "take dictation" and write the children's message for them.

A stack of stamped envelopes, already addressed to the parent, can help children send messages or drawings whenever they like. But don't address too many, most prisoners are moved often during their incarceration.

Many children may need prompting from caregivers to keep in touch with the parent in prison. Some occasions are especially appropriate for prompting: getting school pictures, the parent's birthday, and holidays. Keep a calendar with these dates and reminders on it. Put this calendar where the child can see and reach it.

Parents in jails and prisons may also need help communicating with their child. Family members can help by reminding them of birthdays and giving advice about the child's interests. They can let them know a child's real feelings and thoughts.

If the relationship between the prisoner and the child's caregiver is strained, the parent in prison may also need "permission" to write or encouragement to write often.

How Parents in Prison Can Help with Mail

Children of prisoners usually love getting letters from their parents. They may not write back in a timely fashion, but that does not mean that these letters are not welcomed.

Write often. Just as most young children would rather have five pennies than one nickel, younger kids would rather get many notes and cards than a few long letters.

Prisoners can clip and send cartoons and photos from newspapers and magazines. Write letters in large block letters so they are easy for the child to read.

Prisoners with artistic talent can draw pictures of where they live, work, eat, and exercise to help
Children understand their parents’ daily lives.

Some prisoners send line drawings or tracings of familiar television or cartoon characters, for their children to color and send back.

Add-on drawing activities are great fun. The parent begins a drawing and sends it to the child, asking them to add on to it and send it back. This can go on for some time, back and forth.

Older children may not need block letters or cartoons, but they do need to know they are in their parent’s thoughts. Notes and cards of all kinds are appreciated.

Some older children like to play paper games like tic-tac-toe and hang man that can be sent back and forth. Versions of crossword puzzles, boggle, chess and checkers as well as inventions based on current computer games have been created by children to send to parents in jail.

Ask children lots of questions in your letters. Ask about school, friends, TV, pets and sports.

See if there is a book that your child is reading that you could get from the prison library. When parents and children read the same book, lots of great conversation can happen on the phone, in letters and in visits.

See if your prison has a program where you can read a book to your child on audio or video tape.

Encourage your child to send you school papers and report cards. Ask your child to even send papers that aren’t so good. Then you can help your child with school by writing ideas in your next letter or talk about it on the phone.

Remember not to be harsh or overly critical about your child’s work, drawings or letters, even when you are disappointed about their grades, or the frequency of their letters to you. When you need to correct them or voice concern, emphasize what they did right as well as what needs improvement.

Even if you do not know where your child is, your letters are returned, or you have been asked not to write... write anyway. Letters written but not sent can be stored away for a time when the child will be able to read them. At that time the child will know that she or he was thought about and cared for from a distance.

Many parents in prison had trouble learning to read in school. If you have trouble reading, you are not alone. Hold on to the letters until you find a friend or counselor that you trust and ask for help. Find out if there are adult or family literacy classes at your prison.

Communicating by Phone or in the Visiting Room

It’s often hard for parents and children to communicate, even without the barriers of incarceration. Teens and pre-teens, who seem to be able to talk endlessly to friends, and “live” on the phone have a hard time talking with parents for more than a few minutes. For prisoners and their children, opportunities to talk are limited. Finding things to talk about is challenging. The parent often feels pressure to make the conversations count, to make the communication meaningful. Parents may feel rejected when the child has little to say. In this stressful situation, parents often resort to asking a million questions—questions that children experience as intrusive. Parents and children alike, worry that talk of the outside world will be upsetting to everyone.

What really counts is the parent listening to the child. The subject of the conversation is not so important. Whether talking in the visiting room or on the telephone, here are some tips for prisoner parents.

Don’t be afraid to ask about the child’s life. Not asking may make children feel that you are not interested, or worried about the answers.

Remember that children like their privacy. They may not want to reveal some things about their lives, or they may want to tell you things slowly over time.

If children react as if you are invading their privacy, back off.

Do things “together-apart.” Read the same book, plan to watch the same TV show, do amateur astronomy and watch for changes in the moon or stars.

Ask about topics like the weather, sports and music. These are part of the everyday lives of most kids.
Games to Help to Keep Communication Going

Some prisons will have toys and games available for visits.

A deck of cards can be made by drawing hearts, spades, clubs and diamonds, along with numbers and letters, on small pieces of paper.

Create and expand each other's stories. The parent or child begins a story, and they take turns adding to it.

Most prisons allow writing paper and pencils for word games like hang-man, tic-tac-toe, guessing games, and math games.

Phone games include riddles, developmentally appropriate jokes and "I spy something..." saying that you see something of a specific color or shape and letting the child guess what it might be.

Make sure everyone gets a turn when playing games on the phone or in a visit.

Long Distance Discipline

Trying to discipline a child from prison is difficult. For some families it gives relief to caregivers and helps keep the prisoner parent involved. For other families it causes resentment and stress for one, or both of the adults. For most families, too much focus on discipline can use up valuable communication time and leave children feeling hurt and angry.

Parents in prison can help guide or correct children’s behaviors. They can listen to the child’s feelings and talk about family rules and values. They can reinforce the consequences imposed by the caregiver and give advice about dealing with problems in the future.

Sometimes the child is brought to the visit by the caregiver just to be reprimanded by the prisoner parent. The custodial parent or grandparent may ask the incarcerated parent to discipline the child on the telephone. Outside adults should be careful not to use the visit or phone time only for discipline, or to tell all the "sins" committed by the child. The child will lose interest in visiting and talking to their parent if every contact feels like a lecture or reprimand. Parents in prison should resist the temptation to preach about their own mistakes and trouble with the law. Let the child's behavior stand separate from the parent's crime. Children who can communicate freely and often with their incarcerated parent will also be more open to discipline from them.

Promises, Promises

Sometimes the lack of comfortable topics for conversation will lead incarcerated parents to speak about how it will be when the parent and child are reunited. It is wonderful to keep hope alive. But promises about what the parent will do, buy, and get for the child are easy to make, and hard to keep. Promises shift the relationship from today into an uncertain future. Children need help coping with reality, not living in a dream.

When Children Don't Want to Communicate

There are times when children may not want to talk or visit. There is no simple answer to what should be done about this. There are many possible reasons the child does not want contact with the parent in prison. The child's relationship with the parent prior to incarceration may have been strained. The prison environment may feel threatening, awkward or embarrassing. Traveling to visits can be stressful and boring. The visiting process itself can be humiliating and tedious.

Some or all of the above may be issues for most children of prisoners. So it is not surprising that children sometimes resist contact with their inmate parent. Notice if the child resists both phone conversations and visits. This may suggest there is a problem in the relationship. If the child only avoids visits, perhaps the time or conditions of visiting are the problem. At some
ages children have busy lives. At those ages they have little time for their parents, incarcerated or not. Sometimes children don’t like to go to prison because they feel ignored, they feel tension between their family members or they are bored during the visit. It is best not to force children to visit or talk. Sometimes, however, parents give up too easily and don’t try to convince a child to communicate. To children, this can seem to confirm that contact wasn’t a good idea.

When Children Resist Contact

Let children know that you expect them to talk or visit sometimes.

If a child’s reaction to this expectation is extreme, back off and try again in a few weeks.

Don’t give up calling or asking to see them no matter how rejected you feel.

An Important Exception

Sometimes, a child’s resistance to contact is the result of abuse by the parent. These children need counseling. Visits and phone calls could interfere with treatment.

Remember also that more than three out of four prisoners have histories of addiction and abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Children of alcoholics and drug addicts may be almost relieved to have contact with their parents in jail because they are more likely to be sober. They may have anger and resentment that needs to be resolved before they can trust their parents enough to talk or visit.

When children don’t want to visit for any reason, parents in prison need to seek help from counselors, social workers and friends. It’s hard to cope with a child’s rejection. Many prisoners do not want to be reminded of the hurt they have caused. The anger of their children speaks volumes about the damage done.

Some prisoners are focused on their own pain and can’t see the impact they have had on their children. Some children are focused on getting on with their lives and can’t see the need for a relationship with their imprisoned parent. Patience, support from family and friends and good information about how children of prisoners cope will help.

About the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL)

Pamphlets may be downloaded without charge from the Family and Corrections Network (FCN) web site, www.fcnetwork.org. Duplication is permitted and encouraged, so long as the materials are not altered or sold.

Sorry, FCN is not budgeted to mail free copies.

Send comments to The Children of Prisoners Library at FCN, 32 Oak Grove Road, Palmyra, VA 22963, 434/589-0363, 434/589-6520 Fax, fcn@fcnetwork.org. Copyright Family and Corrections Network, 2003.

In Appreciation

The Children of Prisoners Library is supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with additional support from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Jack DeLoss Taylor Charitable Trust and the Heidtke Foundation.

We are also grateful to our sponsoring organizations: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.-Southern Region, Children and Family Networks, Hour Children, The National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families and The Osborne Association.

Special thanks to the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York for permission to revise and publish material from the three volume set of pamphlets, How Can I Help?

The Children of Prisoners Library was written by Ann Adalist-Estrin, who adapted material from How Can I Help and authored other materials in the Children of Prisoners Library. It was edited and published by Jim Mustin.
Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

Connections-Prisoner and Family Ministry

The agency offers supportive services for presently incarcerated women, their families and women returning to the community from state and federal correctional centers.

VISITS TO MOM
The Visits to Mom program utilizes volunteer drivers and charter buses to transport caregivers and children to the correctional centers to visit incarcerated mothers. The visits are at state and federal women’s correctional centers in Illinois: Decatur, Logan, and Greenville.
This program also organizes and conducts respite services and special events such as Saturday Surprise, Saturday School Experience and holiday events. Saturday Surprise provides the children of incarcerated mothers with a variety of wonderful culturally-enriching field trips and provides a respite for their caregiver(s). To support the children’s academic and social advancement, Saturday School Experience offers bi-monthly mentoring and tutoring for the children.

RELATIVES AS PARENTS PROGRAM (RAPP)
RAPP is a Restorative Justice talking circle for the caregivers conducted at Logan and Decatur Correctional Centers during the monthly Visits to Mom.

FAMILY SERVICES
Family Services programming delivers a range of services to women upon return to the community and their children to include: needs assessment; assistance with acquisition of personal infrastructure documents (State ID, Social Security Card, Birth Certificate); individual and family counseling; monthly Restorative Justice talking/healing circles; bus cards; personal care items; clothing; financial assistance and more. Comprehensive information sharing and referrals are offered for housing, education, employment, budgeting and money management, job training, legal assistance, supplemental food, mental health services, substance abuse treatment and other specialized services.

FAMILY REUNIFICATION
Family Reunification is a program designed to provide women and their families a chance to meet and discuss the issues surrounding the incarceration and develop a plan that will support the woman’s successful transition back to the family. The program provides the same range of casework and comprehensive referral services as Family Services. See above.

For Inquiry
Mike Davis, Assoc. Exec. Dir. of Prisoner and Family Ministry
Rev. Valerie Riley, Director of Connections Program
Rita Williams, Administrative Assistant

Olivia Chase, Family Reunification/Service Specialist
Minister Bernadine White, VTM/RAPP Coordinator

Address: 318 East 74th Street
Chicago, IL 60619

Telephone Number: 773-783-9516
Fax Number: 773-783-9791
Non-Custodial Parents Are Important Too!

Non-custodial parents play important roles in the lives of their children for many reasons.

Being a non-custodial parent does not mean that you have to be absent from your child’s life.

Welfare Reform has placed significant importance on the support of both parents, as custodial parents join the workforce eliminating the need for public assistance.

Contact the Non-Custodial Parent Services Unit (NCPSU)
Cook County (NCPSU)
Parent Support Services
36 S Wabash, 9th Floor
Chicago, IL 60603

phone: (312)793-7987
fax: (312)793-7047

Persons using a teletypewriter may call toll free (800) 526-5812.

Web site: www.childsupportillinois.com
What is a non-custodial parent? A non-custodial parent (NCP) is the parent (mother or father) who does not live with the children.

Non-custodial parents face many issues as they attempt to participate in the lives of their children.

In 1995, the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services (former Public Aid) Division of Child Support Enforcement recognized these issues and opened the Non-Custodial Parent Services Unit (NCPSU) in Chicago to serve Cook County. In 1996, a second unit serving St. Clair County was opened in Belleville.

The Non-Custodial Parent Services Unit (NCPSU) was created to provide non-custodial parents of children receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) with a way to address their needs and concerns.

What services are available through NCPSU? NCPSU offers participants a variety of program options designed to address a wide range of issues facing NCPs.

EMPLOYMENT/ TRAINING
• Earnfare
A state sponsored training program that allows participants to get paid on-the-job employment skills.

• Supervised Job Search
Structured Job Search activities through the use of job diaries that are monitored and verified every 30 days.

SOCIAL SERVICES
• Community-Based (CBO) Service Referrals
Referrals to community based service providers for job readiness training, education/vocational training, job placement and post-employment services.

INFORMATION SERVICES
• Non-Employment Related Services
Individuals can request information on a variety of child support issues including but not limited to paternity establishment.

How do I get involved with NCPSU? NCPs get to NCPSU through three (3) methods:
• Court Referrals
The Court may refer unemployed NCPs to participate in unit programming.

• Administrative Referrals
Unemployed NCPs participating in the department’s administrative paternity establishment program may be referred to participate in unit programming.
• Self-referrals
Unemployed or underemployed individuals can apply to NCPSU to participate in unit-sponsored services. Self-referrals must meet program eligibility guidelines. Services may be restricted.

Actual participation is dependent upon completion of an employability assessment and the method of referral to NCPSU.

Individuals, who are referred through the Court or the Administrative Process, may be subjected to further action for failure to fully participate in NCPSU programming. Self-referrals who do not participate fully will be subject to case cancellations.

Individuals should contact the nearest NCPSU office for program details.

If you are having problems seeing your children, we may be able to help. Child Support and the Domestic Relations Courts in Cook, DuPage and Peoria counties have an Access and Visitation Program providing never-married NCPs services including: mediation, counseling, parenting education, enforcement of visitation orders, and development of alternative custody arrangements.

For more information about the Access and Visitation Program, call Non-Custodial Parent Services Unit.
(312) 793-7987
Things to Remember:

- All existing orders remain in effect until a court or an administrative agency modifies the order.

- Your support order may be modified (increased or decreased) based on the income of the non-custodial parent and state law.

- DCSS staff cannot provide legal advice to you. ONLY ATTORNEYS ARE QUALIFIED TO GIVE YOU LEGAL ADVICE. You may need to seek the advice of a private attorney or contact your local legal aid society to advise you about finding low-cost counsel if you cannot afford a private attorney.

If You Have Questions

If you have any other child support related questions, or to report information, call the Child Support Customer Service Call Center toll free at (800) 447-4278. TTY (800) 526-5812.

What You Need to Know About the Modification Review Process for Child Support Orders
Modification Review Process

The Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services (HFS), Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) conducts modification reviews of child support orders to ensure child support awards are in line with Illinois law and changing circumstances.

A modification is a change to an existing judicial or administrative child support order. The modification processed by DCSS applies only to the child support provision of the order and/or the provision for the child's health care. Judicial orders are modified through the courts and administrative orders are modified through HFS' DCSS.

Not less than once every three years, DCSS notifies each parent subject to a child support order of the right to request a review of their order, and the appropriate place and way in which the request should be made.

Orders qualify for the modification review process if one of the following conditions exists:

- At least three (3) years have passed since the establishment of the order or the last modification review; or
- There is a substantial change in the non-custodial parent's income; or
- The order does not address healthcare coverage for the child(ren); or
- A written request for a review is received by DCSS from the custodial parent, non-custodial parent, or another state.

After the request for a modification review is received by DCSS, both parents will be sent a notice stating whether or not their order qualifies for a modification review. This usually occurs within 30 days after the receipt of the request by DCSS. This timeframe may vary depending on the workload of the office completing the review.

If your order qualifies for a modification review, the notice will ask you and the other parent to send in copies of your income information to DCSS. DCSS will use the information to recalculate the amount of your child support payment.

You will get a notice in the mail with the results of the modification review. The notice of the modification review results will advise you if the amount of your child support payment could:

- Remain the same,
- Increase, or
- Decrease.

If you disagree with the modification review results, you can:

- Request a redetermination with DCSS, if the review results indicate the order will remain the same;
- Attend in court to contest the amount ordered (if you have a judicial order); or
- Request an Administrative Hearing if you disagree with the new administrative order.

Your request must be filed with DCSS within 30 days of the date of the modification review decision notice.

Who May Request a Modification Review?

- Non-Custodial Parent: the parent who does not live with the child(ren),
- Custodial Parent/Caretaker: the parent/caretaker who lives with the child(ren),
- Healthcare and Family Services, or
- Another state's child support agency.

If you are currently receiving child support services from DCSS, you can request a modification review by calling Customer Service toll-free at 1-888-245-1938.

If you are not receiving child support services from DCSS, you can apply for free child support services by calling our toll-free Customer Service Call Center 1(800) 447-4278.

If you prefer to make your request for a modification review in writing, send your written request to:

IL Dept. of Healthcare and Family Services
Division of Child Support Services
DCSS Modification Review Team
P.O. Box 64900
Chicago, IL 60664

Include your name, address and daytime phone number in all written inquiries.

For more information about the modification review process, parents may call Customer Service toll-free at 1-888-245-1938. Persons using a teletypewriter (TTY) can call toll free at 1-800-526-5812.

Military Reserve/National Guard Mobilization and Activations

When an Illinois National Guard or Reserve member is mobilized or activated to long-term continuous military active duty orders (defined as greater than 30 continuous days), the National Guard or Reserve member may request a modification review because of continuous military active duty. To request a modification of your order because of activation to long-term continuous military active duty, contact the:

IL Dept. of Healthcare and Family Services
Community Outreach Department
Military Project
P.O. Box 64629
Chicago, Illinois 60664-0629
Phone (312) 793-7987
Fax (312) 793-8734
Tonight is Family Fun Night at school. My friends come with their moms and dads.
I come with my Uncle George. “We’re going to have so much fun!” he says.

I want to have fun, but I miss my daddy. He’s in prison, so he can’t be here.
I take Uncle George around my classroom, and he meets all my friends. “Jada, your daddy is so tall,” says Rosita.

Suddenly I feel sad and angry. “This is not my daddy,” I whisper to her.
Then I run to the rug and make a hiding place with my arms. Family Fun Night is not so fun.

Uncle George sits next to me. "What’s wrong, Jada?” he asks.

Then my cheeks get hot, and I start to cry. “I miss my daddy,” I say. “I wish he were here.”

“It’s OK,” says Uncle George. “I cry sometimes, too, when I miss your daddy.”
Uncle George scoops me onto his lap. "It’s hard to be here without your daddy," he says. "But you know what...?" Then he takes a picture out of his pocket.

"You have family with you." In the picture, I see Uncle George, my Aunt Denise, and me.
Uncle George puts the picture in my hand. "Keep it in your pocket so you always remember we love you, and we’re here for you."

I smile a little because that’s a happy thing to remember.
Then Rosita comes over. “Are you OK?” she asks.

“I’m feeling better now,” I say. I grab Uncle George’s hand. “This is my Uncle George. He’s in my family.”

“¡Hola!” says Rosita to him. Then she asks me, “Do you and Uncle George want to come and play?”

“Yeah!” I say.
We play pilots and build with blocks.

Then we go to the table, and I draw a picture to send to Daddy.
I still miss my daddy, but I know I'll always have people who love me.
LITTLE children
BIG challenges: incarceration
LITTLE children
BIG challenges: incarceration

Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration Executive Vice President, Education, Research, and Outreach: Lewis Bernstein, Ph.D.; Senior Vice President, Outreach and Educational Practices: Jeanette Betancourt, Ed.D.; Vice President, Outreach Initiatives and Partners: Lynn Chwatsky; Senior Director, Outreach and Content Design: María del Rocío Galarza; Curriculum Specialist: Brittany Sommer; Project Manager: Christina App; Project Coordinator: Angela Hong; Project Assistant: Andrea Cody; Spanish Language Editor and Content Manager: Helen Cuesta; Spanish Translator: Ruby Norfolk, Spanish Consultant: Macarena Salas; Spanish Proofreader: Laura Rozenberg; Director, Domestic Research: David Cohen, Director of Content; Autumn Zitani-Stefano; Assistant Director of Content, Jennifer Schiffman; Director, Project Finance: Carole Schechner; Writer: Rebecca Honig-Briggs; Line/Copy Editor: Jeanette Leardi; and Andy Leifkowitz; Proofreader: Andy Leifkowitz and Evelyn Shoop, Vice President, Marketing and Brand Strategy: Suzanne Duncan, Vice President, Creative Services: Theresa Fitgerald; Senior Manager, Marketing and Creative Services: Charlotte Adams, Designer: Beth May; Spanish Typesetter: Karla Henrick

Special Thanks: The entire Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration team

Advisors: Ann Adalist-Estrin, M.S., Director, National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, Carol F. Burton, L.M.S.W., Executive Director, Centerforce: Elizabeth Gaynes, J.D., Executive Director, The Osborne Association: Kirk E. Harris, M.P.A., J.D., Ph.D., Esq., Faculty, Department of Urban Planning, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; Julie Poehlmann, Ph.D., Professor and Chair, Human Development and Family Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison

A creation of

sesame workshop.

The nonprofit educational organization behind Sesame Street and so much more

Sesame Workshop is the nonprofit educational organization that revolutionized children's television programming with the landmark Sesame Street. The Workshop produces local Sesame Street programs, seen in over 150 countries, and other acclaimed shows to help bridge the literacy gap, including The Electric Company. Beyond television, the Workshop produces content for multiple media platforms on a wide range of issues including literacy, health, and military deployment. Initiatives meet specific needs to help young children and families develop critical skills, acquire healthy habits, and build emotional strength to prepare them for lifelong learning. Learn more at sesameworkshop.org

Major support provided by:

BAE SYSTEMS

Generous support provided by:
Introduction

If your loved one is incarcerated, the many changes may feel overwhelming. But you are strong. Know that you are already helping your family feel cared for and secure.

Sesame Street created this Guide for Parents and Caregivers to help you
• use everyday routines to help your child,
• encourage your child (ages 3-8) to express his feelings,
• talk with your child about incarceration, and
• connect with your child’s incarcerated parent.

Download our FREE app on the App Store® or Google Play™ for more information and resources.
This section will help you
- comfort your child with everyday activities, and
- guide her through tough moments.

You make a difference every day

Help your child feel secure. During big changes, your child may feel worried and unsafe. Reassure her by surrounding her with reliable people and daily activities.

Begin the day by letting your little one know what to expect. You can tell her
- who will take her to school,
- who will pick her up from school, and
- one activity that she will do today.

Make a list or draw pictures to show your child things that will stay the same no matter what. Hang it on the refrigerator and refer to it whenever she needs a little comfort.
Help your child work through everyday challenges.

If your child is acting out or getting upset when things don't go her way, try these strategies:

Use a “Breathe, Think, Do” approach.

- **Breathe:** Ask her to stop what she is doing, put her hands on her tummy, and slowly take three deep breaths.

- **Think:** Help her identify the problem, as well as her thoughts and feelings (“What is wrong?”, “What are you feeling?”), and look for solutions (“What can we do to help you feel better?”).

- **Do:** Together, try out your best solution. If it doesn’t work out, try another.

Sometimes when children act out they may be feeling confused. Help calm her by giving her a choice.

- For example, if she is having trouble playing with someone, you might say, “You can play nicely, or you can take a break from playing.”

Everyday routines such as brushing her teeth, eating breakfast, and sharing a bedtime story help your child feel secure.
This section will help you
• understand what your child is feeling, and
• encourage your child to share his feelings with you.

Your child’s feelings come in all shapes and sizes
Look for signs of big feelings. Children of an incarcerated parent feel many things: stress, fear, shame, anger, sadness, and frustration. You know your child best. As you spend time with him each day, look for slight changes in how he acts. These are clues to watch for:

- sudden yelling or crying
- difficulty sleeping
- unusual clinging
- hitting
- eating more or less than usual
- smiling or laughing less often
- having new fears
- bed wetting

Your comfort and attention will reassure your child that, despite his strong feelings, he can still count on you, no matter what.
Help your child share his feelings.

Talk with and listen to your child.
- Mention things you notice about the way he acts ("You seem to be feeling [angry, bothered, worried] because...").
- Ask questions to get at his feelings ("How are you feeling today?", "Did anything happen today that made you feel happy or sad?").
- Be patient as he shares with you. It may take him time to find the right words. He can draw pictures of how he feels if he doesn't yet have the words.
- As you talk with your child, hold him close or give him a hug. A simple touch can let him know you're there for him.

Let your child know that
- his feelings are OK, and
- he can talk to you about what's on his mind, even if it's scary or hard to say.

Set an example for your child by
- using "feeling words" as you talk about your day ("I felt really happy today because I ate lunch with a friend.");
- being aware of your own feelings. Your child responds to and learns from your reactions. Coping with your feelings is a powerful way to help your child.
This section will help you
- talk with your child about her parent's incarceration, and
- answer some of her questions.

The simple truth matters

Honesty is important. Talking to your child about her parent's incarceration can be scary. You may worry about the questions she will ask. As difficult as it is, tell the truth. It is the best way to help her to feel loved and to build a special, trusting bond.
Let her know it's not her fault. Not knowing why her parent is gone may cause your child great worry. She may believe her parent's disappearance is her fault. Creating a reason ("Mommy is [on vacation, at the doctor's, at school].") will only make her wonder why her parent doesn't return.

You might not want your child to share some details with others. Gently let her know that these are things you are only going to talk about at home or with family.
Consider giving these possible answers:

**Question:**
"Where is Daddy?"

**Answer:**
If the parent has been convicted: "Daddy is in a place called prison for a while. Grown-ups sometimes go to prison when they break a rule called a law. He is not there because of anything you did. This is not your fault."

If the parent is not yet convicted: "Daddy is in a place called jail. He's there because he may have broken an important grown-up rule called a law. Right now people are trying to figure out what happened."

**Question:**
"When will Mommy be home?"

**Answer:**
"Mommy won't be home for a while. We are waiting for more information. I will let you know as soon as I find out."

**Question:**
"Will I get to see Daddy?"

**Answer:**
If your child can visit: "You can visit Daddy in prison once in a while. I'll let you know when. Between visits you can write him letters, draw him pictures, and talk to him on the phone."

If your child will not be able to visit: "We won't be able to visit, but you can draw pictures and write letters to each other whenever you want." If there are legal reasons why contact is not allowed, it is important to follow that advice.

When a military parent is incarcerated it can be particularly challenging. Your child may feel confused when she sees her parent go from being a hero to being incarcerated. Assure her that the good things her parent has done for the country will never be erased. Remind her that her parent will care for her no matter what.
This section will help you
- keep your child connected to his incarcerated parent; and
- find ways to keep your child's spirits up during this difficult time.

You can connect

Visits, phone calls, and letters. When you involve the incarcerated parent in your child's life, you show your child that he will always be cared for.

I miss YOU
Visits

Here are some ways to prepare for the visit:

- Let your child know
  - how you will get to the jail or prison,
  - any special things he might have to do (wait in a line, be looked over by guards, etc.),
  - what his parent will look like (he may be wearing a special uniform, etc.),
  - about his time with the parent (no-touching rules, etc.), and
  - that he will have to say goodbye and leave without his parent.

- Help your child think of things he'd like to tell his incarcerated parent.

Phone Calls

Here are some tips for keeping in touch by phone:

- Let the incarcerated parent know the best times to reach your child.
- Help your child to think of things he'd like to tell his parent.
- Give your child a picture of his parent to look at as he talks.
Letters
Try these writing tips with your child:

• Keep paper and pens handy.

• Ask your child questions to help him think of things he’d like to say.

• If your child is not yet able to write, have him tell you what to put in his letter. Encourage him to draw a picture to go with the words.

• Include copies of your child’s artwork or report card.

Televisits
Preparing for a televisit:

• While there is no substitute for seeing a parent in person, televisiting can be helpful. Seeing a parent’s face can ease fears about the parent’s well-being.

• It may take a few televisits for a young child to realize that the person they see is their parent. Try video chatting with family to help your child get used to it.

Though a parent’s incarceration can bring about big transitions and emotions, it is a chance to show your child how much you love him, and that he will always be cared for.

The incarcerated parent might not always answer your child’s letters. Tell your child that even though he did not get a letter in return, his parent is still thinking about him.
LITTLE children
BIG challenges: incarceration

Tips for Parents and Caregivers

Sesame Street presents Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration, an educational series for families with children (ages 3-8) with a parent in prison. Our resources provide talking points and tools to help families manage the changes resulting from this situation, and to find comfort in one another.

Help your child to feel secure and express feelings
Reassure your child by surrounding her with reliable people and daily activities. Encourage her to share her feelings.

• Let your child know what to expect during everyday activities. Tell her who will take her to school and who will pick her up.
• Provide your child with a comfort item to keep during the day, such as a paper heart or family photo.
• Ask your child questions to help her open up. You might notice a negative behavior and say, "Did something happen today that made you feel sad?"

Talk honestly with your child
It's important to tell your child the truth about his parent's incarceration. It's the best way to help him feel loved and cared for.

• If you do not provide information about the incarceration, your child may come up with his own mistaken reason for his parent's absence. Let your child know that the incarceration is not his fault.
• Be patient as your child works to understand what has happened. You may need to explain the situation several times. Let him know he's not alone.

Stay connected
When you involve the incarcerated parent in your child's life, you show your child that she will always be cared for.

• Visits can be positive for children, but jails can seem scary. Break the ice with games. List favorite colors, music, or sports teams. Describe something and ask your child to guess it.
• Phone calls are a great way to keep in touch. Help your child think of things to tell her parent. Give her a picture of the parent to hold during the call.
• Use pen and paper to write letters. If your child can't yet write, ask her to tell you what to write; she can draw pictures to go with the words.
• Televisiting can be helpful for some children. Sharing an everyday routine such as storytime during your televisit is a great way to be together.

For more Sesame Street resources on incarceration:

- Explore sesamestreet.org/incarceration
- Connect with facebook.com/sesamestreetincommunities
- Download the FREE Sesame Street: Incarceration app