

***If a child lives with honesty,
they learn what truth is.***

It is a difficult decision to tell children that a family member, particularly a parent, is incarcerated. It is better to find this out from someone the child knows and trusts rather than from the school yard or the media. Every family is unique and will decide when and how much information to share.

Shame or fear that your child will think less of the incarcerated family member can interfere with healthy discussions. This resource is designed to offer suggestions and hints that you can explore, consider and refer to when needed so you will have the confidence and openness to make these talks easier.

***It is important for the child to know
that the jail time is not about them
and they are loved.***

As a caregiver you can use supports and resources to educate yourself as you prepare to tell a child about incarceration. Canadian Families and Corrections Network's toll-free information line and website are listed on the front of this resource. The John Howard Society, The Elizabeth Fry Society and The Salvation Army may all offer helpful resources too. There are online support and chat groups as well.

Reading books such as *Let's Talk about Jail*, *My Daddy's in Jail*, *Visiting Day*, *Nine Candles* or CFCN's *Jeffrey Goes to Jail* may help prepare you and give you resources to share with your child. You can get these books from a library, school, organization, or order them online.

How children react to the incarceration of a family member will vary with their age, what they already know and the facts of the arrest:

- Was the child a victim of the crime?
- How old is the child?
- How much does the child know?
- What did the child see?
- What is the caregiver's relationship with the incarcerated person?
- What changes has the incarceration brought to the child's daily life (e.g. foster care, a new school, different friends)?

***Children may believe that if they are bad they
will get to be with the incarcerated parent.***

Children's behaviour may decline with the changes that incarceration brings to a family. They may start wetting the bed, not perform as well at school, become aggressive, withdraw emotionally, become depressed, and push the rules. Give the child positive comments about their strengths and good behaviour and gently correct unhealthy actions. Provide ways to release feelings (sports, puppets, stress balls, games or books about handling anger, etc.). Show healthy behaviour when you are angry with your child and explain it to them (e.g. "I almost slammed that door I was so mad. But what good would that do?")

Children are our
second chance to
have a great
parent-child
relationship.
Laura Schlessinger

How can the caregiver help a child who has a parent in jail?

- Take some time to think about the incarceration facts yourself.
- Provide structure – keeping the same routine will give a child a sense of safety and will teach them how to control themselves and their situation.
- Provide loving surroundings which will help build a caring relationship.
- Encourage children to express their feelings by talking, drawing pictures, playing with play dough, etc.
- Give the child positive messages about their strengths (e.g. "Great job on your homework!").
- Be honest about the incarceration of the parent as a child may make up their own idea of what happened.
- Keep this resource nearby and read it often to ensure you are doing all you can.

***Children need to know that staying in
contact with the incarcerated person by
phone, mail and visits may be possible.***

What about school?

Children may need some help on what to tell their friends for their protection against unfriendly and hurtful comments. Single parent families are

everywhere today so if the crime is not public and results in a short sentence, saying that the parents are separated and one parent is living in another community might be enough.



Suggestions to consider the child's needs:

- Break the news as soon as possible. Children may sense something has happened and not knowing can cause stress, insecurity and confusion.
- Find a quiet, child-friendly place without interruptions and a time later in the day.
- Consider having another adult there who also has a loving relationship with the child. They may have a different way of explaining things or the two of you can talk about some of the facts as a way of telling the child.
- Start with a warning such as "I'm afraid I have to tell you something that might be sad or hard to hear".
- If the child already knows or has assumed some of the story, this is a good place to start. (Did the child see the arrest? Is the child a victim of the crime?)
- Stick to the facts but speak gently. If you don't know, admit this and say you will come back to them when you have new facts.
- It is important for a child to understand that the incarcerated person still loves them.

Children need to know that they are not responsible for the actions of the incarcerated person.

- Give clear, simple, honest answers that fit with the age of the child. (E.g. For a 3 year old use 'Daddy is having a time out' vs. 'incarceration')
- Try not to assume you know what they are thinking or feeling. It's best to ask them.
- Try not to give the child too much information as this can create extra stress. Tell the child you can have this talk again, any time they need it, if they have more questions or you have new information.

- Consider what the child may need in terms of counseling, a support group, peer support, etc. and see if they are open to these ideas.

In your attempt to normalize the experience of having a family member incarcerated, do not normalize prison or crime.

There is a stigma in society when a family member is incarcerated. It may be that both of you are grieving your loss and struggling with the many changes that incarceration can bring to your daily life. It is okay to show your feelings but try not to let them overwhelm you in front of the child. Try to focus daily life on happy memories and take time to walk this path together. Remember the grief journey is unique for everyone and a child's path may follow a different rhythm from your pattern. Children's grief is often shown in their actions.



Adults need support too. If you look after yourself, you will be in a better place to continue to help the child.

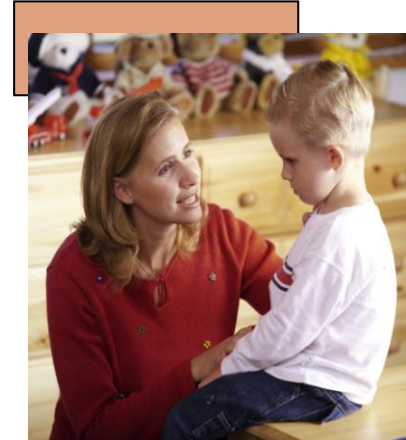
What about you?

Being a caregiver requires patience and emotional strength. The needs of caregivers are important as well. Finding support for yourself is also a way of helping the child.

This resource was created by Canadian Families and Corrections Network with generous funding from the Community Foundation for Kingston & Area.

Telling the Children

How to Talk to Children about a Loved One's Incarceration



And Strengthen Parent-Child Relationships



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Corrections Network

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