



EXTENSION

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Communicating with kids as an incarcerated parent

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Being an incarcerated parent can be extremely complicated. Many incarcerated parents feel the emotional weight of being separated from their children. Additionally, communication might be impeded by the co-parent, facility rules or the person's own emotions (Charles, Muentner and Kjellstrand, 2019). Along with facing difficulties inside prison, including isolation, fear and diminished hope (Harris et al., 2020), their role as a parent has changed.

Despite not having full-time access to their children, it's important for an incarcerated parent to understand that they are still their child's parent, and they matter in their child's life. However, maintaining communication and a close relationship with their children can be difficult. Dealing with limited contact, co-parenting and understanding their new role in their child's life comes with challenges.

Children who have a relationship with their incarcerated parent reap a multitude of benefits, including stronger family ties, which can help alleviate some of the challenges associated with having an incarcerated parent (Charles et al., 2021). For parents who are incarcerated, use these tips as a guide to help promote communication and understanding with your child. Additionally, use the skill and dialogue sheet at the end of this fact sheet to help guide conversations with your child.

Setting realistic expectations for yourself and your children

Children are going to have a lot of questions, so it's important to keep an open mind. You're not always going to have all the answers, and that's okay. Try your best to answer their questions as they come and use your resources if you need help. The takeaway is that you're able to effectively communicate what you do and don't know.

While you may or may not currently have contact with your child, this could change as they get older. It's still important to try to communicate and let them know that you love them. It can also be hard to find things to talk about when your child is on the outside and you're on the inside. Talking to your child can bring up a lot of emotions. Try to stay calm, cool and collected when speaking so you don't overwhelm them. Use the things you have in your control to help your children feel less scared by seeing their parent in jail/prison. See below a guide for specific examples of skills, questions kids may ask and ways of responding.

Understand your child's needs

- Communicate at age-appropriate levels. Children may have limited understanding until they get older, so keep this in mind when answering tough questions.
- Try to understand your child's perspective. Keep in mind that other children or adults may treat them poorly for having an incarcerated parent, or they might only understand one side of the story (Turney, 2018). What matters is that you validate their perspective and experience and do what is in your control to maintain a relationship.
- Understand that your child is just that, a child, and the responsibility of keeping contact falls to you as the adult. Due to the distanced relationship, they might be scared to talk to you, and while communication may be difficult, do your best to keep in contact and be an involved parent (Charles, Muentner and Kjellstrand, 2019).

Put your child's needs first during contacts, visitations and letters

- It's important for incarcerated parents to help their children take things one step at a time. If children find visitations scary, try to keep up with letters instead. Try to meet them where they are at and address issues as they come (American Bar Association, 2013).
- Simply listening more than talking can help children feel like you are their biggest fan and can help you and your child maintain a healthy relationship. Additionally, it allows you to be a supportive parent and a present figure in their life.

Answer honestly.

- Acknowledge your mistakes. Kids look up to their parents, help them understand how they can learn from your actions (American Bar Association, 2013).
- A simple but honest answer without all the details can still help kids understand that it is okay to ask questions.
- If you're having trouble explaining something, try to find another parent in a similar situation and ask them about their experience. You can also talk to a trusted staff member or your lawyer for help (Charles et al., 2021).
- Let your child know that their feelings matter. They might feel sad, angry or confused about what is happening, and that's okay. Listen to them and let them express their emotions.
 - Try using "I" statements like "I see that you're upset," or "I know this has been hard for you."
 - Express gratitude for their communication by saying things like "thank you for telling me how you feel."

Try to make things feel normal

- Normalcy in this setting can be hard to come by. Try to make a list of the things you would do with your child before you were incarcerated and see if you can replicate them.
- If you're able to, find something that the two of you can do independently and then talk about when you meet. This can be watching the same television shows or reading the same books.
 - This can be a neutral topic that can lead to more in-depth conversations about life lessons, growing up or hopes and dreams about the future. It shows your child that you care about some of the same things they care about.
 - For younger children, read a book/story to them over the phone
 - Having them hear your voice is a reminder that you care and you're thinking about them.
 - Be silly: Use fun voices for different characters and try to enjoy the time as much as you can. This can help to make phone calls less scary and more fun.
 - If possible, seek out opportunities to engage in parent-child activities that can be done from a distance:
 - Read a book over the phone or during visitation or read them a bedtime story. If they're willing, see if your co-parent could record the call and play it at bedtime.
 - Be up to date on their favorite sports team. Try to catch games on TV or the radio and be ready to talk about it next time you hear/see them.
 - Work on homework together. If you're able to, have them mail homework to you that you can help with. In the end, getting good or bad grades doesn't matter as much as the fact that you're actively participating in their education.

How to have a successful visit with your child

While visitations can be exciting, they can also be overwhelming for children. Prison is a new and sometimes scary environment that they may not be used to yet. It's important to prepare yourself and your family for what visitation days entail. Try to put yourself in their shoes and think about what you would want to know before you walked into a visitation room. Use these tips, as well as our skill guide below, to help prepare yourself and your family for visitations.

Make sure you have filed all the correct paperwork for them to visit

- There's nothing worse than having your family visit if they can't see you. Make sure to verify with the facility and family that they are on your visitation list.

Set realistic expectations for what the day will be like

- It's important to plan early so children aren't surprised/disappointed when they see you (American Bar Association, 2013). Here are some things to think about.
 - Will they be touched?
 - How intense is security?
 - Will the guards ask them any questions?
- Check your local correctional institution (in Oklahoma, contact OK Corrections) for guidelines on visitation. Know enough to prepare kids for the environment they're going to step into.

During visitations, make the conversation about them

- Ask about school, their friends and hobbies. Try to keep the conversation centered on their interests.

Bettering yourself

We know incarceration can be difficult for your family, but it has also been difficult for you. There are a lot of things that can be difficult to adapt to once your incarceration is over. It can be difficult to secure housing, find a job or manage addiction. Making an effort during this time is not easy, but your family will notice the effort you put into rehabilitating yourself and your relationships.

Admit that you will need help

- Being incarcerated, as well as re-entry into society, is difficult. Understand that you may need help securing a job, housing, rehabilitation and so on. (Charles, Muentner and Kjellstrand, 2019)

Being incarcerated does not mean you will be a bad parent

- You can repair your relationship, but you have to be willing to do the work (Charles et al., 2021). Make an effort to stay involved in your children's lives while respecting their boundaries.

Staying involved in your child's life not only benefits you, but your family as well (Charles et al., 2021). The work you put in to stay connected with your child not only builds a stronger relationship now but, it could build a closer relationship in the future.

Table 1. Table title

Skill	Child dialogue	Response
Using age appropriate language	<i>"When are you coming home?"</i> (American Bar Association, 2013)	<i>"I'm not sure, but I will try to be home three birthdays from now."</i> <i>"I should be home in six more months, but it could change. I'll be excited to see you when I do!"</i>
Making the conversation about them. (If you feel stuck, here's some things you can ask about)	Many children won't know what to say, so parents should be prepared to lead in getting the conversation going.	<i>"What are your friends like/how are they doing?"</i> <i>"Have you been reading any books lately?"</i> <i>"What have you been doing for fun?"</i>
Honest communication and owning up to your mistakes	<i>"Why are you in jail?"</i> (American Bar Association, 2013)	<i>"Well, it's complicated. I think it's something we can talk about more when you're a little older."</i> <i>"I got into a fight with a friend, and it got a little out of hand. I shouldn't have done it, but that's why I'm doing my time now."</i>
Preparing them for a visit	<i>"I'm scared to come see you."</i>	<i>"It's okay to be scared. It will be a little like going to the airport. You'll go through a metal detector, and you'll have to take everything out of your pockets. Then you'll get called in to come see me. I'll be behind a clear wall and we'll talk through a telephone. It will all be okay though because I can see your face, and you can see mine."</i>
Understanding their perspective	<i>"Kids at school make fun of me because you're in jail."</i>	<i>"It's not your fault that I'm in jail. I know it's hard to listen to people talk about me, but you can always talk to me or your mom about it."</i>

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