

# When a Parent is an Inmate

A child can experience many different emotions when a parent is in prison, including:

- **Confusion and fear** – If the child was home when the parent was arrested, he may feel upset by the sight of a parent being handcuffed.
- **Guilt** – A child may feel guilty if she opened the door for the police to come into the home or just about having a parent in prison. She may believe it is her fault and think, “If only I was a better child, this would have never happened.” She may be too young to understand that it was Mom or Dad who did something wrong.
- **Abandonment and disruption** – The other parent or caregiver may be busy trying to make ends meet and deal with his or her own feelings. As a result, that parent may not have as much time for the child as he or she did before all this happened. A child needs reassurance that the absent parent and the caregiver parent still care for him.
- **Anger** – A child may feel the inmate caused her a lot of pain and not want to deal with the situation. If substance abuse or domestic violence occurred in the home before the arrest, the child may be fearful of having a parent who might be released to re-abuse her.
- **Shame** – A child of an inmate may be embarrassed because he needs time off for visiting his parent in a facility. Other children may bully and tease him. Studies show that some children will withdraw while others become aggressive and hostile.

It is important to tell children the truth about what is happening. It is more frightening for a child not to know the truth. Telling him that Mom or Dad is away at school or in the Army can be harmful because the child will wonder why Mom or Dad never comes home to visit. By telling the child the truth, trust in the caregiver is built. Adults should talk with the child and answer his questions honestly.

It's best to encourage children to stay in touch with their parent in prison. Suggest that they write letters and send holiday or birthday cards. Caregivers can also send school work, report cards,

photos of the children, or pictures a child has drawn, if permitted by facility rules.

Also, encourage and support the child to do things that help him feel better. Help him explore outside interests and special talents, such as sports, painting, dancing, biking, or reading. This helps the child build self-confidence. There are several agencies across the state that assist families of incarcerated parents. Contact the Department of Corrections at 717-975-4859.

*Edited from “A Handbook for Families and Friends of PA Department of Corrections Prison Inmates,” available at [www.doc.state.pa.us](http://www.doc.state.pa.us). ❖*

## did you know?

Several facilities under the auspices of the PA Department of Corrections are affiliated organizations in PFSA's network. The state's Community Corrections Centers (pre-release and paroled inmates) offer family support programs in many sites. Janeen Christ, Special Projects Coordinator for DOC's Bureau of Community Corrections, notes that many studies have confirmed what PFSA has seen. “A positive relationship with their children is an important factor in the successful reintegration of ex-inmates to society. Programs that help them understand their children and become part of their children's lives have a great impact on recidivism.” Reviews of prisoners' family relationships yield two consistent findings: male prisoners who maintain strong family ties during imprisonment have higher rates of post-release success, and men who assume husband and parenting roles upon release have higher rates of success than those who do not (Hairston, 2002). Presumably, female family relationships are similarly important, but there exists no data on that.

Here is some feedback from participants in the Harrisburg center:

- “The class gave me good information to talk to my kids better. I don't yell at them when I see them anymore.”
- “I don't want my son to go down the same road I did, and this meeting helped me look at that and what I can do about it.”
- “At first I didn't want to come to this, but I learned a lot about what being a father is all about.”
- “I understand how to get along with my kids' mother a lot better now.”

The family support programs in Community Corrections help bridge the gap between an incarcerated parent and his children and educate formerly incarcerated parents about child development, communication skills, child support and visitation, as well as discipline and family dynamics. ❖