

You Are Not Alone: The Sad Truth about Having a Parent in Prison

Is your mom or dad in prison? You have a lot of company. Do you know that you are one of **two million** children who currently have a parent in jail or prison right now in America? And there are **eight million** other children in our country who have had a parent incarcerated in the past. You are not alone—although you may feel that way.

Since there are a lot more people incarcerated now, there are also a lot more children whose parents are incarcerated. In Dane County, for example, there are 1,600 children who have a parent in prison.

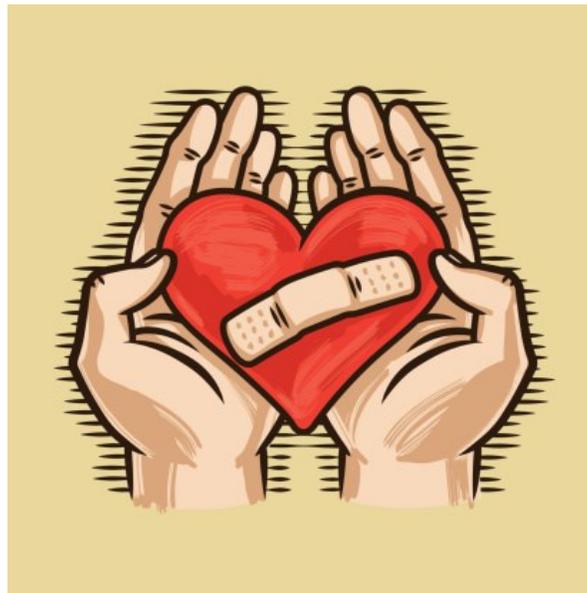
Kids, whether they are six or 16, have a hard time handling the fact that their mom or dad is in jail or prison. Everyone handles it differently. Some kids don't want to see their parents. Others want to see them, but can't because of the time and distance involved. You have a right to feel however you do. But part of growing up is learning what to *do* with your feelings.

Here are some things to keep in mind as you go through these hard times.

- Tell yourself over and over again: *what your parent did to be put in jail is not your fault*. All adults make mistakes but some make big mistakes end up with big consequences. If your parents are in jail

or prison, it doesn't mean that *they* are bad . . . but they didn't make good choices.

- Even if you didn't live with your parents or your life at home was pretty tough, it doesn't mean that you won't miss them.



- Parents can love their children very much but still make big mistakes.
- You deserve to have honest answers. Look for an adult who will tell you the truth.
- It's normal to feel sad, angry, confused, disappointed, and a lot of other emotions and still love your parent. It can be hard to decide how you feel, and often you might not want to deal with your feelings at all.

- Grieving is normal. You may find that you have trouble sleeping, getting along with friends, foster parents, and at school.
- Consider going to therapy (if you're not already). A good therapist gives you someone to talk to confidentially and non-judgmentally. Many people have a hard time finding their right path without working with therapists.
- Prepare what you will tell your friends and teachers. You do not have to tell things you do not want to reveal. Think about what you want others to know and who you want to

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know what, and stick to it.

- If your parent made bad choices that sent him or her to prison, that does *not* mean you are destined for the same thing. You might be like your parent in many ways, but you don't have to make the same mistakes.

Let's Talk About Visiting and Contacting Your Mom or Dad.

As you can imagine, there are a lot of rules in a jail or prison, and each facility has its own procedures. The process to visit your parent may be complicated and take a lot of time. It's not an easy process emotionally for anyone, either.

It's common to feel scared and nervous about prison or jail, especially because of how it's portrayed on TV, but it's not the same as on TV! You may have nightmares about jail or prison or get sick to your stomach on the way to visit your parent. This is just your body's way of coping with your feelings. If you are feeling this way, it's normal. Most kids and adults would feel the same way in this situation. Like with a lot of things, the first time will probably be the hardest.

You can stay connected by sending letters, making tapes, or sending pictures.

Many kids may have questions about how their parent got to prison, what it is like and how their parent is doing. These are good questions and you have a right to ask them.

Since jails are designed for shorter stays, they often have a different visiting area than prisons.

Prison visiting rooms may look like a cafeteria, and in some places, there will be games to play and vending machines. Regardless of what it is like, you will be safe there. An adult will have to set up a time and fill out paperwork before you can visit. Ask

Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents

I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.

I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.

I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.

I have the right to be well cared for in my parent's absence.

I have the right to speak with, see, and touch my parent.

I have the right to support as I struggle with my parent's incarceration.

I have the right not to be judged, blamed, or labeled because of my parent's incarceration.

I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

(<http://www.friendsoutside.org/resources.htm>)

what the place will be like before you go so you know what to expect.

In either prison or jail, you will see correctional officers, and they will tell you what to do. You might meet in rooms with glass walls. You may see other prisoners in leg shackles.

You will have to go through metal detectors and put all of your belongings in a locker in the lobby before you go into the visiting room. Leave your electronics locked in the car or don't bring them at all. You have to remove all metal from your body. The metal detectors are very sensitive! If something you are wearing sets it off,

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you may not be able to enter the visiting area. Jewelry, piercings, underwire bras, bobby pins, metal hair accessories, and rivets on certain jeans or overalls will set off the metal detectors. Be prepared.

Ask if your visiting room will have vending machines. If so, consider bringing some money to buy food. You won't be able to bring any food from home, but it might be a nice treat for you and your parent to share something from a vending machine.

Your parent will be able to hug you at the beginning and end, but other physical contact will be limited.

Like other times in your life, your conversation may be harder to carry on than you would like. Sometimes asking people, "What are your highs and lows since I last saw you?" is helpful.

It also helps to make a list. While it seems strange to make a list of things you'd like to talk to your parent about, it'll help you if you do—things that you want to tell your mom and questions to ask. Ideas for your list might include:

- What you do in school: your subjects, your teachers, your friends



What's the Difference Between Jail and Prison?

Jails are temporary holding places before a person goes to court to be convicted or let go. Some people serve shorter sentences for less serious crimes in jail rather than in a prison. A person might be in jail for only a day or up to about a year.

Prisons are places for long-term confinement for those who have been convicted of serious crimes.

- What you do after school: your homework, riding or walking to school, sports and activities, weekend activities.
- Ask about what your parent does.
- Ask her what her day is like, how it begins, the work, the food, what is there for recreation.
- Talk about your favorite songs, TV shows, computer games, and ask about your parent's favorite activities.

Sometimes there may be a quiet time with them that is uncomfortable, which is normal when people aren't able to see each other very often.

You don't have to talk about other family members or be the message person for you parent. If that happens, just tell your mom or dad that you just want to talk about things between the two of you and that don't want to be a go-between.

One of the hardest parts about visits is that they don't always happen—for a lot of different reasons. It may have to do with something as simple as a scheduling problem with the person who's supposed to take you or something more complicated like a prison rule of some kind.

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Sometimes a visit may be called off on the day you drive to the prison. Sometimes you may not get the whole amount of time you expected. Be flexible. It's one of those situations where you have to take what you can get.

Expect to be upset and scared before you go and upset and full of turmoil, anger and sadness when you leave. Most kids feel this way no matter what their age. Cry, think, talk it out, write in your journal or send a letter to your parent about how you're feeling, or draw pictures.

What Will Happen When Your Parent Gets Out of Jail?

This is different for each person and each family. Some children are reunited right away and live with their parent, especially if they have a home and the parent had custody before going to prison. In other cases, it may be a gradual process before you will return to your parent's home.

If you did not live with your dad or mom before they went to jail, you may start having visits again.

A lot of kids are scared. Some really do not want to live with their parent and fear they may have to. Talk to your social workers and foster parents.

Your brothers and sisters are often one of your best sources of support, although most likely each one is in a different spot about how they feel. Be honest but think about how much they can handle.

Last, but most important, ***it is not your fault that that your parent is in jail.***

Since there is little information written for young people who have an incarcerated parent, we are grateful to these social workers and a special grandmother who

agreed to share their knowledge:

- **Fabu Carter Briscoe**, Mentor
Coordinator of the Madison Area Urban Ministry, Madison
- **Rachel Madding**, formerly of the
Coalition for Children, Youth & Families,
Milwaukee
- **Julie Janescek**, Kewaunee County
Foster Care Coordinator, Kewaunee
- **Shirley Zahn**, Supervisor, Oshkosh
Department of Social Services, Oshkosh
- **A Wisconsin grandmother** who
shared her knowledge about fostering
her grandchildren, whose mom is in
prison.



Resources

Check with your social worker to find out if there is a visitation program for young people who live in your area.

You can order the booklet, ***Wish You Were Here: When Your Parent Is In Prison*** from <http://youthcomm.org>, or get an adult to rent it for you from [our resource center](#).

[National Resource Center for Permanency and Family](#)

Connections: Provides topical listings with multiple links to resources

[Mentoring Connections](#) by Madison Urban Ministry



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