

When a Parent is Away: Should I encourage my child's relationship with their parent in jail?

As a caregiver, it can be difficult to determine if your child should maintain a connection when their parent is incarcerated. It can also be challenging to keep that connection going.

Several studies have shown that maintaining contact between incarcerated parents and their children can help offset the harmful effects of parental incarceration - especially with visits conducted in supportive, safe, and child-friendly environments. For many children, communicating with the parent can:

- maintain or repair attachment
- provide opportunities to talk about their feelings
- help them cope with the grief and loss resulting from the separation
- reassure them that their parent is safe and help correct frightening thoughts



While maintaining contact is beneficial in most cases, there are circumstances where it may *not* be in the child's best interest to connect with their parent in jail. In most cases, you, the caregiver, are in the best position to make this decision on your child's behalf.

Ask yourself, "What is in my child's best interest?"

Keep children out of the middle of adult conflicts.

You may be frustrated or have hard feelings about the parent in jail, and you may be justified in those feelings. However, it's important that those feelings do not influence the connection between the child and their parent. Children impacted by incarceration often experience high stress. **Exposure to adult conflict** adds to this stress. Keeping your feelings about the parent out of this decision is NOT easy and will require self-care and self-compassion for you, the caregiver.

Do not feel pressured into maintaining the connection.

If connection will not be good for your child's wellbeing, it's ok to trust your decision, even if the parent in jail is pushing for it. However, you do not need to make the decision alone. Reach out to a school counselor, a therapist, or a trusted friend to discuss your thoughts about contact and your child's wellbeing.

To Help You Decide...

As you weigh your decision, you may want to consider these questions:

Did the parent care for or have a positive relationship with the child prior to incarceration?

Was the child well cared for and protected by the parent?

Is the parent hoping to reunite with the child following release?

Is there potential for a positive relationship, even if parent-child unification is unlikely?

If you answered YES to ANY of these questions, your child would likely benefit from connecting with their parent. Phone calls, letters and visits are important ways to maintain the parent-child bond.

Prepare Your Child

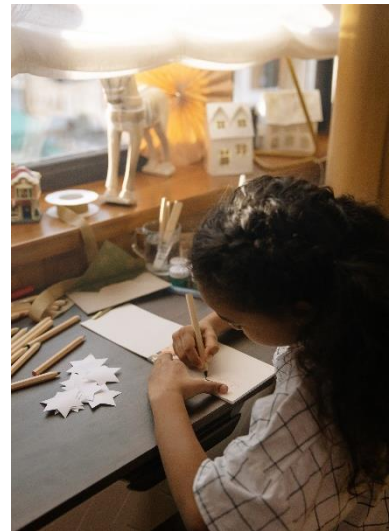
If you decide it is a good idea for your child to connect with their parent, help them prepare. This may include talking through what a visit will be like, helping them write a letter or even preparing what they'd like to discuss in a phone call. What stories or ideas do they want to share with their parent? Do they have any questions they'll want to ask their parent?

For more information on connecting:

[Helping Children Write Letters](#)

[Video Visits with Children](#)

[Phone Calls](#)



Expect Emotions

It is important to know that your child may experience many different emotions before, during and after connecting with their parent who is incarcerated. They may feel some positive emotions – joy, relief, hope – and they may also feel some negative emotions – sadness, fear, anger, resentment.

When your child experiences difficult or painful emotions, it does not mean the connection was not valuable. Although these emotions are unpleasant, they are important. You can help your child by letting them know their feelings are normal and talking with them about ways to cope. For more about managing emotions, visit [Strong Feelings](#).

Relationships are complicated. Maintaining them takes effort. Yet supporting your child's relationship with their parent who is incarcerated can have powerful impact their longterm health and wellbeing.

For more Caregiver Connection resources, visit: theliteracylink.extension.wisc.edu/resources/

Source: Poehlmann J., Dallaire D., Loper A., Shear L. Children's contact with their incarcerated parents: Research findings and recommendations. *Am. Psychol.* 2010;65:575–598. doi: 10.1037/a0020279.