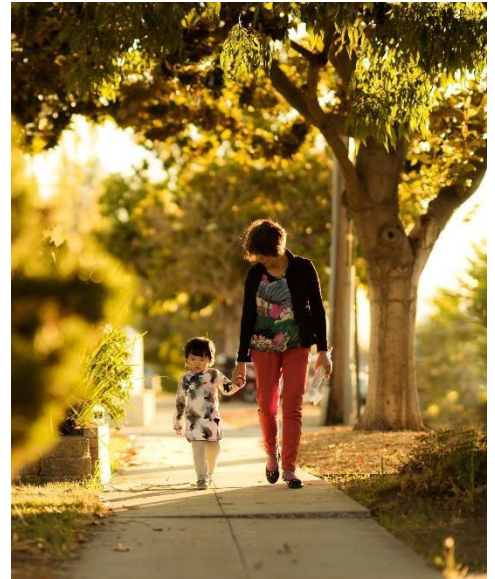


When a Parent is Away: What Should I Tell the Kids?

It can be difficult to know how much to share with children about the incarceration of their parent. We want to protect them from worry, shame, or embarrassment. Because of this, parents and caregivers often tell children that the parent is away on vacation, at work, in the military, or at college. Although well-meaning, these responses often backfire. Children eventually find out the truth, which can damage trust with the very people they depend on.

We know from research that children fare better when they are told the truth about their parent's incarceration. How much you share will be up to you.



Here are some ideas on how to talk with children about jail or prison:

1. Give Age-Appropriate Information

Provide simple and honest explanations. For young children, this might be, "Dad broke the law (or some people think Dad broke the law) and he has to go to jail for a while." Older children may be ready for a more complete story. In fact, they may hear about it at school or in the community, or even read about it online. It is usually easier on them to get the truth from their caregiver or parent.

Even young children understand the idea of consequences for behaviors. This can be a good opportunity to explain to the child how the action may have been wrong, but the parent is not bad – just as the child sometimes does things that are wrong, but that does not mean that the child is bad.

2. Let Them Know It's Not Their Fault

Children of almost any age may worry that they did something wrong to cause their parent's incarceration. Children need to hear (again and again) that it is not their fault and that their parent loves them very much.

3. Use Children's Books and Videos



Children's books and videos can be a great way to talk over difficult or emotional topics with children. For children impacted by the incarceration of a parent, books can be a helpful way to explain, normalize, de-stigmatize and support them in their experience. It can help them to know they are not alone.

When you read with your child, you also strengthen your bond. A close, nurturing relationship with you can help protect your child from the damaging impact of too much stress.

For a list of children's books on incarceration and managing emotions, visit:

<https://theliteracylink.extension.wisc.edu/resources/>

4. Speak Respectfully of the Other Parent

Caregivers may have reasons to feel upset with the parent in jail or prison. The parent in jail or prison may be frustrated by decisions the caregiver is making about their child. It is healthy to express these frustrations with a trusted adult in your life. Keep comments about the parent/caregiver positive or neutral in front of your child. An insult to the parent/caregiver is an insult to the child. Children have a right to love their parents and caregivers, even when that important person has made choices the other person is unhappy with.

5. Be Ready for Questions!

When children know the truth about where their parent is, they will have questions, and some of these questions might be difficult. You won't have all the answers, and it's ok to say, "I don't know". It is important for children to feel free to talk about their feelings.

Children may also ask you for the same information over and over again, as they work to process the situation. Have patience with them. They need to be reassured that they are safe, loved and not to blame for their parent's incarceration.

It takes courage to have these conversations!

Being prepared can help. Don't hesitate to reach out to friends or a counselor for support. Just like our children, adults also need someone to talk with.

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

