

Help for Hard Times

Suggestions for families and friends when a loved one is imprisoned

Families in Crisis, Inc.

60 Popieluszko Court, 2nd floor
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

(T) 860.727.5800

(F) 860.727.5801

www.familiesincrisis.org

First things first

- Take care of yourself - both physically and emotionally. You won't be much help to others if you're not in a good place yourself.
- Seek out and connect with people who are in the same situation as you - they know what you are going through...maybe you can even share resources (baby sit for each other, carpool to visit, etc.).
- Build on the positive - stay focused on what you can do or change - not on what you can't.
- Live your life! You have a life to lead on "the outside" - it may include children, your home, job or religious community - stay involved and find joy where you can.
- Don't hesitate to ask others you know and trust for help. Often, your family and friends may want to be supportive but aren't sure how to approach you. Unlike death and divorce, there are no social rules or rituals for others to follow. It's up to you to set the tone.

If children are involved

- It is important to keep the explanation simple and age appropriate when you tell a child that a loved one is in prison.
- Prepare what you want to say and allow plenty of time to answer questions about prison, prison life, the crime, and what this will mean for them.
- Children will react differently. For some children, the experience can be overwhelming while for others it is less serious. Sometimes it is a relief.
- The child's age, understanding of the situation, and the reaction of others all play a part in the affect the parent's incarceration will have.
- Children may have different feelings, and sometimes even several feelings at once, or one right after the other. Some of those feelings may be sadness, fear, guilt, disbelief, anxiety or anger. It is important to understand and recognize all their feelings.

Stay connected

- Visiting is not the only way to be together. Telephone calls and letters can be just as beneficial.
- Focus on your relationship - you're still parents, partners, siblings or friends. Walls don't change that. Do the best you can to care and support each other.
- Take the time to learn about each other's world -You'll have to work harder to understand each other's daily lives. Ask questions. Listen. Share details about what's happening on the "outside" as well as the "inside."

Before you visit

- Make sure you are an approved visitor before you make the trip.
- Every institution is different. Know the visiting schedule. If possible, let your loved one know when you plan to come so he or she can be ready too.
- Know the rules and regulations ahead of time so you don't bring something that is not allowed. You may lose your visiting privileges.
- Prepare both yourself and your children for the visit. Explain the visiting process and security measures. Visiting can be emotional - before, during and after the visit. Check in with one another.

Budget your resources

- If you accept collect calls, expect higher phone bills and budget accordingly.
- Check with your phone company or shop around for ways to keep your phone bills down.
- Visiting is an expense too - in both time and money. There are transportation costs, time factors (will you have to take time off from work?), childcare, etc.
- Know your limits and don't overstep them. Negotiate and together come up with a plan to stay connected that won't leave you exhausted or put you in debt.

What to tell children when a parent or family member goes to prison

Should you tell? Who should tell? What could you say?

Some guidelines

When a parent or family member goes to prison, often, the family's first reaction is to protect the children by not telling them the truth.... or to tell them only part of the truth. Perhaps, the parent in prison is afraid what the children will think of him or her? Afraid they won't love and respect them anymore?

The reality is that *children usually find out the truth anyway*. They hear adults talking, or a friend may tell them or they simply figure things out for themselves. So, what is the best thing to do? While every family must decide for themselves, here are some key things to keep in mind.

- Children need to trust the adults who take care of them. ***You build their trust when you tell the truth - even if it hurts.*** Besides, if they find out you lied about a loved one in prison, they'll be hurt twice as hard...about the imprisonment and your deception. Also, if you lie about this, what else are you not telling the truth about?
- ***Children are smart.*** While you may believe that you can explain a loved one's absence with a vague answer (they are in the hospital, working for the state or away at school) children usually find out. Phone calls and letters declare when someone communicates from a correctional facility, or the children see the barbed wire when they visit, or their loved one never comes home - even if they beg or it's a holiday. These are just ***some of the clues*** that even the youngest of children can put together.
- If children aren't given an explanation that makes sense - they will tell themselves ***something*** to fill in the gap. That something may be worse than the truth. If you want them to come to you for information or comfort, you must demonstrate the "door is open" for honest communication. Be open and patient when they approach you.
- Children need to hear explanations they can understand. Keep in mind their age and experience. Keep it simple. ***It's not a one - time discussion.*** Often, once children have had an opportunity to think about things, they'll come back with other questions or feelings. Be open to talk about the crime, prison life and the safety of their parent or loved one.... ***for most children, the number one priority is knowing that their parent or loved one is safe!***
- Provide children with guidance about ***what to tell people outside the family.*** Should they say, "you're separated" or "he's away" or "in prison"? Every situation is different - so help children prepare for questions, teasing or offers of support from others.
- Holidays, mother's day, father's day and birthdays are especially difficult. Schools may do special projects. ***Be proactive.*** Talk to your children about what's coming up and ask them how they want to handle things. ***Provide guidance in advance.***
- ***Prepare your children about what to expect*** during visits, phone calls or letters. Children experience time differently than adults. Help them understand how long someone will be gone or when the next contact may be.
- Separate how ***you feel*** about the imprisoned adult from what ***the child may feel*** or want. It's normal for children to want the adults in their lives to be good caregivers. Many children believe that once a parent comes home from prison they will be the

mother or father they always wanted. Listen to their hopes and fears. Let them know what they may realistically expect, without bias or judgment.

- If possible, ***include the imprisoned parent or loved one in the discussions***. Discuss what you want to say in advance and practice with one another. Children feel better when the adult who is imprisoned says he or she is safe and cared for - and that the child is not at fault for anything. Reassure them that even though prison is not a place where anyone wants to end up - the adult will be okay.
- Finally, ***just because an adult does a bad thing doesn't necessarily mean he or she is a bad person***. Separate the two. The incarcerated person made a mistake that he or she must be accountable for. Although walls may separate them, they still can love one another very much.

Families in Crisis, Inc

Strengthening families for a better community.

Coming Home – Family Education Session

Although every family is unique and different, many have similar experiences when a loved one returns from prison. These experiences are often different than what was expected. It's important for you ***to talk*** about your hopes and fears and develop realistic expectations about coming home.

Then and Now

- The value system on the "inside" is different than on the "outside"
- Institutionalization is unnatural and changes the way a man or woman thinks, feels and acts
- Many prisoners become hardened, and when released, struggle to be sensitive and open about their feelings
- While the person was gone the family changed – coming home will change things again

If you haven't already, begin talking about what you hope and expect for the future:

Family Life

- How does his or her return affect your family's structure, living space, finances, routine, etc.?
- Is he or she welcome home or returning under duress? How long do you expect him or her to stay? Is the time frame realistic?
- Discuss and set realistic boundaries (ex. routines, visitors, etc.) for daily living
- Recognize that as you become a "new family" things will get worse before they get better
- Expect to feel many emotions – both good and bad (happy, anxious, etc.)
- Re-entry might not be new for you – discuss the pitfalls and challenges. What will you try to do differently this time?
- Expect conflict and disagreements – but keep talking! Don't sit on your feelings

Relationships

- Remember the good times, discuss how it felt to be apart, spend time talking about your hopes, fears, future plans and goals – what are your strengths and what will be your challenges
- If partners, discuss your commitment to one another – what do you expect (honesty, loyalty, faithfulness, etc.)

- Sexuality – is now the time to have another child? Should you practice safe sex?
Most people don't pass on sexually transmitted diseases because they don't care – it's because they don't know

Parenting

- What was their relationship with their child(ren) before they went to prison? What do you want it to be now?
- What is their relationship with your child(ren)'s caregiver (the person caring for their child)? If that's you what are realistic plans to strengthen and/or repair relationships?
- How has their child(ren) experienced their imprisonment? They will act out their feelings. Be prepared to respond appropriately
- If the returning prisoner will not live with all of his or her child(ren) how will parenting be different?
- The children's caregiver sets the tone for how child(ren) will respond to the returning adult
- Allow child(ren) time to adjust - help them build a solid relationship first before expecting them to discipline appropriately

Employment

- Identification- encourage them to get the identification right away to get a job
- Be realistic. Getting a job will not be easy – encourage them to take advantage of every resource to help them along the way (Project PREP)
- Think short term and long term. Their first job may not be ideal but it is only the first step on the road to earning a living wage
- Encourage them to explore educational and/or vocational opportunities
- Provide support as they re-enter the world of work (help them be on time, encourage attendance, etc.)

Financial

- What can and will your family provide before you earn your own money? Discuss and come to an agreement on expectations
- It may take a long time before you can really contribute to the family's expenses. Be considerate
- Will they have child support payments? If so, how they you plan to handle this? Encourage them to know their options
- Do they have financial obligations for children they don't live with? Encourage them to communicate regularly with the other co-parent(s) about what they are doing and what they can expect. Encourage them to be honest

Peer Relations

- At first, they may feel most comfortable with others who were in prison too - they're making a transition – encourage them not to take chances and compromise your freedom
- Encourage them to attend support groups or enter a mentoring relationship that surround them with positive relationships
- Encourage them to avoid old hangouts
- Provide opportunities to spend time with you and their children and other active parents
- Encourage them to volunteer in your community before and after they get a job
- Encourage them to attend church or other community groups

Programs that can Help

- Families in Crisis, Inc. provides home-based individual, couples, and parent counseling services as well as mentoring support. Call us if you think we can help **860.727.5800**
- For information on child support matters call **860.723.1002**
- For help with basic needs (i.e. housing, food, clothing, utilities, etc.) contact Infoline by dialing **211**

Families in Crisis, Inc.

About the Agency

Founded in 1979, Families in Crisis, Inc. (FIC) is a private not for profit agency governed by a volunteer board of directors. From offices located in Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven and Waterbury, Connecticut specially trained staff provide critically needed services to families of offenders. FIC is the only agency in Connecticut, and one of only a few nationally, that serves these families.

Services stabilize the family in crisis and provide meaningful opportunities for change. FIC focuses on the dynamics of the family unit and the significant role that family relationships play to help offenders rebuild their lives. These services are an important addition to the criminal justice system's own efforts to reduce crime and to prepare offenders to be productive members of their communities.

Why FIC's Services are Important

- *The arrest of a loved one throws families into crisis*
- *The criminal justice system focuses on the offender, no one is there for their families- and families "do time" too.*
- *Without intervention, children of imprisoned parents are significantly more likely to go to prison themselves*
- *Strong family ties are the key success factor for successful community re-entry*

FIC Services

- Family counseling
- Parent education (in prisons and the community)
- Services for children of prisoners and their caregivers
- Visitor transportation
- Re-entry

"We already had serious problems when he got arrested. I knew if we were going to make it as a family, we needed help. Families in Crisis changed our lives."

Spouse of an offender