

Tip Sheet for Incarcerated Parents: Planning for a Visit from Your Child/Children

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Visitation can be an important and meaningful experience for incarcerated parents and their children, but it can also be a source of stress and anxiety when parents' or children's expectations do not align with what ends up happening. Many aspects of visitation are outside of the control of an incarcerated parent, but there are things you can do to anticipate problems and reduce stress to make visitation a positive and beneficial experience for everyone involved. Below are things to consider when planning for a visit from your child. If you do not know the answer to a question, think about who in your facility you can ask for an answer such as other incarcerated parents, volunteers, or facility staff. Even if you cannot find the answer to a particular question, if you think it could affect the visit make sure your child's caregiver is aware of the issue.



Things to Consider Before the Visit

- **What are the rules?** It can be very disappointing for everyone when families are turned away and not allowed to visit because they did not understand the visiting rules and procedures of the facility. To help prevent this from happening, check with the staff and let your family know the rules on:
 - What can visitors wear? Many facilities prohibit revealing clothing, sweatshirts with hoods, or spandex-type clothing. Open toed shoes may also be a problem.
 - What can visitors bring to a visit? Some facilities allow caregivers with infants to bring a bottle, a change of clothes, and a diaper; and they may allow a child to bring a toy or a book; other facilities do not. Can a child bring a gift? Many facilities do not allow visitors to bring in gifts or other items including cash for their loved one. It can be terribly disappointing for a child to plan to give their parent a drawing or small gift only to be told at security that it is not allowed.
 - How many visitors are allowed at one time? Facilities can be very strict on the maximum number of visitors and count infants towards this number. If only two people are allowed in and there are three young children, make sure your visitor knows that he/she may need someone to watch the other children while you are visiting. How can you divide visiting time evenly between your children? Is there a waiting area for additional guests to stay in during the visit if not everyone is allowed in at one time?
- Who needs to be on the visitation list? Some facilities only require adults to be on the list, while others require minors to be included as well. Even if you have already made a request to put someone on the list, it is good to check before they visit to make sure your request has been processed.
- **How will your child react to the security?** Jails and prisons can be intimidating environments for children, especially if this is their first visit. Trying to familiarize yourself with what your child will encounter during their visit and if possible explaining this information to them or their caregiver before the visit can help children feel more comfortable.
 - Think about what your child can expect to experience when going through security. Factors that could be intimidating include having dogs on site, going through a metal detector, and guards patting them down. Children may also face long lines and wait times without being able to bring along books, toys, or food. This may make children hungry, tired, and irritable by the time they are able to see you.
 - Consider informing them about the environment of the visiting room, such as if it is typically crowded and noisy with many other visitors. This may be a distraction for children during the visit, but knowing the environment ahead of time can help to prepare them.





- **Will your child/children be able to touch you?**

The format of the visitation can vary by facility and sometimes children can become upset if they are not able to have as much physical contact with their parent as they had anticipated. If possible, informing your child or their caregiver about what the format of the visit will be ahead of time can help children prepare for the visit. For example, factors to consider could include:

- Are the visits video (or virtual) where you visit through a computer monitor?
- Will you and your child be separated by Plexiglas?
- Are contact visits allowed and if so what are the rules? Can your child hug you or sit on your lap? Do these rules vary by the age of your child?
- How long are the visits?

- **How can you interact with your child/children?**

Visitations are a great time to bond with your child and thinking about what activities may be age appropriate to do during your visit can help to maximize this time.

- If you have a baby you may want to sing quietly or read them a book.
- An older child or teen may want to talk about what is going on with their school or sports.
- Depending on the rules of the facility and the resources available, consider playing cards or another game together.
- If it is a no contact visit, try to develop a signal to convey your emotions to the child, such as hands to the glass.

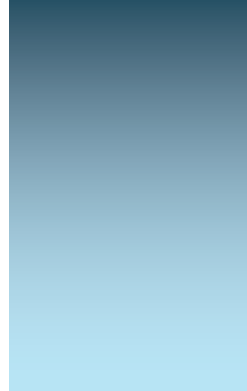
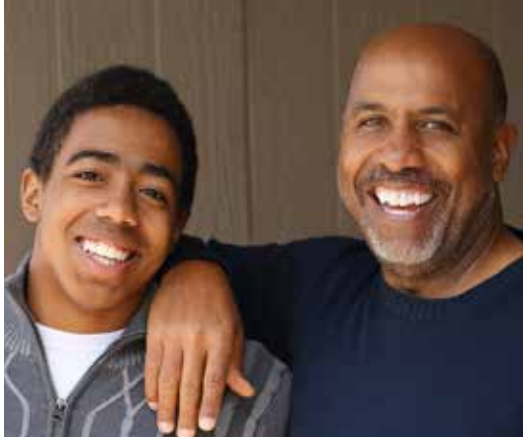
- **Who is bringing the child/children?** Considering who is bringing your child to the visit and what your relationship is with that person can help to prevent negative conversations that may arise.

- If you have a particularly strained relationship with the person bringing your child to visit, try to put those feelings aside so that you can prioritize this time with your child.
- If there are things that you would like to discuss with this person that your child should not hear, encourage them to visit at another time without the child or make a plan to discuss those issues by phone.

- **Are there special visiting programs available?** Some prisons have programs that allow special accommodations for visits between incarcerated mothers or fathers and their children such as contact visits or visits in child friendly rooms equipped with toys and activities. These programs can be really valuable for your children, but they often have special rules or eligibility criteria. To see if you and your child can benefit from one of these programs, ask about who can participate and how you can be involved.

Things to Consider During the Visit

- **Your child may be nervous.** A child experiencing some nervousness, especially if this is their first visit, is normal. Try to give your child some time when they first arrive to settle in and consider what you know about their personality. For example, if your child is particularly shy or anxious, they may need a little more time to warm up in a new environment.
- **Your child may have changed since the last visit.** If your child has visited before, but it has been a while since they have last seen you, they may comment on how you look different. Acknowledge your child's own development and change (For example: "You've gotten so tall." or "I can't believe how many teeth you've lost since I last saw you!").
- **Good questions to ask.** There may be things that are happening in your child's life that are particularly exciting or stressful for them such as moving, changing schools, or participating in a new sport or activity. Visitations can be a perfect opportunity for you to ask them about these events and their feelings about them. Every parent-child dynamic is different, but sometimes asking specific questions like "what's your favorite class?" or "tell me about your best friend" can engage your child more than general questions like, "how are you?" Do not get discouraged if the child doesn't talk as much as you would like. For smaller children, physical contact, if allowed, can be more important and meaningful than talking.
- **Ways to engage other than talking.** Children may have their own ideas on what they would like to do during the visit. If there are toys to play with during the visit you can use this opportunity to ask if they would like to choose a game to play or if they would prefer to just sit and talk. Some facilities have photo machines or other ways that you can have a picture taken with your child.



Some facilities charge with cash and coins while others require visitors to purchase tokens or tickets. Making sure caregivers are prepared to have cash with them for vending machines and photo opportunities can be useful when possible.

- **Timing matters.** The time of the visit may impact how your child feels during the visit. For example, if visits begin early in the morning, children and their caregivers may have been up very early to allow time for travel or if the visits happen over the lunch hour they may feel hungry. Often, these factors are unavoidable, but it can be useful to keep in mind during the visit and try to be understanding.
- **How to make saying goodbye easier.** Try to give your child 5 minute and 10 minute warnings before the end of the visit so that they can start mentally preparing to leave. Children can feel more at ease if they know the next time they will be able to visit. If you know this information, tell your child roughly when the next visit will occur. If possible, try to provide a transitional item for the child to take home such as a drawing or photo to end on a positive note.

Things to Consider After the Visit

- **Who can the child talk to about it?** It is important for children to be able to express their feelings about the visit. Families and other individuals can be a great support system. Consider talking to your child's caregiver about reaching out to a broader support network, both within and beyond your family for advice and assistance.
- **Follow-up with a call or letter.** It may be helpful to call or send a letter a few days after the visit to remind your child that there are other ways to communicate other than in-person visits. It could also be nice to ask a question or share a detail that your child told you during the visit to show that you were listening, such as "how did that test go?" or "are you still feeling sad about so and so?"
- **What are other sources of support for your child?** There may be programs or resources that can help your child through this time. Encourage your child's caregiver or other family members to look into mentoring programs or other resources that can be of assistance to your child. You can share with them the "Resources for Caregivers" section.

Resources for Caregivers: Talking to Children

Sesame Street's *Little Children, Big Challenges:*
Incarceration

<http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/incarceration>

Materials from the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated

<http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/resources/library/children-of-prisoners-library/>

Including:

Age-specific guidance

<http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/cipl201-caringforcip.pdf>

Advice for caregivers

<http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/cipl202-questionsfromcaregivers.pdf>

<http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/cipl204-tipsforcaregiversfromcaregivers.pdf>

Materials from the New Jersey Department of Corrections, *When a parent goes to prison: A guide to discussing your incarceration with your children*

<http://www.state.nj.us/corrections/pdf/OTS/InmateFamilyResources/WhatAboutMe.pdf>

Materials from the Oregon Program, *Parenting Inside Out* (providing evidence-based curriculum for incarcerated mothers and fathers)

<http://www.parentinginsideout.org/>

Including a set of materials targeted toward educators and caregivers and a collection of resources for children

<http://www.parentinginsideout.org/resources/>

For children in foster care

<http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-F2F-PartnershipsBetweenCorrectionsandChildWelfareCollaborationforChangePartTwo-2001.pdf>