

What shall I tell the children?

One of the hardest things to face when someone goes into prison is telling the children, but it is important that you talk to them about what is happening. If children don't know where their parent is, they can become confused as they often sense that something has happened which they don't understand or which they misconstrue.

They may think that they aren't allowed to ask questions and imagine things which will worry them more. There is also the danger that they will find out some other way – from other children at school, overhearing adult conversations, local media, or Googling to find out details which may shock or frighten them without any adult support.

By talking together you can reassure them. You may still see changes in their behaviour as they come to terms with what has happened, but they will know that it's OK to talk about it.

Do other people need to know?

Unfortunately, you may not be able to stop other people knowing about what has happened. There may be times when you will have to help the child deal with people saying or doing things which upset them. It may also be helpful to choose to tell some people, including the child's school; teachers and support staff can offer valuable support if they are aware of what is going on in the child's life. The school may nominate a particular member of staff for the child to go to whenever they feel distressed.

And what about me?

Living with the realities of what has happened can be hard, and there will be times when you may need someone to turn to, yourself. If you want information or someone to talk to, the list overleaf gives details of organisations that are there to help.

When is the right time?

There is no right time or way to tell a child. As someone who knows them well, you are the best judge of when is a suitable moment. It is best to get things out into the open as soon as possible; the child may already know and understand more than you realise and be waiting for the chance to talk.

If you have to tell more than one child, you will need to speak to each in a way that they understand. Apart from their age, each child is different and you need to plan when and how they are told and, importantly, how much and in what detail you explain. Although it is essential that you are honest, you shouldn't feel you are not being truthful if you restrict what you tell them to what they can understand and cope with.

The most important thing is that you pick a time when you won't be disturbed or distracted, so that you have the best environment to answer their questions. You will also need time to allow them to think and ask more if they choose to. It may be difficult for the child to take in all that you have said. You will probably need to explain things several times and talk about it on other occasions.

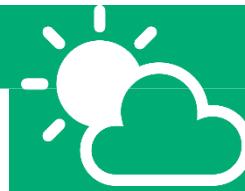
It may be helpful for the child to have a second person who knows their situation, and who they feel they can trust: a relative, friend or teacher. Sometimes children want to protect the people closest to them and may not want to cause more upset by sharing their own worries and fears. Children often think they're to blame; they need to know they are not.

What do I say?



Most children will want to know where their parent is and why. They may need reassurance that their parent is safe. It is important that they do not see them as a bad person, even if they know they have done something wrong. You can help the child recognise that people you love can do bad things but it doesn't mean you have to stop loving them, or they stop loving you.

In most cases, the child will be allowed to visit their parent, talk to them by phone, and send them cards and letters. Many prisons offer extra activities such as Family Days and Story Book Dads for prisoner dads to record a story onto CD which is sent to their child.



Most prisons have Visitors Centres which can help you prepare for your visit so that you can talk to the child in advance about what will happen. Tell them about any special needs your child may have; they will do their best to help, and you will be able to give your child further reassurance before the day of the visit.

As secure environments, prisons have very strict rules about what you can and can't take into the visits hall. It is far better to be fully informed in advance so that your child isn't disappointed on the day. But before making any promises to the child, make sure that there are no restrictions in place which mean that the prisoner is not allowed contact with his child, and also that an adult is willing to bring the child to visit. If that is the case, you will need to explain in terms that the child can understand but does not frighten them. The child may find it confusing and distressing to match the 'prisoner' and their offence with the figure they have known and loved as their parent.

Try not to give children too much information in one go. They are bound to have questions and will need time to take in what you have said. There are lots of books for children about having a parent in prison, and may be comforting for your child to feel they are not alone in their experience.

Babies and very young children obviously won't be able to understand what has happened, but you can still talk to them about their parent.

After you have told the child, the most important thing is to listen to them and allow them to have their own feelings, which may well include anger and resentment as well as sadness and loss. They may also feel a sense of relief if the situation at home had previously been very difficult. If they don't want to talk about it, don't force them.

How do we deal with the future?

Even though their parent is absent, try to give the child a sense of their own future which isn't bound up in their parent's sentence. Continue to celebrate special events like birthdays, successes and achievements, holidays and outings.

The child shouldn't feel that by enjoying life they are 'betraying' their parent. It's best to continue to talk to the child about keeping in touch with their parent. By using letters, telephone calls and visits, the child can choose how much contact they have. They will need your support and encouragement in what they choose.

Useful contacts

Prisoners' Families Helpline

Offers support to anyone with a friend or relative in prison.

Mon-Fri 9am—8pm, Sat 10.00am-3.00pm
Call free on 0808 808 2003

Family Lives

Offers support and information to parents.
Helpline: 0808 800 2222. www.familylives.org.uk

Assisted Prison Visits Unit (APVU)

Mon-Fri 9am—5pm Tel: 0300 063 2100
Can provide help with the cost of visiting.
www.gov.uk/helpwithprisonvisits

Childline

A free confidential phone counselling service for any child, 24 hours a day, every day.
Helpline: 0800 1111. www.childline.org.uk

Ormiston Families runs services for those affected by imprisonment in the community and in many prisons in the East of England.

Email: enquiries@ormistonfamilies.org.uk

Telephone: 01473 724 517

Address: Ormiston Families, Unit 17, The Drift, Nacton Road, Ipswich, Suffolk, IP3 9QR

Website: www.ormiston.org