



13 WAYS TO BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR CHILDREN ... EVEN FROM PRISON!

STAYING INVOLVED WITH YOUR CHILDREN WHILE INCARCERATED

Angel Tree® is a program of Prison Fellowship® that serves incarcerated parents by providing a pathway for strengthening and restoring their relationships with their children and families. Founded in 1982, Angel Tree volunteers minister to hundreds of thousands of children every Christmas by delivering a gift and the Gospel message on behalf of their incarcerated parents.



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BEING PART OF YOUR CHILDREN'S LIVES WHILE INCARCERATED MAY SEEM HARD OR EVEN IMPOSSIBLE ...

No doubt about it, parenting from prison can be very difficult. If you seldom see, visit, or talk with your children, how can you build a relationship with them?

STAYING CONNECTED MAY BE CHALLENGING, BUT IT CAN BE DONE

Even when contact is limited, you can still build a bridge to your kids in other ways. The tips in this brochure can help you nurture stronger relationships with your children by responding to their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

FOR MOTHERS

13 WAYS TO STAY CONNECTED WITH YOUR CHILDREN

1. BECOME AN EXPERT ON YOUR CHILDREN AND THEIR STAGES OF GROWTH

What are your kids learning in school? What difficulties do they face? What physical, emotional, and social changes are they experiencing? If you don't know, use the prison library to find a book, video, or other resource that explains the developmental phases of children and gives you a better understanding of what your kids are facing.

2. PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR CHILDREN'S INTERESTS

What's their favorite hobby? Their best subject in school? The activities they prefer? Find out what interests them the most, then get interested yourself—and discover new things together. For example, an incarcerated parent whose son was interested in biology wrote to a health organization. Free materials were sent to both the parent and the son so they could learn at the same time and then share what they discovered with each other.

3. BECOME A LONG-DISTANCE COACH ... OR FAN

Do your kids like basketball, dance, or some other sport? Learn all you can about the athletic interests that mean the most to your kids. What skills are needed? What are the rules of the game? Who are the role models your children look up to? When you know more, you can share more and cheer on their efforts in a more meaningful way.

4. KEEP THE FAITH

Many incarcerated mothers find that a relationship with Jesus Christ provides tremendous support through troubled times. Because Jesus died on the cross for your sins, you can have a relationship with God as your loving heavenly Father. Tell Him about your fears and your desire to be a good parent. Take time to read the Bible daily—it is filled with promises that He will take care of you and guide you. Take advantage of the activities and programs offered through your chaplain's office. Share your spiritual beliefs with your children and encourage them also to trust in God. Pray for your children every day.

5. RESPECT YOUR CHILDREN'S CAREGIVER

It can be hard not seeing your children on a day-to-day basis and having regular input on their upbringing. And you may not always agree with what the caregiver is doing. Even so, be careful to speak about and treat the caregiver respectfully in front of your children. Hearing you criticize the caregiver will only add to their stress and confusion.

6. UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF FATHERS

An involved, responsible, and committed father (or father figure) is an essential part of the healthy development of your children. Except in circumstances where contact with the biological father is not possible, safe, or wise, it is important that you keep a positive relationship with your children's dad. Even if you don't get along with each other, encourage contact between him and your children for their benefit. Contact National Fatherhood Initiative (12410 Milestone Center Drive, Suite 600, Germantown, MD 20876) to find more ways to help your children's father learn to be a better dad.

7. TAKE CARE OF YOUR HEALTH

You want to be around when your children are adults. How about being there for your grandkids and great-grandkids? How well you take care of yourself today may determine whether you are around in years to come. Exercise, eat right, don't smoke, and try to live as healthy as you can.

8. RISK BEING VULNERABLE WITH YOUR CHILDREN

It may be very difficult, but taking the risk of being completely open, honest, and humble with your children can help you rebuild strong bonds with them. Admit to your kids that you have made some bad choices and ask them to forgive you for hurting them. Be ready and willing to receive their anger or other strong emotions. Accept that their feelings are normal, and don't make them feel guilty. This can help your kids regain their trust in you and show that you will always be there for them.

9. TELL YOUR CHILDREN THAT YOU LOVE AND ACCEPT THEM NO MATTER WHAT

Everything you say or write shows them how you feel. Even your body movement and facial expressions reveal your feelings. When children think that a parent is critical, uncaring, or disinterested, they start to feel unwanted or inadequate. To win back the love and approval they feel they have lost they may turn to destructive behaviors or look for love and acceptance from other possibly harmful sources. If your children know they are unconditionally loved and valued by you, they will be far less likely to resort to unhealthy relationships or damaging habits.



10. HELP YOUR KIDS TO BE KIDS

When a parent goes to prison, children often have to take on "grown-up" responsibilities—like helping to care for younger siblings and doing more work around the house. When they come to visit you, take time to relax and play with them. Don't burden them with the emotional baggage of your problems and frustrations. This can make them feel responsible for your wellbeing and feelings—which isn't their job.

11. ASSURE YOUR KIDS THAT THEY ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR ABSENCE

Although they may not put their feelings into words, children often think that they are somehow to blame for a parent's imprisonment. They may wonder if they did something wrong. "Did Mommy go away because she doesn't love me anymore? Did Mommy start using drugs because I was bad?" Reassure your kids that you are in prison because of what you did, not because of anything they did.

12. TAKE A PARENTING CLASS

Your facility—or volunteer groups that come into your facility—may offer programs on parenting skills. Participate in these programs. The more you can learn, the better parent you'll become.

13. SEEK MENTORSHIP

Organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters can offer mentors for your children. Your counselor or chaplain can help point you in the right direction. Mentors provide your children encouraging support and help them find new ways to deal with issues. Mentors will never replace you as a mother, but can help you guide and nurture your children.

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This brochure has been adapted from National Fatherhood Initiative's "Staying Involved with Your Children While Incarcerated" brochure.