ANGEL TREE®
A Program of Prison Fellowship

WORD TO THE CAREGIVER

Writing letters is often the best form of communication between children and their incarcerated parents. It is less expensive than phone calls and allows both the child and the parent to think through what they want to say to each another.

Angel Tree® has designed the letter-writing kit as a creative and fun way for children of prisoners to get together with their friends at their local church, share stories or concerns, put them in writing, and send them to their incarcerated parent.

Children, of course, can also use the letter-writing kit on their own. It may also give you and your child some special one-on-one time together, as you help your child think about what to write to the incarcerated parent.

We pray that this kit will encourage and help your child to reconnect with his or her incarcerated parent. We also pray that their relationship will grow stronger as a result of ongoing communications through letter writing.

Here are a few basic steps that can enhance your child's letter-writing experience.

1. Pray for God's guidance and blessing.
2. Make sure that you have the parent's department of corrections (DOC) identification number and the mailing address for the prison facility, and find out the facility's rules for sending mail. For example, some facilities allow photographs to be sent while others don't.
3. Spend time with the child discussing important things to include in the letter.
4. Take time to enjoy the activities.

What if the incarcerated parent doesn't respond?

In most cases, incarcerated parents will be very excited to get a letter from their children, so they will make every effort to write back. Sometimes a child will not get a response and then might naturally feel disappointed, sad, mad, or even rejected.

There could be several reasons the parent in prison does not respond to the child's letter:

- The prison's security process makes it take longer for a letter to get to its destination.
- The prison may be on lockdown for some reason, and none of the prisoner's mail is going out of the prison.
- The prisoner is in the process of being transferred to another prison or to another unit within the same prison—and the family has not yet been notified.
- The prisoner may be on temporary disciplinary restriction.
- The child's letter never made it to the imprisoned parent.
- The parent's letter got waylaid or lost in the mail.
- The parent feels too embarrassed to write.
- The parent lacks supplies to write (stationery, stamps, etc.).
- The parent doesn't understand how important it is for the child to receive a response.

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If the parent has not responded, here are some ways you might help the child:

- Talk through with the child some possible reasons for the lack of response (above). Help the child avoid jumping to conclusions that the parent just did not want to write back.
- Encourage the child to write again. It's OK to say in the next letter something like: "I haven't heard back from you, and I would really like you to write to me."
- If you are the child's caregiver, you might write to the incarcerated parent yourself. Let him or her know how important it is to the child to hear back from the parent.
- You may also want to call the prison, to see if there is some other reason you have gotten no response (lockdown, transfer, etc.).
- If the lack of response continues, encourage the child to talk about his or her feelings. Try not to put down the incarcerated parent, but do not make unrealistic excuses or promises about the parent either. (Do not say, for example: "Oh, I'm sure Daddy wants to write to you. I'm sure the letter is in the mail." You don't know if these things are true.) Let the child know that it is up to him or her to decide to continue writing or not. Be sure to support the child's decision.

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