**RAISING CHILDREN WITH A PARENT IN PRISON**

Helpful Suggestions for Caregivers

**Keeping Your Family Connected**

As a caregiver, you know the traumatic and emotional impact on the rest of the family when a parent goes to prison. Not only is it difficult for the children, it can also be overwhelming for those of you left to care for the children.

You might have to work more hours, change residences, make more sacrifices, and struggle with feelings of anger, hurt, and resentment. You may not want to keep the family connected yet you want to do what’s best for the children. And they need the loving support of their parents – even a parent behind bars. Children want to know they’re not forgotten – because they haven’t forgotten their parents.

Building a meaningful, positive connection between your children and the incarcerated parent may not be easy *but it is possible*. And your efforts could encourage a supportive relationship that benefits everyone in the family.

*Though not always suitable, in most cases children want to have some contact with the parents in prison. The following steps may help you build that bridge*.

**10 WAYS TO KEEP YOUR FAMILY CONNECTED**

**1. Keep the prisoner parent informed of experiences important to the children.**

Earning an A on a big test. Scoring a run in a baseball game. Winning an award. By sharing these accomplishments with the parent, he or she can celebrate with the child. It’s also helpful to keep the parent informed about a child’s significant behaviors – whether positive, like making a new friend; or troubling, like becoming more withdrawn. It’s not possible to share every detail, but staying in touch this way will allow the incarcerated parent and the children to feel more connected.

**2. Show respect for the incarcerated parent.**

Regardless of your personal feelings toward the incarcerated parent, it’s best to act and speak respectfully in front of the children. Insulting or criticizing the parent will only add to their stress and confusion. Instead of condemning the parent, speak honestly about how he or she made some wrong choices and is now facing the consequences. Use this example to reinforce the importance of making good decisions.

**3. Encourage contact between the incarcerated parent and the children.**

Whenever you can accept a phone call, allow time for the children to talk with their parent. If you know when he or she plans to call, help the children prepare by choosing one thing to talk about beforehand, so they don’t ramble on or clam up. Also encourage and help the children to write letters or draw pictures – these mean so much to the parent in prison! You may want to send photographs. Contact the prison to find out what you’re allowed to send.

**4. Respect the children’s feelings.**

This means being honest with the children about where their parent is. You’re not protecting the children by telling them their parent is away on a business trip or in the hospital or giving them some other story. If they find out the truth from another source (a careless neighbor, a newspaper article, a friend, etc.), they could be very angry and have trouble ever trusting you again. You don’t have to go into all the details. In words appropriate to their age and level of understanding, explain that their parent made some mistakes and is now paying the consequences. Encourage the children to talk about their feelings and let them know that any feeling they have is natural. Remind them that it is not their fault that Mom or Dad is in prison. And just because the parent did something wrong, it doesn’t mean that he or she no longer cares about the family.

**5. Explore programs in the prison that help prisoners build relationship with their children.**

In some prisons, parents can send their children a recording of themselves reading a children’s book. Some prisons allow special camps where children come into prison for a day of activities with their parents. Check with prison officials or the prison chaplain to find out what programs are available – and encourage the parent and children to get involved.

**6. If they want to go, take the children to visit their parent in prison.**

First, prepare the children for what prison might be like – going through security clearance, sitting in a visiting room, seeing their parent in prison clothes, etc. As with phone calls, you might help the children come up with some ideas of what to talk about. And be prepared to help them through the pain of saying goodbye to their parent after the visit is over. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. Consider carpooling with other family members of other prisoners. Traveling together can save money and allows you to meet others who share your experience and concerns.

**7. Lean on God for strength and support.**

Jesus Christ came to earth and died on our behalf so that we could have a personal relationship with God. He wants to walk with you through this time. Be honest with God about your feelings. Tell Him about your fears and needs. Take time to read passages of the Bible daily – it is filled with promises that He will take care of you, guide you and never abandon you. As you look to God for His direction and provision, the children in your care will learn that they, too, can trust in Jesus to be there for them in their time of need.

**8. During prison visits, discuss how the incarcerated parent can prepare for life after prison.**

Planning ahead will help both of you gain more confidence about the future. Discuss what kind of educational, vocational, and pre-release classes are available in prison. Encourage the prisoners to look into Prison Fellowship or other groups that offer programs at that prison. Naturally, when the incarcerated parent gets out of prison, the whole family with have some adjustments to make. Those adjustments will be easier if you can get some goals together and work on ways to reach these goals.

**9. Take care of your own health.**

Your physical, mental, and spiritual health are important because the children in your care are depending on you. Eat nutritious foods and get enough exercise and rest to stay healthy and alert. Stay in touch with positive, caring friends who will encourage you.

**10. Remember, you’re not alone**.

You may feel like it sometimes, but you do not have to do this alone. There are wonderful programs and resources to help you meet the needs of your children – as well as some of your own. Do some research to find out which churches or civic groups in your area offer after-school activities for children and teens. Look for a mentoring program that could pair your child with a same-sex adult to be a friend and coach. Discover which local groups (hospitals, community colleges, public health services, faith-based groups) offer parenting classes that would be helpful to you. The people providing these services understand your needs and are ready to support you and the incarcerated parent in raising healthy, happy children.

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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 parent.

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