



Families and children have unique needs when a parent is incarcerated. When this happens, a family gets involved with the justice system in stages. This guide is the third in a series of three guides that cover a family's journey as the family navigates the justice system and copes with a loved one's involvement in the system.

- Arrest (Guide 1),
- Jail Time/Detention (Guide 1),
- Hearing/Trial (Guide 1),
- Sentencing (Guide 1),
- Incarceration (Guide 2)
- **Reentry**

For this guide, the federal Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs draws on the work of the National Institute of Corrections to define **reentry** as "The transition of individuals from prisons or jails back into the community."

The questions and tips in this guide are designed to help families care for the children of incarcerated parents.

These questions and tips about **reentry** will promote a family's ability to keep and strengthen communication and relationships, manage stress and emotions, and prioritize the caregiver's

### THREE-WAY LINES OF COMMUNICATION: Facility or Probation or Parole Staff—Incarcerated Parent—Family

Successful reentry involves three key parties—**facility or probation or parole staff**, the **incarcerated parent**, and the **family**. Together, these parties contribute to the success of improving communication, building and maintaining parent-child relationships, and promoting quality caregiver self-care and care for the children of the incarcerated parent.



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The following is an example of how all three parties can work well together:

- The **facility or probation or parole staff** offers effective programming to prepare the parent for returning to family and community life.
- The **parent** actively participates in and completes these programs.
- The **family** prepares the children for the parent's return to the home and community.

The **facility or probation or parole staff** and **family** help the **parent** find a job after release, possibly in an area of interest using job skills the parent learned during incarceration.



self-care and care for the children. Many of the concepts and tips are informed by listening sessions with incarcerated parents and youth who have or have had an incarcerated parent: <https://youth.gov/coip/listening-session>.

Getting ready for reentry begins the first day of incarceration but intensifies the closer the incarcerated parent gets to release. When planning for reentry, the parent and family members should start to think about the parent finding a job, securing housing, resuming family roles and responsibilities, and rejoining the community.

The goal of reentry planning is to increase the likelihood that the parent will have a successful and smooth transition back into family and community life. If the children, caregiver, and incarcerated parent maintain a relationship (through letter writing, phone calls, visits) during the incarceration stage, barriers to reentry can be more easily overcome.

As you plan for the parent's reentry, think about how the children may have been affected by their parent's incarceration. Consider the following factors:

- Children's ages
- Whether the children witnessed the arrest
- Ways the family was disrupted or impacted (in the short and long term)
- Whether community supports have helped the family overcome difficulties

## Questions, by Age Group

Children will likely have a lot of questions about the incarcerated parent returning home. The following are some questions you may hear. Be sure to let children know it is okay to ask questions and that you may not have all the answers, but you will try to find out or help them figure it out. Ask follow-up questions to make sure you understand what they're asking. Try to answer without judgment or negativity. For all ages, a helpful conversation starter is to ask the children how they feel about seeing the parent again.

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### Children 0–6 Years Old

1. Is Mom going to play with me when she gets home?
2. Who will tuck me in at bedtime once Daddy is back home?
3. Will you [caregiver] still live with me after Mommy gets home?

**Note:** For children 0–6, the parent may be a stranger. The children may be scared and not want to interact or live with the parent. Allow the children some time to get to know the parent. Try not to force interaction before the children are ready. As mentioned in the tips, find activities that may help with bonding.

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### Children 7–12 Years Old

1. Why is Mom spending so much time in her room instead of with me? Isn't Mom glad to be back home with us?
2. How is Dad getting home? Will the police be coming to the house again, just like they did when they took Dad away? Or do we have to pick Dad up at the prison where we've gone to visit him?
3. Dad hasn't been here for me. What are we supposed to talk about?
4. Is Dad going to come to my baseball game?
5. Mom is getting out of prison. But why aren't we living with her?



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### Youth 13–18 Years Old

1. Dad has not been around for a long time, and I have only seen him on short visits. How am I supposed to know what to say or do or how to act around Dad?
2. Why do I have to keep doing these chores while Mom is in her room listening to music to relax? I want to relax too!
3. With Mom getting out of prison, will I have to change schools?
4. Why do I have to do what Dad tells me to do? He hasn't been around for years.
5. I'm happy here with Grandma. This is where my friends are, and I feel safe here. Why do I have to go and live with Mom?

**Note:** Children 7–12 years old and youth 13–18 years old might act out instead of asking questions. For example, they may go to their rooms or to a friend's house to avoid a situation or deal with a parent who is back in their lives. Allow children time and space to get comfortable with their parent. Talk about and set expectations for mutual respect.

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### Young Adults 19–25 Years Old

1. I have been working and giving you money to help take care of us. But, when Mom gets out of prison, will she get a job and contribute to the family? Will I have to keep working?
2. With Dad coming home, where will everyone sleep? Should I find another place to live?
3. Do you think Dad will be able to stay out of trouble?
4. Do you think Mom will like my boyfriend? When should I introduce him to her, and how should I do it?

**Note:** Young people 19–25 years old may appear to be unconcerned by the parent's planned arrival home; however, they may have real concerns and questions that they either do not know how to express or that they may feel awkward about asking. Let them know it is okay to ask questions. As with younger children, talk about and set expectations for mutual respect.

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## Tips

**These tips are suggestions.** Not every tip is right for every family. You can decide which tips you like and which tips meet the unique needs of your situation. Choose the tips that are the right fit for the children, the family, *and* the incarcerated parent.

### Tips for Before Reentry: The Planning Phase

- Consider having a counselor assess the children to determine if re-establishing a relationship with the parent will impact their well-being. A counselor may be available through your case manager, the children's school, the local mental health center, advocacy organizations, or a community-based organization.
- Remind children that their parent may need some private time or space to get used to being back home. However, this doesn't mean the parent loves the children any less or is less interested in them.
- For some children, after the parent went to prison, the parent has not only been physically absent but may also have been emotionally and psychologically absent. Children will need time to get to know their parent again, even for families who have worked hard to build and maintain relationships during the incarceration.
- Be prepared to talk with children about having the parent back in the home. This talk is especially important if children haven't seen the parent since the time of arrest. Consider having more



support at the home when the parent walks through the door. Such support can come from a trusted adult or a counselor. You and the children can also prepare for the parent's return home by talking with a counselor in advance.

- As a condition of parole, courts may decide that the parent cannot move back into the home or may see the children only when another caregiver is present. If possible, talk with a counselor about how best to prepare children for this situation.
- The released parent may face a lot of barriers during reentry. Barriers may include finding employment and housing, handling peer pressure, and adjusting to life after a long time away from loved ones. To help relieve stress on the parent, children, and other family members, discuss with everyone how they can support each other and help the parent get back to everyday life.
- Help children understand the value of the police and the legal system; its purpose is more than just the reason the parent was separated from the family; the system is in place to keep communities safe.
- The parent may lose or be in danger of losing parental rights to the children. This means the children may be in the foster care system or may be headed there. Work with the foster care system to determine strategic next steps to get the family back together (see [reunification guide](#)).
- Consider planning some family activities to promote a successful reentry for the parent. For example, if your children are ready and have expressed some interest, you might encourage them to make welcome banners and initiate contact by asking the parent to watch a TV show, read a book, or play a game. It is important to prepare the children for possible parent reactions, including not being interested.
- Prepare children for establishing or building an emotional relationship with the parent. This may be difficult if the relationship never existed in the first place or was lacking in recent years. Seek the help of a counselor to build the relationship.
- Visit and communicate with the parent as often as possible during the final 6 months of incarceration. Prepare children to talk with the parent about what they will do when the parent returns home. Through these talks, the parent can learn more about the children, for example, likes and dislikes.
- Before release, share with the parent information about the children's habits, likes and dislikes, fears, and anxieties. Examples include the children's favorite stuffed animals and the foods they like most and least.
- Encourage the parent, caregiver, and family members to take part in training programs designed to prepare the parent for reentry.
- Work with the parole office, facility, and parent to develop a structured plan regarding opportunities after reentry and challenges to reentry. Some facilities have their own reentry tip sheets and materials available. You can also mention the challenges to reentry in the family session that takes place prior to release and ask to be a member of the reentry team if the facility creates a reentry plan.



## Tips for After Reentry: The Adjustment Phase

- Understand that, after release, the incarcerated parent will need help adjusting to most aspects of family life. Family life is less structured than life in facility settings. Children will also have to adjust to having the parent around the home.
- The family system, such as roles and responsibility, bonds, and relationships, may have changed a lot while the parent was incarcerated. As a result, the parent may feel disconnected for not having much, if any, influence on these changes.
- Relationships in and outside the home may have changed or may be new since the parent was incarcerated. Discuss those relationships with the parent, especially any concerns the parent has with the children's other parent or caregiver. Also talk about the impact of these relationships on guidelines for visits and involvement in decision making.
- Remember that children may struggle with stress or feelings of shame over the social stigma of having an incarcerated parent. These feelings may get worse for children when the parent returns home or to the community.
- Help children answer questions their peers may ask about the parent returning home. Children may have to face questions or comments such as the following: "So, where has your dad been all this time?" "This is the first time I've seen your mother." "Who was that sitting with your family at the basketball game?"
- Seek out social service agencies, advocacy groups, and the faith-based community to help children adjust to the return of an incarcerated parent.
- Ask extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents, to be a resource for children as they adjust to having the parent back in the home.
- For homes with multiple children, create special time for each child to spend with the parent. Activities should be of interest to the child and can happen at or away from home.
- Help children accept and adjust to changes that must occur when the parent returns home. For example, a child may have to bunk with a sibling or change where he or she sits for meals.
- Help children through daily routines that may be different after the parent arrives home, for example, changes related to school homework, bedtimes, and discipline.
- Seek out social service agencies that provide classes or sessions on improving the bond between the parent and children.
- If the current caregiver will no longer be the primary caregiver, allow some overlap in time between the caregiver leaving the home and the parent taking over.

**Extra Resource:** This tip sheet was written **BY** youth who have or have had incarcerated parents **FOR** youth who have incarcerated parents: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/children-of-incarcerated-parents/listening-sessions/tip-sheet-for-youth-coip>



## Resources for Caregivers: Talking to Children

Advice for caregivers: <http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/cipl202-questionsfromcaregivers.pdf>  
<https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/CIPL-204.pdf>

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

Materials from the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated: <http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/resources/library/children-of-prisoners-library/>

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 youth.gov on Tools, Guides, and Resources for Parents and Caregivers: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/children-of-incarcerated-parents/tools-guides-resources>

Sesame Street's "Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration": <http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/incarceration>