

When A Parent Is Incarcerated

Over one million American children have a mother or father in prison, and seven million have a parent or close relative on probation or parole. In Pennsylvania, over half of all inmates have two or more children under the age of 18. The effects of your incarceration on your family can be serious and long-term, but open, honest, communication can go a long way to helping the situation. We have spoken with moms and dads who have spent significant periods of time away from their children due to incarceration. Here's what they have to say.

▶ **Some of the most loving parents can be found in prisons.** Many incarcerated parents have the same dreams for their children as other parents in the community. They have the same struggles and questions about parenting.

▶ **There may be shame and anger in your family.** Incarceration and shortcomings can create tension and strain within the family system. The impact of consequences is felt by those who love you most- financially, socially, and emotionally. It is normal for you to experience guilt about these effects on relationships with loved ones.

▶ **You may not know what being a parent means.** Some incarcerated parents did not have healthy relationships with their own parents. If your parents were absent for any reason- it can be difficult to know what parenting looks and feels like. Begin to take steps toward being the person you needed when you were young- as you invest in your role as a parent.

▶ **Be honest.** Admitting mistakes and taking ownership of past decision making can become a pathway to change. Be realistic with yourself and others about the changes you

would like to make and use accountability to put these changes into action with support from those who can help you.

▶ **Keep it real, accept reality.** Reputation is what we did and what others have seen of us. Character is our behavior when no one is watching. Placing blame on circumstances or holding grudges toward the criminal justice system or other people is only a negative distraction from your own personal growth. Focus on improving your personal character, life, and parenting goals.

▶ **Being in prison doesn't mean you stop being a parent.** Here are some ways you can maintain a relationship or begin to build a connection with your children.

- ▶ Work on your relationship with your child's caretakers
- ▶ Write letters and cards to your child and call when possible
- ▶ Provide reassurance when and where possible to and for your child
- ▶ Document your parenting efforts even during incarceration
- ▶ Ask for help, learn more about parenting, and seek support and learning opportunities

All parents need and deserve support and access to resources. We recommend these valuable outlets for families who have been impacted by incarceration. For more information on parental rights, families coping with incarceration, support for fathers, and services available to child and caregivers visit these sites:

https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/parental_incarceration.pdf

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/incarceration/>

<https://www.fatherhood.gov/content/supporting-fathers-and-families-impacted-incarceration>

<http://jsg.legis.state.pa.us/resources/documents/ftp/documents/children%20of%20incarcerated%20parents.pdf>