

Supporting your child when a parent is in jail



In Australia, approximately 50% of all prisoners are parents. This leaves many, many children who are affected by their parent being incarcerated. Of course the imprisonment of the child's parent not only affects just the child, but also affects the extended family as a whole.

Telling your child about their parent being in jail

It can be difficult to know how to tell your child that their parent has gone to jail. Some people choose not to tell their child as they feel that the child may not be able to cope with this type of news. In fact, it is usually best to be open and honest with your child as early as you can. Children are very sensitive to what is happening around them and they will often pick up that the adults that are caring for them are stressed or upset. They may also overhear conversations about their parents situation, which can be especially difficult if they hear this from someone outside the family. Not telling your child that their parent has gone to prison can lead to them feeling more worried about their parent as they are likely to notice their absence but not understand what has happened to them. Providing children with simple explanations about what has happened, shows them that the adults around them can be trusted to tell them the truth and look after them. Giving them small, honest bits of news such as, "Daddy did the wrong thing and broke the law and has had to go to jail for a little while" can be helpful. You will also need to prepare yourself to answer many questions from your child, or your child asking you to give them the

same information over and over again, as they try to come to terms with and understand the information. These questions may come out in the following days, but also in the following weeks and months. It can be helpful asking a trusted family friend to talk to your child about this as well.

The stress and impact of having a parent in prison

There are many stressors that may impact on a family when someone goes to jail, especially if the person had been part of the child's household before they went to jail. Some of these stressors include:

- » Financial stressors if the person provided financial support for the family. This can also lead to problems with housing.
- » Break-up of the household. Children may need to move house or live with other relatives and may be separated from parents, carers and siblings. This is frequently the case when it is the child's mother who has to go to jail.
- » Lack of social support from other friends and family.

Emotionally children and young people may feel:

- » Grief that they no longer have that parent around.
- » Separation anxiety, especially if they are feeling worried about what is happening to the other parent.
- » Anxiety around what will happen to them and their family.

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- » Shame and embarrassment, especially around friends and peers at school.

These stressors and emotional difficulties that children and young people face are also likely to have a negative effect on how your child is able to cope at school. It can really help to be open with the school about your family's situation, so that the school is also able to give your child some support. The more support that your child is able to get from home, other trusted adults and school, the more likely it is that they will be able to cope a little bit better. Some of the ways that your child may be affected at school includes:

- » Difficulties concentrating or paying attention in class as they are feeling worried or anxious.
- » Difficulties controlling their emotions as they are feeling very stressed or worried. This can lead to them having some conflict with their friends or with teachers.
- » Missing school due to feeling overwhelmed and as though school is not a priority for them at the moment.
- » Bullying from other children who know about their situation.
- » Social withdrawal and isolation from other kids at school.

Continuing on with life with a parent in jail

One way that you can really provide support to your child is to continue on, as best you can, with the normal family routines and rituals. Children and young people feel safe when they can follow their normal, everyday routines. This includes going to school, attending any other activities outside or school time, eating regular meals, spending time together as a family and seeing other extended families and friends.

Other ways that you can support your child include:

- » Allow them to ask questions and provide simple, clear and honest answers.
- » Be there for them.
- » Assure them that it is not their fault that their parent has gone to jail.
- » Acknowledge their feelings and let them know that their bad feelings may be causing changes in the ways they would normally behave.
- » Make sure that they feel valued and cared for.
- » Make sure that they are supported at school and at home.
- » Help them to understand that life will go on and that they will get through this time.
- » Seek help and support from others, including health professionals and counselors, if it is needed.

You will also need to decide whether your children will visit their parent who is in jail. This will be a personal decision for you, your child and their incarcerated parent to make about what is appropriate. Adolescents may refuse to visit their parent in jail as a way of taking some control over the situation and exerting their independence. This is something that you can discuss with them. There is little evidence available that tells us whether children visiting their parent in jail is either helpful or harmful to the child. There are support organizations that can help you with some of these decisions. They are listed at the end of this tipsheet.

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Looking after yourself

As the primary parent or carer, your child will be relying a lot of you for emotional support and stability. It is important for you to recognize stressors and how they are impacting on you and to make sure that you seek help if you need it. It is only by looking after yourself that you will be able to provide the strength and support your children need.

Over time, most children and young people will be resilient to the adversities that they face in their life. Surrounding children with adults who are positive, protective and nurturing is the best way to help them through tough times.

For more information:

SHINE for Kids

www.shineforkids.org.au

The Families Handbook – NSW Corrective Services

www.correctiveservices.nsw.gov.au

Trauma & Grief Network

www.tgn.anu.edu.au

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