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CAREGIVER GUIDE



PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS // BUILDING FAMILY BRIDGES

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ABOUT THE BUILDING FAMILY BRIDGES PROJECT



A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE GRANT

The Building Family Bridges project was initially funded by a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The project's primary purpose is to strengthen relationships between incarcerated parents and their children, and reduce the rate of recidivism overall. In 2022, Virginia's reported recidivism rate of 22.3% ranked the second lowest three-year re-incarceration rate among the 42 states that report this rate for State Responsible inmates. This marks the lowest rate for Virginia in over 20 years.

VADOC Recidivism, VADOC Research-Evaluation Unit, March 2022; FY2017 cohort

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Caregiver Guide is to help new caregivers of children of incarcerated parents. Caregivers can include, but are not limited to, biological parents, grandparents, foster parents, and family members. The Caregiver Guide will help new caregivers maneuver the difficulties of caring for a child with an incarcerated parent.

With a 500% increase in incarceration over the past 40 years, many lives have been affected. Nearly two million children across the country have an incarcerated parent. While this number is staggering, hopefully, it is reassuring that you, as the caregiver, are not alone.

Utilizing this guide, you will learn why communication is important and some examples of communication. You will also grasp how to help the child cope in different situations and how to prepare the child for visitation. While this was written for caregivers of children of incarcerated parents, the Caregiver Guide can also be beneficial for any parent or family member.

OUR GOALS

The goal of this Caregiver Guide is to improve relationships between the caregiver, the child and the incarcerated parent through effective communication throughout the period of incarceration. The guide can also assist the caregiver and child to navigate emotions during a stressful time. Maintaining positive parental relationships throughout the child's lifetime can be a critical element of their development





CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS' BILL OF RIGHTS*

I HAVE THE RIGHT....

1. To be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.
2. To be heard when decisions are made about me.
3. To be considered when decisions are made about me.
4. To be well cared for in my parent's absence.
5. To speak with, see, and touch my parent.
6. To support as I face my parent's incarceration.
7. Not to be judged, blamed, or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.
8. To a lifelong relationship with my parent.

Developed by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership 2005.
www.sfcipp.org

EMPATHY

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Empathy is a skill that is not so easily mastered but should be incorporated into your daily lives.

What is empathy, you ask? Great question! Empathy is the effort to recognize, understand, and share another person's thoughts and experiences. Establishing empathy is essential for building and maintaining relationships, especially during traumatic times or occasions. Empathy is the ability to enter a person's world and be sensitive, moment by moment, to the feelings flowing through the person. Being empathetic helps an individual become aware of a person's feelings and the experiences that caused those emotions. Empathy is a great skill that should be utilized more, especially by new caregivers of children of incarcerated parents. When a child loses a parent to the criminal justice system, they experience something extremely traumatic. If the caregiver can utilize empathy to understand why a child might react in a certain way, the child may recognize the emotions themselves.

Developing Empathy

Empathy allows for the caregiver to understand the child's reactions to certain situations and intervene when needed. Empathy is easy to utilize for people like ourselves, but empathy is harder to use when people are different from us. The caregiver should utilize empathy even if we understand what a child is feeling or do not. Empathy helps us connect and help others, even if we do not entirely understand why someone feels a certain way. As caregivers, empathy should be a prioritized skill to learn. A way to develop or increase empathy is by understanding an individual by looking at the world from their eyes. Below are some questions to ask yourself to help improve your empathy.

“What happened to this person?”

“Why are they feeling this way?”

“How can I best help this person?”

“What does this person need?”

Empathy In Relationships

With empathy, a person takes on their interpretation of another person's desires, pain, and reasons for seeking help. When developing empathy in a relationship, the caregiver or incarcerated parent should consider what the other individual is going through. The caregiver should recognize that the incarcerated parent feels a loss of self from family and the society they once knew. The incarcerated parent should realize that the caregiver might be feeling overwhelmed and alone. Using empathy, both the incarcerated parent and the caregiver can help the child respond to their current feelings or emotions. Empathy is a great skill to work on, especially in developing and maintaining relationships.

(Elliot et al., 2011)
(Pedersen et al., 2008)(Psychology Today)

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

THIS SECTION EXPLAINS WHY COMMUNICATION IS IMPORTANT AND PROVIDES SOME EXAMPLES.

Communication is a core foundation for building and maintaining healthy relationships. Communication allows family members to express their feelings, needs and wants with one another. Poor communication within the family can lead to confusion and toxic stress. Toxic stress releases hormones that cause changes to the brain and can ultimately affect a child's behavior in school and overall wellbeing. Maintaining positive communication between children and their incarcerated parent works to alleviate toxic stress.

Positive Communication can lead to:

- Maintaining a relationship with a parent in jail/prison
- Reduced stress on both the parent and child
- Alleviated stress for reunification
- Correcting false/frightening images
- Building trust
- Clarity and direction
- Preventing and resolving problems
- Increased engagement

Poor Communication can lead to:

- Misunderstandings
- Low morale
- Mistrust
- Isolation
- Behavior problems
- Difficulty at school
- Trouble building and maintaining relationships

Why is it important to maintain a relationship with the incarcerated parent?

For some incarcerated parents, prison can actually be an opportunity to become a better parent. The family maintaining a relationship with the incarcerated parent can also work as an incentive. While incarcerated, individuals are often given the chance to participate in parenting programs. Caregivers can suggest this option during visitation.

What to Look For When Child Confronts a New Stressor:

- Yelling/crying
- Difficulty sleeping
- Unusual clinging
- Eating more or less than usual
- Not smiling as often
- New fears

Continue on to the next section to learn more about how to communicate with your child exhibiting these changes.

(National Institute of Corrections)
(PCC)
(Sesame Street, 2016)



IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

Child to Caregiver Examples:

Depending on the age of the child, here are some ways you can answer the question:

“Why was my parent arrested?” or “Why is my parent in jail/prison?”

“Your parent has committed a crime and has to pay the consequences.”

“Did I do something wrong? or “Is there something wrong with me?”

“You did nothing wrong. The feelings you’re experiencing are normal, but it is not your fault. There is nothing wrong with you.”

“Is my dad/mom a bad person?” or “Am I a bad person?”

“Your parent made a mistake, but still has to pay the consequences. Just because your parent made a mistake doesn't make him/her a bad person or you one either.”

“Does my mom/dad still love me?”

“Your mom/dad will always love you. Just because they aren't here right now doesn't mean they stopped loving you.”

“Will my mom/dad be safe?”

“The people in charge are the ones who try to keep your parents safe during their time there.”

“When is my mom/dad coming home?”

“Certain crimes get certain lengths of time in prison/jail. Your parent should be home when you're ____ years old.”

“How will I talk to my mom/dad when I miss them?”

“There are several different ways to talk to your mom/dad. You can contact them through phone calls, letters, and video chats. Sometimes we can even visit in person.”

OPEN AND HONEST

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE CAREGIVER AND CHILD PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE OVERALL WELL-BEING OF THE CHILD.

HEALTHY

COMMUNICATION FROM CAREGIVER TO A CHILD CAN INCLUDE:

- Remaining honest with the child about parent’s incarceration
- Addressing child’s feelings of shame
- Addressing child’s feelings of guilt making sure to reiterate that their parent’s incarceration is not their fault

OPEN COMMUNICATION

FROM INCARCERATED PARENT TO A CHILD IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE:

- Incarcerated parents still play a vital role in the family system
- Caregivers play an important role in helping the child maintain a relationship with his/her incarcerated parent
- Maintaining a relationship between the incarcerated parent and the child can increase the child’s overall well-being

FEELINGS

THIS SECTION COVERS FEELINGS THAT CHILDREN MAY HAVE RELATED TO PARENTAL INCARCERATION.

Feelings of Children Related to Parental Incarceration and Release

Emotions are an important way of expressing our feelings. Without room to express our emotions, the feelings can feel trapped and suppressed. When we feel like our emotions are trapped, then we have trouble communicating and expressing them, which can just cause more trouble. Below is a list of emotions that the child of the incarcerated parent could be feeling and ways to address and cope with those emotions.

WORRY/GUILT

- If the child expresses feelings of worry or guilt, it means they are concerned for their incarcerated parent.
- The child will likely look for cues to ensure the parent is adjusting to jail/prison (TV or shows can intensify worry if the media portrays it negatively).
- The child may feel guilty and feel that their parent's incarceration is his/her fault. Sometimes feelings are subconscious and show up as fear and/or anger.

Coping with Worry/Guilt: If the child is worried about their incarcerated parent, it is likely because they love and care for their parent. It is important to reassure the child that their parent's incarceration is not their fault. If feeling worried about the parent's safety, then reassure the child that the correctional officers are doing their best they can to keep the parent safe.

FEAR

- Fear is often expressed in children when they are unable to express any other emotion. Instead of sharing their fears, the child may express fears such as being scared of the dark rather than expressing that they are fearful of being alone.

Coping with Fear: The first step would be recognizing when the child is feeling fearful or anxious. Next, the feelings of fear should be addressed and confronted to make sure the child feels safe and secure. Reassure the child that they will not be alone in the process.

CONFUSION

- Children are often not told the truth about parental incarceration. The lack of open communication can create confusion about the parent's incarceration and release. Children are suspicious of their parent's whereabouts during incarceration but are unable to ask his/her parent questions. However, once the parent returns home, they will likely be questioned by the child.

Coping with Confusion: Explaining the process regarding the parent's incarceration can help the child understand what is going on. Open communication can create a comfortable space for the child to ask questions when feeling confused or overwhelmed.

(Adalist-Estrin, 2004)

FEELINGS

ANGER

- Angry feelings often stem from feelings of confusion, fear, worry, frustration, disappointment, and resentment. Anger is an important feeling that should be expressed in a safe way.

Coping with Anger: The caregivers should address these primary feelings rather than solely addressing the angry outbursts. Ask the child why they are feeling angry and then have a conversation about it together. Confronting just the anger outburst can lead to suppression of the anger and cause more behavioral problems.



(Adalist-Estrin, 2004)

COPING STYLES

THIS SECTION REVIEWS WHAT COPING STRATEGIES ARE AND HOW THEY ARE USEFUL.

Coping Styles

A coping style is an adaptive method for a person to use when one is feeling an intense emotion. Coping methods allow for a person to confront an emotion in a safe, healthy manner. Coping styles are essential when encountering unknown or foreign feelings. Coping styles allow for family members to freely express and address their emotions. Coping styles provide a safe and healthy environment for communication within the family. There are different types of coping styles that differ with experiences.

Within coping styles, there are risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors can potentially create poor coping mechanisms, while protective factors lead to healthy coping skills. Coping styles are most effective with protective factors such as positive social engagement, positive peer relationships, loving caregiver or family member(s), mentorships, and extracurricular activities. Exposure to adaptive coping strategies is a protective factor against the trauma of having an incarcerated parent. Lastly, the availability of resources, both educational and emotional, can lead to a better livelihood for the child of an incarcerated parent.



BENEFITS OF MENTORSHIP(S) CAN INCLUDE:

- INCREASED POSITIVE ATTITUDE
- INCREASED SENSE OF WELL BEING
- IMPROVED SCHOOL PERFORMANCE
- IMPROVED SELF-CONFIDENCE
- INCREASED TRUST
- INCREASED LEARNING SKILLS
- POSITIVE COPING SKILLS

(Adalist-Estrin, 2004)
(The Children of Incarcerated Parents Library – The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated)
(Hutchinson), 2019)

DURING INCARCERATION: TYPES OF FAMILIES

There are different types of families during the incarceration period. These dynamics determine the types of coping styles utilized between the caregiver and the child. It is important to recognize your type of family dynamic to determine which coping style is most useful. The coping styles will help create a safe environment for open communication and a way for the child to process their feelings and emotions.

The Family on Hold:

The “Family on Hold” generally prioritize maintaining a relationship with the incarcerated parent through letters, video visits, phone calls, and in-person visits. This type of family has a desire to help the incarcerated parent stay connected to the family and outside world. The “Family on Hold” is usually able to remain positive even during a period of separation. However, family members put emotions on hold until the incarcerated parent is released from prison.

Coping Style:

It is important to address the needs and emotions immediately. When holding back feelings, suppression of those feelings can lead to distress. Focusing only on positive communication can lead to years of suppressed hurt and pain. It is important to allow the children to express their negative emotions in a safe space without the caregiver influencing those emotions or perceptions. Avoidance of the subject surrounding the parent’s incarceration can decrease the child’s ability to cope.

The Parallel Family:

The “Parallel Family” prefers continuing on as the arrest and incarceration didn’t happen. Life continues on. The “Parallel Family” keeps in touch by letters, calls and occasional visits with the incarcerated parent. The “Parallel Family” will confront their feelings and emotions after the incarcerated parent is released from prison. The “Parallel Family” will move on with their lives while the incarcerated parent is immobilized in prison or jail.

Coping Style:

The suppression of all emotions can be damaging for all family members and can lead to unhealthy coping behaviors later in life. Various problems that are common amongst this type of family can decrease a child’s ability to cope, including keeping parental imprisonment a secret from the child, avoidance of talking about parental imprisonment, lying, and minimizing the situation. It is important to remain open and honest with children about what is going on with their parent. It is also important for the child to express emotions related to their incarcerated parent and have a safe space to do so.

(Adalist-Estrin, 2004)

(The Children of Incarcerated Parents Library – The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated)

DURING INCARCERATION: TYPES OF FAMILIES

The Estranged Family:

The “Estranged Family” does not remain in contact with an incarcerated parent and generally ends up cutting the incarcerated family member off completely.

Coping Style:

While it is understandable to want to cease communication with the incarcerated parent due to hurt and pain, open and free communication between the child and the incarcerated parent is vital. If the child is unable to confront his/her emotions, the child may continue to suppress those feelings. Continuous suppression can lead to poor coping skills and behavior problems. Lack of communication with the incarcerated parent can lead to negative feelings about the incarcerated parent. A benefit of frequent contact with the incarcerated parent is increased self-esteem.

The Turbulent Family:

The “Turbulent Family” represents chaos. Negative feelings are expressed in ways that feel out of control. The relationship dynamics represent poor relationship skills. The contact between caregiver and incarcerated parent can be hurtful and emotionally straining. The “Turbulent Family” will remain in contact with the incarcerated parent, but not in a healthy way with safe, open communication.

Coping Style:

When painful feelings are present, it is important for the child to be able to express their emotions. It is the responsibility of the caregiver to provide a safe space for the child to communicate. In the “Turbulent Family” high-stress situations can occur. If the child feels scared or nervous to share his/her feelings, the child can feel large amounts of stress. If the tensions between caregiver and incarcerated parent are high, it can be useful to look from an outside perspective when trying to make important decisions for the child. Also, it is important not to push personal thoughts about the incarcerated parent onto the child. Let the child develop their own feelings about the incarcerated parent without influence from the caregiver.

It is important to consider that while these coping mechanisms provide a guide for the caregiver, this Caregiver Guide does not replace the benefits of seeing a therapist, counselor, social worker, or psychologist. **For more information regarding a therapist, counselor, social worker, or psychologist, use the search engine at [Psychology Today](#) to find help by location, insurance type, and availability.**

For more information about coping styles, please visit:

[Sesame Street Resources](#)

(Adalist-Estrin, 2004)

(The Children of Incarcerated Parents Library – The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated)

(Poehlmann et al., 2010)

PREPARATION FOR VISITATION

THIS SECTION REVIEWS HOW TO PREPARE FOR VISITATION.

Several studies show positive effects of the child maintaining relationships with the incarcerated parent. Visitation is an important component in maintaining healthy relationships between the child and incarcerated parent. Visitation allows for the incarcerated parent to become more involved in the child's life. Visitation creates more opportunities for the child to address scary feelings and fearful expectations. Visits can correct frightening images the child may have of the incarcerated parent and prison. Last, but not least, visitation can help correct poor behavior problems the child might possess since the parent has been incarcerated.

The child's first visit should focus on the child. Prior to the first visit, the caregiver should make sure the child is prepared for seeing the incarcerated parent for the first time. There are several steps to ensure that the child feels ready to see the incarcerated parent with minimal trauma. The following steps should be reviewed with the caregiver prior to the first visit.

1. KNOW THE RULES

Knowing the rules is an important first step to prepare for the visit with an incarcerated parent. Each facility (prison or jail) has its own set of rules and expectations during visitations. The caregiver should make himself/herself aware of these rules and expectations prior to the visit to make sure the visit goes as smoothly as possible. Preparing ahead of time can help the child feel ready to see the incarcerated parent in a new and scary environment; the child needs to know what to expect when visiting the parent for the first time.

Important aspects the caregiver should tell the child:

- How long the ride will be,
- What the correctional officers will look like,
- The appearance of the incarcerated parent,
- The search process, and
- Other guidelines to adhere to.

GOING TO PRISON FOR THE FIRST TIME IS A SCARY EXPERIENCE FOR A CHILD, NO MATTER THE AGE. THE MORE PREPARED A CAREGIVER IS, THE MORE THE CAREGIVER CAN EASE THE EXPERIENCE FOR THE CHILD.

PREPARATION FOR VISITATION

2. KNOW THE CHILD

Knowing how the child is will be important to take into consideration when planning for the initial visit and all the visits following. “Knowing the child” means that the caregiver should be aware of the length of time the child is able to sit for, the length of time it takes the child to warm up to new environments and situations, level of distraction, level of anxiety, etc. Having the incarcerated parent write to the child to inform them about what it will be like when they visit is another method to help prepare the child, especially if their anxiety is high.

3. PLAN TO TALK

An important aspect of the visitation process is preparing the child for the visit. Caregivers are encouraged to share as much information as possible with the child regarding what the visit will be like and discouraged to hide information from the child. Allow opportunities for the child to express how life is going on the outside; many children fear that talking about life on the outside could be damaging to the incarcerated parent. Everyday life is okay to talk about because it is the reality. Avoiding the reality of life can be damaging to the caregiver, child, and incarcerated parent. If talking to the child becomes too difficult, meaning the child is not expressing his/her emotions or feelings, then therapy and professional help might benefit both the child and caregiver.

4. REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

It is not uncommon for children to remain guarded around the subject of parental incarceration and visitation. Family coping styles can help predict how the child may feel regarding visiting during their parent’s incarceration; however, every child responds differently and requires a unique response. The caregiver should be aware that the initial visit may not go as smoothly as planned or hoped, but it is also important to remember that is okay. Preparing for visitation can help the process go as smoothly as possible.



(The Children of Incarcerated Parents Library – The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated)

CHILD CHECK-LIST FOR VISITATION

IF IT IS THE FIRST TIME THE CHILD IS VISITING THEIR INCARCERATED PARENT, THE VISIT SHOULD BE FOCUSED AROUND THE CHILD AND ANYTHING THAT STRAYS AWAY FROM THE CHILD AS THE FOCAL POINT SHOULD BE AVOIDED. IF POSSIBLE, IT CAN BE HELPFUL FOR THE CAREGIVER TO VISIT THE FACILITY ALONE BEFORE BRINGING THE CHILD IN ORDER TO BEST PREPARE THE CHILD.

- Before visiting, make calls to confirm that the incarcerated parent is in the right facility that you are planning to visit.
- Call the facility to ensure the time frame that visiting is allowed.
- Double-check to ensure you are following visitation guidelines. This includes making sure you or the child has any weapons, drugs, vitamins, or metal objects. Make sure you pay close attention to the guidelines behind appropriate attire and additional objects allowed or prohibited.
- Arrive early at the facility early.
- Make sure the child is fed before entering the facility. The facility does not allow individuals to bring food inside. There is the potential that there are vending machines inside, but there is a risk that the machine may be broken or empty.
- Limit the child's stress as much as possible. For example, if a correctional officer requests something that does not seem to make sense, simply follow along with these requests. However, if you feel as though you are being mistreated, record the officer's name, the date, and the incident and make a report after you leave the visit.
- Talk to the incarcerated parent before the visit about ensuring that the focal point of the visit will be the child. You can suggest topics of conversation that the incarcerated parent will bring up during the visit. If you are unable to visit the incarcerated parent in person before the visit with the child, talk over the phone about what to expect within the facility, such as specific rules and guidelines.
- Think of imaginary games or methods to keep the child amused while in the waiting room. Games like "I-Spy" allow the child to focus on finding items around the area they are in.

VISITATION: COMMUNICATION METHODS

THIS SECTION DISCUSSES THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF COMMUNICATION FOR VISITATION.

Benefits of Maintaining Communication

Maintaining a parent-child relationship is a crucial aspect of a child's development. Although the incarceration of a parent can be a traumatic and stressful experience for the child, regular methods of communication can help the child adjust and can increase their overall well-being. Even if in-person visitation is not possible, letter writing, telephone calls, and video visitation is still highly effective and can sustain the parent-child relationship.

Methods of Communication include:

- In-Person Visitation
- Video Visitation
- Telephone
- Mail

IN-PERSON VISITATION

In-person visitation is the most preferred method of communication between family members. Communication is already difficult with the limitations of incarceration. For some families, the incarceration period may be the first time that an incarcerated parent might listen or speak to the child. While the conversations might be regulated or limited in prisons/jails, communication is still vital to ensure the child knows he/she is supported and loved. In-person visitation gives opportunities for the child to tell the incarcerated parent about what is happening in his/her life. While in-person visitation can be scary and intimidating, they allow for relationships to be developed and maintained during the incarceration period.

VIDEO VISTATION

There are limited options for the incarcerated parent and the child to communicate. One under-utilized method of communication is video visitation. Video visitation, while not the same as in-person, allows opportunities for the child to update the incarcerated parent on their life and vice versa with the incarcerated parent. Through video visitation, a child can tell the incarcerated parent what is happening in his/her life including at school, at home, etc. Video visitation offers a wonderful opportunity for families to stay connected and updated on what is going on in each other's lives.

At times, in-person visitation may be limited. Through certain programs and organizations like [Assisting Families of Inmates \(AFOI\)](#), as a family member of an incarcerated parent, you can meet with your loved ones remotely while reducing the cost of traveling long distances. For more information regarding video visitation, please visit the [Virginia Department of Corrections](#) or AFOI website(s).

(VADOC) (AFOI)

VISITATION: COMMUNICATION METHODS

TELEPHONE

Telephone calls can be another effective method of communication. Despite children, preteens, and teens' ability to stay on their devices for long periods of time, holding a conversation over the phone can sometimes be difficult, and finding topics of discussion can be challenging. Incarcerated parents should try to remember that listening to their child is more important than asking several questions in order to keep the conversation going. Parents can prepare for phone calls with their children by assembling a few open-ended questions and allowing room for the child to do most of the chatting. It is important to try to not get angry at the child if they want to end a phone conversation early because they are likely finding a way to have control over a situation.

MAIL OR LETTER-WRITING

Letter writing has various benefits when used as a method of communication between the child and incarcerated parent. Letter writing can provide a space for both children and incarcerated parent to share their feelings openly and honestly, including any feelings of anger or resentment. Sharing negative feelings with one another can allow for a more positive relationship to develop in the future. Both the incarcerated parent and child can express their affection through letter writing. If children are too young to write, the caregiver can assist the child. The caregiver may also want to assist the child if they are having difficulty putting negative emotions, such as abandonment, into words.

E-MAIL

E-mail is a convenient way to communicate with an incarcerated parent. E-mail is fast and easy to use. Individuals usually receive the e-mail within 48 hours! You can even attach a picture or video to the email as well. E-mail opens up communication. Similarly to letter writing, e-mail provides a safe space for the child to express themselves.

WHEN THE CHILD DOESN'T WANT TO COMMUNICATE

While communication is highly suggested, there is a possibility that the child might not want to visit the incarcerated parent. The reasoning behind resistance to visiting could be for several reasons. The child could have had a strained relationship with the incarcerated parent prior to incarceration, the child could be busy with sports and other activities, or the child doesn't want to risk feeling rejected or ignored. If the child is extremely hesitant to visit, then the caregiver and the incarcerated parent should re-address the situation in a few weeks. Always leave the door open for communication between the child and the incarcerated parent.

Visitation guidelines

THIS SECTION INCLUDES GUIDELINES FOR MAIL, TELEPHONE, VIDEO VISITATION, AND IN-PERSON VISTATION.

In this section, we are reviewing the necessities needed to review and include prior to visitation. With these guidelines, the caregiver and child should feel prepared to visit the incarcerated parent. The guidelines include what to expect, but also what is required for visitation.

Communication Guidelines

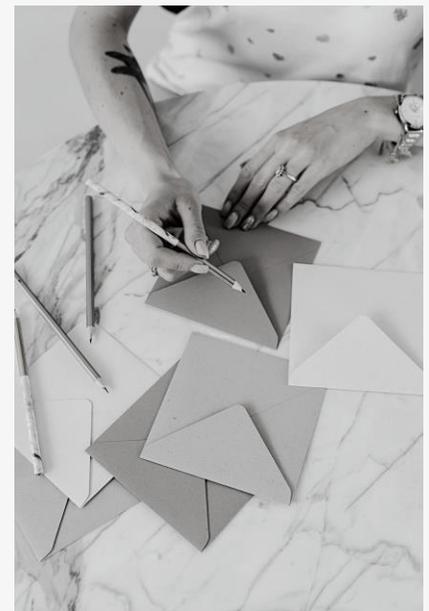
First, as the caregiver and child, you both have the right to correspond and communicate with the incarcerated parent. The means of communication include mail correspondence, telephone calls, video visitation, and in-person visits. Through these means of communication, a healthy bond and attachment can be formed and maintained with the incarcerated parent and can lead to many benefits. All methods of communication must be approved and comply with the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) operating guidelines. It is strongly recommended to visit www.vadoc.virginia.gov and look under “Family & Friends” to find the most updated information regarding mail and communication.

SENDING MAIL

Sending mail to an incarcerated parent is an excellent way to keep the lines of communication open when transportation is difficult to find or arrange. Letter writing is a way for children to keep the incarcerated parent updated on the child’s life. Anyone can write a letter to the incarcerated parent as long as the envelope is correctly addressed with the following information:

What can you send to the Incarcerated Parents?

MAIL ACCEPTED	MAIL NOT ACCEPTED
Letters	Money orders, cash, & checks
Greeting Cards	Postage Stamps
Post Cards	Prepaid Envelopes
Appropriate Photos	Nude or Semi-Nude Images



Please note that all mail received will be shredded after it has been scanned (INCLUDING photographs).

To find more information about contraband or other items not in compliance, please review [Operating Procedure 802.1](#).

VISITATION GUIDELINES

The following information can be found using the directories provided:

- Find an inmate's state ID number using the [Inmate Locator](#)
- Find facility addresses on the [Facilities Directories](#)

Some challenges when sending mail:

- The mail must be clearly identifiable or it might be considered contraband.
- The mailing process might be delayed with sending and receiving mail, so be patient. Oftentimes, there are no stamps available in the facilities, which could make responding to the letters difficult.

Sending Mail

Addressing Your Mail

Inmate's first and last name
Inmate's 7-digit state ID number
Name of Facility or Institution
Address and Zip Code

TELEPHONE COMMUNICATION

Telephone calls are found to be a common form of communication among all, including incarcerated parents. One challenge about telephone communication is that phone calls can quickly become expensive. Another challenge is that sometimes children can be frustrated with the interruption or end of the calls. While the frustration is understandable, it should not outweigh the importance of telephone communication and communication in general.

Telephone calls allow children to hear their parent's voice and update them on what is going on in their lives.

How It Works

1. *Whom can inmates call?*

- a. Inmates can call family, friends, and legal aid from an approved call list. The list can include landline phone numbers and cell phone numbers. The maximum number of people on the list is up to 15 numbers. Family, friends, and legal aid are free to deny any collect or debit call from an inmate.

2. *What are the security measures in place?*

- a. The VADOC inmate phone system is operated by [ConnectNetwork](#) operated by Global Tel*Link (GTL). All calls are recorded and monitored, except for verified legal aid calls.

3. *What is the call duration?*

- a. The call duration is up to 20 minutes.

4. *How can you fund inmate phone calls?*

- a. As a family member or friend, you can deposit money into a prepaid account that you set up in order to receive calls from the incarcerated parent. This method is done by AdvancePay ([ConnectNetwork](#)). Another method is through Inmate Pin Debit Accounts, in which a family member can deposit money into the incarcerated parent's account. This is achieved by going to [ConnectNetwork](#) and setting up an account.

(VADOC)

VISITATION GUIDELINES

VIDEO VISITATION

Video visitation is another great form of communication that allows the child to see the face of the incarcerated parent. While in-person visitation is preferred for most, many families have limited options in regard to transportation and financial means. Video visitation allows for a medium that is in between telephone calls and in-person visitation. Video communication helps children connect with the incarcerated parent and allows the incarcerated parent to see the emotions and expressions of the child. Below are guidelines to be followed when interested in video visitation.

Currently, through the VADOC, video visitation is offered in partnership with Assisting Families of Inmates (AFOI) and Global Tel*Link (GTL). Here are the following guidelines for at-home video visitation and video visitation at a facility.

Enhanced At-Home Video Visitation

- Visitors are prohibited from using the at-home video visitation while operating a vehicle. If this occurs, the visit will be terminated with no refund and you will face a 12-month suspension from the system.
- The family member is responsible for registration with an account and scheduling the video visit.
- Visitors AND inmates are both subject to follow the same rules that apply to in-person visitation.
- ALL visits are subject to monitoring and recording.
- **How much does it cost?** It costs \$0.40 per minute with availability in 20 minute and 50 minute options.
- **How do I register and schedule enhanced video visitation?** Enhanced video visitation is supported on home computers (desktops or laptops, Windows or Mac), some tablets (those running on Android or other operating systems, but not Apple's iOS), and Android smartphones. If using an Android smartphone or tablet, please download these two apps from the Google Play Store: [GTL Schedule Visits \(1 of 2\)](#) and [GTL - Internet Visits \(2 of 2\)](#). Both must be downloaded to use enhanced video visitation.

Video Visitation from a Visitor Center

- All major institutions in Virginia are served from 6 Visitor centers throughout the state, including Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Norfolk, Richmond, and Roanoke.
- **Who can have a video visit?** An inmate has to be eligible as set by the VADOC.
- **How much does it cost?** \$8 for a 20-minute visit and \$20 for a 50-minute visit. Transportation is not included in the pricing.
- **How do I register to visit an AFOI visitor center?**
 - Obtain visitor approvals for each visitor from the VADOC. Do so by downloading an application [here](#) or [contacting the AFOI](#). Fill out your portion completely. Currently, there is a limit of four approved visitors, which includes children.
 - After filling out the application, send it to AFOI by email family@afoi.org or by fax.
 - After approval by AFOI, register for a [GTL Visitation Account](#).
 - [Waiver for Services](#) must be signed with [DocuSign](#) and [submitted](#) (can be in person or by email).

VISITATION GUIDELINES

Video Visitation from a Visitor Center (cont.)

- **How do I schedule a visit?** Prior to making a payment or scheduling a visit, you must be approved by AFOI, and have completed an intake.
- Depending on location, appointments are available between 9 am-2 pm on Saturdays and Sundays.
- Contact AFOI to schedule a video visit at a visitor center or make a request through the website.
- Once an appointment has been confirmed, send the payment via the AFOI website or by mailing a money order to the office.
- Requests and payments must be received by 4:00 pm on Wednesday prior to the weekend of the visit.
- **What should I do on the day of my visit?** Arrive 15 minutes early with your photo ID, your AFOI Visitor ID card, and the IDs of anyone approved to visit with you. All visitors must wear a mask. There will be staff available to greet and help you.

DUE TO COVID-19, THE CURRENT FACILITIES ARE NOW OPEN FOR WEEKEND VIDEO

VISITATION: Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Norfolk, Richmond, and Roanoke

To view more details on the VADOC video visitation policy and procedures, please refer to [Operating Procedure 851.1](#).

IN-PERSON VISITATION

In-person video visitation allows for the children to see the incarcerated parent face-to-face. The incarcerated parent can ask about the child's life and experiences while seeing the expression on the child's face. In-person visitation can improve communication among the family members and better prepare the incarcerated parent for re-entry. Visiting allows for ways to maintain, build, and enhance a positive-parent relationship with the incarcerated parent. In-person visitation allows for opportunities to support attachment and healing during a traumatizing time. Prior to visiting in person, make sure that you review the guidelines [Operating Procedure 851.1](#) for visitation to ensure a positive experience for the child. Below are guidelines to follow prior to visiting in person.

Apply for Visitation

- Prior to visiting, a family member or friend must [submit a visitation application](#) if you are a new visitor or renewing your visiting privileges.
- Visiting privileges expire 3 years from the date of approval. Please submit a new application online at least 30 days prior to the expiration date for in-state visitors and 90 days prior for out-of-state visitors.
- Child Applications must be attached to an adult application. More than one minor can be added to the application.
- **Who can visit?** Immediate family members can visit more than one inmate, but visitors that are not immediate family members are limited to visiting one inmate. If you need application assistance, please [contact AFOI](#) for help.

(AFOI)
(VADOC)

VISITATION GUIDELINES

IN-PERSON VISITATION (CONT.)

Visitation Policies

What should you bring?

- Once the application is approved, you will need to bring one form of valid identification to the visit. Some examples of acceptable identification include:
 - Driver's License
 - Passport.
 - Military ID
 - Other official picture ID issued by a federal or state agency

What are the facility procedures?

All facilities allow visiting on Saturdays, Sundays, and state holidays, but some procedures vary based on the facility. Contact the facility directly to obtain more information.

What is the dress code? The chart below provides examples. Please contact the facility for a more detailed list.

ATTIRE MUST:	ATTIRE MUST NOT:	
Cover from the neck to the kneecaps	Be inappropriate in any way*	*This includes tube tops, tank tops, or halter tops; clothes that expose your midriff, side, or back; mini-skirts, mini-dresses, shorts, skorts, or culottes (at or above the kneecap); form-fitting clothes like leotards, spandex, and leggings; see-through clothing; tops or dresses that have revealing necklines and/or excessive splits; clothing resembling inmate clothing.
Include appropriate underwear	Contain symbols or signs with inappropriate language or graphics**	
Include footwear worn at all times	Include watches and all wearable technology	**This includes gang symbols, racist comments, inflammatory communications, etc.

If your wardrobe is considered inappropriate, you will be referred to the Administrative Duty Officer. The officer will then make the final decision on whether you are allowed to enter the visiting room.

Background Checks

There will be annual background checks on each visitor. Previous approval does not guarantee approval in the future.

(AFOI)
(VADOC)

Accessibility

Accommodations will be provided during the visitation for those who are disabled. Please contact the facility prior to visiting to ensure accommodations are in place.

VISITATION GUIDELINES

E-MAIL

Through JPay, an individual can reach out to their loved one through email. There is a fee and process, which is outlined below. Depending on the facility, incarcerated individuals may be able to respond electronically, view and print your message, and view photo and video attachments.

Process for E-Mail

- E-Mail is faster than regular mail, which is a great pro for utilizing this service. There are different rates per state, so please review the rates here.
- Download the JPay App in the Apple store or on Google Play. Sign up for
- a free account utilizing this link here.

TIPS FOR VISITATION

DISCIPLINE

- Discipline can be a difficult conversation to have between a child and incarcerated parent. Disciplining from prison can be even harder for some families. While some families might be relieved that the incarcerated parent is involved, for other families it can cause resentment and stress. A conversation must be had between the caregiver and the incarcerated parent to decide which method would work best for the child and the family overall.
- If involving the incarcerated parent is best for the child, then the incarcerated parent can help guide or counsel the child's behaviors. This can be powerful for the child especially if the incarcerated parent and the caregiver are on the same page. Consequences are a powerful tool for the child to understand especially with poor behaviors.
- While discipline is important, it is vital to ensure that the visits, whether in-person, telephone, or video visitation, are not just for disciplining the child. The child can then associate visitation in a negative way.
- Lastly, as caregivers, there should be resistance to the temptation to bring up the incarcerated parent's trouble with the law. There should be a separation between the child's consequence and trouble with the law. The child could then associate all poor behaviors with illegal behaviors.

The tips below can be utilized in different methods of communication. Please review the tips prior to visitation, whether that be by phone, video conferencing, or in-person visits. Some TIPS Include:

- Don't be afraid to ask about the child's life. There is a danger in not asking because it could make the child feel like the incarcerated parent does not care or is not interested.
- Some children may not want to reveal what is going on in their lives, but it is still important to ask. Some children may want to take conversations slowly.
- Complete activities "together-apart". "Together-apart" means doing an activity together despite not being together the whole time. Some activities include reading the same book, watching the same TV show, etc.
- Ask about everyday occurrences that happen in the child's life. For example, ask about the weather, sports, music, etc. These topics can be used as a "safe zone" if the child is unwilling to share personal information.

GAMES

- Games can be used for awkward and tough communication.
- Some facilities may have games and toys available otherwise make your own!
- Phone games can be "I spy" or certain riddles
- In-person visits may be able to utilize pen and paper for hangman or other word games.
- Make sure everyone gets a turn!

FAMILY REUNIFICATION

THIS SECTION INCLUDES THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY REUNIFICATION AND HOW THAT AFFECTS THE FAMILY.



Every family is different. Similarly, successful reunification can look different for every family. What works for one family might not work for another. However, there are common parameters to follow amongst families within successful reunification. The parameters include permanence, safety, and family wellbeing. Permanence means that the child has at least one adult that is always there for them. Permanence also focuses on lifelong connections between the family members and the incarcerated parent. Safety ensures that the child is not re-exposed to similar factors that lead to the parent's incarceration. Focusing on family well-being means meeting the child's needs.

Family members should recognize there is no one solution that works for all families. When an incarcerated parent is returning home, the family may want life to return to what it once was. For reunification to be successful, family members should consider maintaining or repairing relationships individually and as a family unit. The familial bonds can help prevent the incarcerated parent from going back to jail or prison.

(Hlavka et al., 2015)

(Labrenz et al., 2020)

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Library: The National Resource Center for Children and Families of the Incarcerated.

(The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2012.)

FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Realistic Family Expectations

When the incarcerated parent returns home, the family may expect the incarcerated parent to behave a certain way, but that is not always the case. The family unit should create realistic expectations regarding the incarcerated parent's return home. Below is a list of reactions the family might exhibit toward the incarcerated parent.

- Family members may feel anger or resentment towards the incarcerated parent.
- Children may develop a lack of trust towards the incarcerated parent.
- Anxiety around potential actions or behaviors made by an incarcerated parent.
- The family may exhibit disappointment towards the incarcerated parent.
- There may be a need to relearn family dynamics.
- The family may have a strong desire for life to go back to the way it was before the parent became incarcerated.

How can the family help the incarcerated parent adjust after release?

The incarcerated parent might have a mix of feelings when returning home. The parent can feel happy and excited, but even scared and frustrated. The family dynamics changed when the incarcerated parent was in prison/jail, so the family must allow time for the incarcerated parent to adjust to life outside of the prison/jail. Below is a list of ways the family members can help the incarcerated parent readjust to the new family dynamics.

- The family should allow time for the incarcerated parent to adjust. The incarcerated parent was used to a way of living in prison/jail. The family should give a grace period for the incarcerated parent to adapt to a new way of life.
- The family should create a space for open communication between the incarcerated parent and the family members. Both the family members and the incarcerated parent are going to be experiencing uncomfortable feelings. Allowing a safe space for the feelings to be expressed will create opportunities for moving forward. Oftentimes, the incarcerated parent may not even understand or know how to communicate with their family. Being in jail/prison can be traumatizing. Allowing them time to process their feelings will be very beneficial for the family as a whole.
- Lastly, the family should show support for the recently released incarcerated parent. Social support can be shown in different ways depending on the family. Social support allows the incarcerated parent to feel safe and comfortable.



FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Protective Factors for the Child

A *protective factor* is a condition(s) that can help a child deal with a stressful event, such as a parent becoming incarcerated. Protective factors are valuable for children with an incarcerated parent because they can help a child cope in a healthy way. Protective factors can also help a child when the incarcerated parent is released from the facility.

A protective factor can be a child's community because it plays an important role in the child's welfare. Especially if community relationships were developed when the parent was incarcerated. Community allows opportunities and relationships to form, allowing the child to express both positive and negative emotions. Children often look to people who are not in the immediate family for support. Support within the school, such as teachers and peers can be considered protective factors. Agencies and other community systems can also provide support for the child, caregiver, and the family as a whole.

With the assistance of protective factors, the caregiver can assist the child during the reunification period. Some methods of assistance include:

- **Open communication.** The caregiver should ensure that the child feels comfortable sharing his/her emotions during this stressful process. The caregiver should also keep the lines of communication open for the child to ask questions.
- **Opportunities for the child to express his/her feelings.** The child is most likely to exhibit a range of emotions from happiness to fear to frustration. Allowing opportunities for the child to express herself/himself will decrease the stress the child is feeling or the burden the child is holding.
- **Creating a structure or a routine for the child.** The child's life has changed in a huge way when their parent was incarcerated and when the parent was released. Creating structure allows the child to stick to something he/she knows and is familiar with.

MEETING

THE ESTRANGED FAMILY

The “Estranged Family” feels as if time stopped when the incarcerated parent went to prison. When the incarcerated parent returns home, it may appear as a surprise to the family members. The “Estranged Family” wishes to start off where things were left off. This can cause stress for the child in the family because the child can be experiencing two emotions: welcoming the parent back and also rejecting the parent for returning. To combat these feelings, the “Estranged Family” should first accept that the incarcerated parent went to the facility in the first place. By ignoring the incarcerated parent, it can cause confusion among the child about where the parent went. By keeping open communication about the parent’s whereabouts, the child is less likely to feel confused about the incarcerated parent’s return.

THE TURBULENT FAMILY

Within the “Turbulent Family”, poor relationship skills between the caregiver and the incarcerated parent can influence the child. The children attempt to express feelings that were experienced when the incarcerated parent was in prison. Since the return of the parent, the child will attempt to express those feelings again. The child may exhibit behavior problems such as acting out in school or the community. It is important to allow the child to express his/her feelings freely in a safe space without the influence of the parents. Also, allow for the child to adjust to the return of the incarcerated parent. Since the incarceration caused the child trauma, allow time for the child to address those hurt feelings.

(Adalist-Estrin, 2004)

STAGES OF ADJUSTMENT

THIS SECTION INCLUDES DIFFERENT STAGES OF ADJUSTMENT FOR THE CHILD ONCE THE INCARCERATED PARENT IS RELEASED.

There are four stages that a child can experience once the incarcerated parent is released from prison/jail. The four stages including honeymoon, suspicion, resistance, and expression/withholding. Recognizing these four stages is important because it addresses negative emotions or feelings the child is experiencing.

STAGE I - HONEYMOON

- Everyone is trying their best to be in a good mood, but there also can be underlying anxiety and stress.
- The child can be excited that the incarcerated parent returned, but feel underlying resentment.
- The child's resentment can build over a few weeks but still pretend to be happy and excited about the parent's return.

Example: The resentment is from the parent's incarceration making life harder on the caregiver.

STAGE II - SUSPICION

- The child increasingly becomes more comfortable letting some of the positive, but especially negative, feelings emerge
- The child questions the incarcerated parent's role in the family while being suspicious of the incarcerated parent's motives.
- Lastly, the child is concerned about the length of the presence. For example, when/if the parent returns to prison.

Example: The child can be suspicious of the parent's behaviors and motives. Whether the parent would stay or do something to get incarcerated again.

STAGE III - RESISTANCE

- The child tests the limits of the rules.
- The child questions "how bad can I be and still be loved?"

Example: The child can act out. The child can exhibit defiant behavior to the incarcerated parent. They test the ability of the incarcerated parent to make them feel safe, while continually questioning the incarcerated parent's authority.

STAGES OF ADJUSTMENT

STAGE IV - EXPRESSION OR WITHHOLDING

- The child will either hide the emotions or show feelings.
- Do not assume that children who hide their feelings are doing okay. The inability or difficulty showing emotions can be a sign that the child is not doing well. The parent should gently encourage the child to express themselves and offer a safe space for expression.

Example: The child felt an acute sense of loss after both parents were incarcerated. The child was unable to share the feelings of fear but remained polite and obedient. The child appeared to be adjusting well but was unable to externalize feelings and responses.

RESILIENCE

THIS SECTION REVIEWS WHAT RESILIENCE MEANS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW.

What is resilience?

When children and families are faced with particularly negative situations, such as incarceration within the family, resilience means working towards adapting to the situation positively and recover quickly from life stressors. Change can affect everyone differently and there is not an exact time frame that a child and/or family will recover from parental incarceration. However, adaption to this life-changing event will more than likely occur over time.

Why is resilience important?

Resilience can help individuals get through difficult life events as well as empower individuals to grow despite adversity. Teaching resilience to children with incarcerated parents can help decrease the potential for negative outcomes to occur, such as the child following in their parent's footsteps. Practicing resilience can help protect the child from various negative outcomes in relation to parental incarceration.

How to practice resilience?

Oftentimes, traumatic events can lead to isolation. Building and maintaining connections through social support is one of the most significant methods to promote positive adaptation to parental incarceration and decrease isolation. As the caregiver, it is important to focus on trustworthy outlets to support the child, which can also help with healthy coping.

TRUSTWORTHY OUTLETS CAN INCLUDE:

- POSITIVE SUPPORT FROM THE INCARCERATED PARENT
- POSITIVE SUPPORT FROM A CAREGIVER
- POSITIVE ROLE MODELS WITHIN THE SCHOOL
- POSITIVE FRIENDS BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL
- POSITIVE AFTER SCHOOL ACTIVITIES (CLUBS, ATHLETICS)
- POSITIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

(Luther, 2014)
(Hanson, 2018)
(American Psychiatric Association)

RESILIENCE



A “Turning point” is a term to describe a transition to a more positive outcome. Caregivers can implement “turning points” in a child’s life by:

- Creating and maintaining a new, healthy, supportive adult relationship
- Connecting with a religious/spiritual community
- Finding a mentor

In order to boost resilience, the caregiver can:

- Have extra compassion for child and themselves
- Nurture more than ever
- Provide structure
- Teach skills
- Get support

(Luther, 2014)
(Hanson, 2018)
(American Psychiatric Association)

CONCLUSION

Communication is a core foundation for building and maintaining healthy relationships. With communication, relationships can be built and formed. As a caregiver, you have the ability to use open and healthy communication between the child and also with the incarcerated parent. Communication is necessary for keeping that door open to build and foster relationships between the child and incarcerated parent. Alongside communication, empathy and coping skills can be utilized to better strengthen the relationship between the family members.

We don't have the ability to control anyone but ourselves. However, everyone has a choice in how we respond to life's stressful situations. Responding to incarceration can be scary for every member of the family. As the caregiver of the child, you hold responsibility for effectively communicating with the child as well as the responsibility of being the child's role model. If responded to and cared for in a positive way, the child's stress around their incarcerated parent can be reduced.

The skills we mentioned throughout the Caregiver Guide should be used daily throughout conversations. The skills that are mentioned are meant to be practiced and utilized. Despite being in the middle of a hard and stressful situation, you have the ability to be adept in the material we have given you. Through consistency and practice, you can better the life of yourself, the child, and the incarcerated parent.

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