

# HELPING CHILDREN TO COPE

## INTRODUCTION

The imprisonment of a parent is especially hard on children, who will look to the adults around them for the comfort and support that they need. Knowing how you can help your child will not only help them get through the experience, but also make life easier for you, and bring you some of the love and attention missing after the separation from your partner. This page provides advice on how to help your children cope.



## Caring for your children on your own and what to tell them

Looking after your children after an arrest, and deciding what to tell them, is one of the most difficult repercussions. Different approaches will suit different children, and it is important that you take care of this responsibility whilst also taking good care of your own needs. This is especially the case when you have been left to bring up your children by yourself.

Most parents tell their children white lies at various points in their lives. Usually they are to do with fairies collecting teeth or pets having gone to live somewhere else: covering up the imprisonment of a parent is a much harder task. However, while it may be tempting to tell a child that their parent has simply 'gone to college', children tend to see through such tales during visits, through other children or the local media, or simply by becoming older and wiser.

Some parents decide not to tell their children anything at all. While this is a tempting option, children tend to pick up on tension – especially when stresses are aggravated by some form of deceit. Children in this situation often become afraid to ask anything, and imagine all manner of frightening explanations for what is missing from their lives.

Usually, it is best to decide what elements of the true story to tell children, and when to tell them. Having made these difficult decisions, it is important to ensure that you tell your children at a suitable time, when you can attend to their questions and offer them comfort. Remember – every family and every situation is different, and you and your partner are the best people to make these complicated decisions.

### Telling your children the truth and considering the possible outcomes

When first considering how to tell the children what has happened, it might help to consider what they already know (have they noticed a parent's absence or the emotions of other family members?) and what reassurance they might need. No matter how grown-up children might seem, the damage done to their family from the outside will be hard to take, and they may feel less safe and secure in their own home.

The children's age is very important. You may want to simply explain to very young children that their parent has to be away for a while, while slightly older children may require a little more information about prison if they've picked up on others' conversations. Older children are likely to want to hear about what has happened in much more depth; though it may be hard, it could be best for them to hear about the details from someone whom they are close to.

Different children will react in very different ways: some will ask questions, while others will not want to talk about it much; some will sympathise with their parent in prison, some will be angry or ashamed, and others will be proud. Their behaviour may also go through dramatic changes. Regardless of the kinds of reactions they have to the news, support is available through organisations such as Jigsaw, youth and community workers, faith groups, and others.

For the parent left at home, meanwhile, it can help to talk to other parents who have had similar experiences. Jigsaw is open throughout the week to provide advice on getting in touch with people who will be able to empathise.

### How things change for children and possible reactions

Many children will feel an acute sense of loss upon a parents' imprisonment: encouraging them to look to the future, perhaps towards a birthday or a visit, can help provide them with a sense of hope. In the meantime, the loss of a parent is bound to change relationships within the home, with family members receiving more responsibility or less attention. These changes can exacerbate a child's complicated feelings, and so it is important to reassure them both that they are not to blame, and also that their imprisoned parent is not a bad person.

Children of different ages, and in different circumstances, will show very different reactions; some may take it in their stride, while others undergo a period of real upheaval in their personality. Either way, they need care and empathy; plenty of talking and spending time together may also help you to cope better with problems affecting you. This section will mention some common problems that children face and their reactions, as well as suggest tips for dealing with them. Common reactions include:

**Anger:** Children will often become angry not only with a missing parent, but also with other figures of authority who seem unsympathetic. Understanding why a child feels this way, and encouraging them to use their anger in a positive way, can help them to understand their own feelings better.

**Refusal to Attend School:** Children may feel extremely anxious and self-conscious about attending school after a parent's arrest. At home, they'll feel less as though people are talking about them. Bullying, struggles with teachers or difficulties with work can also make it hard to face school, often, the best solution will be to talk to teachers themselves about the problem, and take a firm but understanding approach with your child. It may also be advisable to make teachers aware of the situation, especially if it could be affecting important coursework or exams.

**Depression:** Many children struggle to act through their emotions, and many bottle up their feelings entirely. If one parent goes to prison, and the other takes on more responsibilities, a child may be left feeling unloved. The best cure here is to spend good time talking together, and try to engage your child in the kind of activities they enjoyed before the arrest.

**Jealousy:** In cases where a child has a baby brother or sister, they may suffer from the greater attention afforded the baby. Often, encouraging the older child to help in looking after the baby can help them to feel more important, while time alone with the parent while the baby is sleeping may also be invaluable.

**Tantrums:** Tensions within the home and the family may make tantrums more likely – as ever, it is important to be calm and authoritative. Embracing the child and making it clear that you understand their anger can help greatly.

**Wetting the Bed:** Anxiety caused by an arrest can cause children to start wetting the bed again. Usually, talking with the child will soon uncover the exact cause – whether it be concern for their parent or fear of it happening to other family members – and the resulting understanding will calm the problem.

### Here are some suggestions to help cope with problems children face:

- Make sure that you continue to show a keen interest in your children's school work and social lives – offering praise and encouragement will remind them that they are loved.
- Try to ensure that a new sense of routine is quickly established – children like to know what they can expect each day.
- Firmly and gently instil a clear set of rules on behaviour, so that children know where they stand and don't try to take advantage of the situation. It is important to keep a sense of discipline.
- Spend plenty of time with each child, individually – this way, they will feel special and cared-for.
- Make your children aware that you want to know about their thoughts and feelings, and try to discuss them frequently.
- Be aware of any added responsibility that your children may also be feeling – they may feel that they are responsible for siblings' or your own happiness. Make sure that they do not feel overburdened.
- Many parents on the outside find that talking about the problems discussed here helps them achieve a caring and disciplined home life. Jigsaw is always eager to help in this area, as are a host of other organisations which Jigsaw could help you to find out more about.

### Preparing your children for a visit and dealing with the journey home

The first visit is often strange and frightening for children. One good tip is to make the first visit by yourself, so that you can let your children know what to expect. However, it is important to bear in mind that visits are still likely to be stressful for children, and they may be upset by how restricted they are. Jigsaw can help here by offering our Children's play area within the Visits Room, offering them care and an opportunity to play.

Although you may worry that visits will be grim experiences for your children, they do at least enable them to stay in touch with their parent, and give them the chance to see that their mum or dad is alive and well. The parent will also get an opportunity to see their child growing up.

Children often behave in unusual or unpredictable ways during visits: it is not uncommon for them to be especially excitable, irritable, withdrawn, argumentative or attention-seeking. All of these reactions can be a natural result of their anxiety, and can be lessened by good preparation for a visit – make your children aware of the length of the visit, the presence of other families and the fact that there will be other children to play with in the Children’s play area. Most importantly, make sure that the children’s contact with their parent takes the form they desire – whether it be visits, letters or telephone calls.

When travelling home, encourage your children to discuss how they feel, and try to talk up the benefits of the visit, and how their parent will have been delighted to see them. Remember your own needs, too – discuss your own feelings with your children, and arrange your own visits with your partner in order to help your own relationship along.

### **Coping with parole or release and the community’s reaction**

When a parent has been away for a long time, children can struggle to adjust to their return home – they may even resent them if things at home have been good since their arrest. It can also be difficult if the child was very young when their parent was imprisoned; if dynamics at home have changed, the returning parent may also struggle to adapt.

Children sometimes struggle to relate to the ‘stranger’ who has returned home, and may feel that they are losing out on attention that was once theirs. Any of these problems can affect families after release, and so careful, open discussion of thoughts and feelings is important.

Children of all ages feel a need to ‘fit in’ and share certain values with children of their own age, and this desire becomes important in a youngster’s wish to find their own identity as they get a bit older. Having a parent sent to prison, then, could easily make them feel stigmatised and less comfortable within their group of friends.

The effect on a child varies according to the nature of the offence for which their parent was arrested. Crimes of a violent or sexual nature may make it especially hard for a child to feel at home in their communities, be it their groups of friends, neighbourhood, or sports teams.

However simple or difficult children find relations within their communities following the arrest of a parent, having caring and responsible adults to talk to will be of great help. Ensure that your children are aware that you understand any problems they might be having, and try talking to teachers and group leaders if you feel it will help make sure that your child’s situation is understood.

### **Particular problems when a mother or pregnant woman is imprisoned**

Both mother and child can be seriously affected by an arrest: children often become withdrawn or antisocial, while the mother suffers particular trauma from the separation. With women often being the cornerstone of families, they are especially prone to struggling when they hear that things on the outside aren’t as good as they’d like them to be.

Many women find that they are still running the family from inside prison, especially when they are a lone parent – they may have to rely on family or friends to look after their children and many may have been ill-prepared for having to make childcare arrangements upon their sentencing. Children can find the whole process extremely hard, especially when they are farmed out to different family members to be looked after, separated not only from their mother, but also their siblings.

A pregnant woman is subject to the same sentencing as any other woman. However, she will usually be given the option of keeping her baby in a mother-and-baby unit for the first 9 or 18 months of the newborn's life: during the day, she will work in the prison while the child is looked after by nurses, and then at night she can have the baby with her in a cot in an unlocked room in the mother-and-baby unit.

The mother-and-baby units do have problems, though. In spite of everyone's best efforts, the young child will not get the stimulation they would on the outside, where they would meet many more family and friends and get to go on trips out. It is important, therefore, that a mother who takes up such an opportunity to look after their child provides toys and games, and takes their baby out in the grounds if allowed.

Grandparents may often be called upon to help out with child care, sometimes becoming principal carers. This can be hard work, especially if you have been looking forward to retirement. Sometimes, becoming your grandchildren's carers is the only alternative to them going into care.

If you do decide to become your grandchildren's primary carers, make sure to seek support from organisations such as Jigsaw. Not only is it important to take care of practical concerns, such as ensuring that you still have plenty of time to spend how you want to, but also to keep your emotions in check – many parents feel a sense of guilt when a son or daughter goes to jail, as though their parenting wasn't up to scratch. However, it is important to remember that all people growing up are influenced by the whole of society around them, not just by their parents.

### **Supporting your child when they are sent to prison**

Parents can struggle when a child is sent to prison with the burden of thinking or knowing that their child is unhappy in prison, and can feel anger with various parties. One of the most important things to do is to make sure that your child knows that you still love them, in spite of any crime that they may have committed: continuing support from their family will be of great comfort to them.

Making the best possible use of opportunities for contact can help the whole family get through a difficult situation, building up supportive relationships. This has been recognised by a number of Young Offenders' Institutes, which are seeking to involve families more. Asking the prison how you can continue to support your child might bring up new ideas, and help to ensure that your child is unlikely to reoffend upon release.