



# Inside / Outside Parenting

A guide for families with a parent in prison

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## Our Advice for Families

If you are reading this guide and using our tools then you have probably already decided to stay connected to your imprisoned family member. This may not always be the correct decision, but only you can make that decision. In some cases, especially cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse, we would urge you to seek the advice of a professional counselor. The advice contained in this document is written by spouses of former prisoners, former prisoners, and the children of prisoners, all of whom have had success in maintaining, repairing, and improving their relationships, but who are not professional counselors.

The advice we give is intended to help you be the best parents to your children and to provide your children with the best parenting possible from both parents despite a difficult situation. Please send the "Inside Parent" portion of this guide to your child's Inside Parent ASAP. If you have time, make some notes for them based on the advice in your "Outside Parent" portion of the guide.

Sincerely,

Prison Recovery Network

## Outside Parent

- I. Whether or not you've decided to stay connected to your imprisoned family member you cannot continually blame them, degrade them, or insult them to (or in front of) your children. That person is your child's father or mother and talking badly about them will often have the same effect as if you were to say those things to your child. STOP AND THINK about your child before you talk badly about their imprisoned parent.
- II. You also can't make excuses for, praise the actions of, or deny the responsibility of the Inside Parent for their situation. This teaches your child to blame anyone and everyone else for their situation. They will always struggle with being responsible for themselves if you handicap them this way.
- III. Discuss with the Inside Parent exactly how you will explain their situation to your child. Whether or not they claim to be innocent of the crime for which they are incarcerated, they must learn to take responsibility for their lifestyle and the situations they've put themselves (and your children) into. We suggest being as honest as possible based on a child's age. If the child is old enough to have access to the internet, and the information is available online (e.g. News articles, social media, etc...) we suggest being completely candid with your child. If they don't find it, their friends will.
- IV. Being honest does not mean burdening your child, though it could mean opening their eyes to the world a little earlier than you'd prefer. Reassure your child that they can deal with this in the manner that is best for them. They've been put in a difficult enough situation without you burdening them with the need to keep secrets. This can only increase their sense of shame, which is not appropriate since it was their Inside Parent who created the situation.
- V. Being honest does not mean treating your child like a friend or confidant! You are their parent and your job is to reassure them that they are not to blame, that this doesn't mean that they will be "like their dad / mom". It's ok to show emotion, but seek support from family, friends, your faith community, or a professional counselor – DO NOT LET YOUR CHILDREN BE YOUR SUPPORT; your motivation, yes, but do not let them feel responsible for your well-being. Life is hard enough for them, you're the grown-up.
- VI. Do not make promises you cannot keep. Do not tell your child when their Inside Parent will be home if you're not 100% sure. Do not give them false hope, it will harm them much more than the truth. Be

gentle, but honest. Whether it's going to be months, decades, or never, you can give your children their best chance in life by being honest with them.

- VII. Reassure them that they can stay in touch, but don't overpromise. Letter writing is cheap and probably the most meaningful long-term form of communication. It gives your child something they can hold on to, keep for re-reading, and is probably the most viable way for the Inside Parent to create a strong, consistent presence in your child's life.
- VIII. Writing to their Inside Parent will give your child a real sense of having a relationship with both of you; as long as they get letters back. You might have to make sure the Inside Parent has postage money. It doesn't matter if they are barely literate, they need to write! If they are illiterate they can find someone to write for them while they learn for themselves. This is not only reasonable, it's crucial. The only thing they should ever feel ashamed for is NOT WRITING AT ALL.
- IX. Phone calls are great, but they can be expensive. Bills can easily grow into 100's or even 1000's of dollars a month if you're not careful! Stress consistency over frequency – to both your child and the Inside Parent. This will help avoid crushed expectations on both their parts (and yours).
- X. Visits are life affirming, whenever possible. Visiting can be expensive too, especially if the prison is far away. Don't overpromise visits to either your child, or their Inside Parent. Again, stress consistency over frequency. Even non-contact visits can be positive, though these can be too difficult for some children. Always talk to your child after a visit about how it makes them feel. If you hear or see anything that is even a little concerning to you, seek professional advice.
- XI. Communicate fully what's going on at home to the Inside Parent. Don't try to "protect them" or shy away because you don't want to "burden them". Don't blame them either. Chances are they already blame themselves more than you know. They need to know what's going on in order to be the best parent possible to your child.
- XII. NEVER, EVER TELL YOUR CHILD THAT THERE IS SOMETHING THEY SHOULD WITHHOLD FROM THEIR Inside Parent. If there is a new relationship, an impending divorce, a home foreclosure, or a death in the family it is up to YOU to communicate it beforehand so you can BOTH help your child through it.
- XIII. Letter writing is cheap and probably the most meaningful long-term form of communication. It gives your child something they can hold on to, keep for re-reading, and is probably the most realistic way for the

Inside Parent to create a strong, consistent presence in your child's life. We can't stress this enough. If the Inside Parent is going to be away more than a few weeks make sure they send and receive letters.

- XIV. Letters don't have to be very long. Letting the Inside Parent know what's going on in your child's life gives them all the material they need. It's the everyday details that are most important, not just the "big stuff". Tell the Inside Parent about your child's favorite toys, teachers, friends, etc...
- XV. You can also suggest they tell stories from when they were the same age, reinforce good things your child is doing, encourage them when they need it, and set expectations for school performance, behavior, etc... (Have this discussion beforehand so you are on the same page!)
- XVI. Be deliberate about setting expectations for this relationship. Use our Family Planning Tool & Guide to create a consistent, open, and healthy relationship with your child's Inside Parent. It will take much of the stress out of the relationship for everyone involved, allowing you to put your energy into planning for a more positive future for all of you!



## Our Advice for Prisoners

Your family / friends have chosen to stay close to you and stay in touch. This is not always an easy or automatic decision for people to make; regardless of the why you're in prison or jail. This tool is meant to help you stay connected, rebuild, and improve on the positive relationships you have in the community. It's meant to help you and your family manage your expectations of each other, create some predictability for both of you, and hopefully set the stage for your eventual reunification outside prison or jail.

The most important factor in a successful release is the positive relationships you have in the community. Use your time to focus on taking ownership of your life, improving the good relationships, and getting rid of the bad ones. The Prison Recovery Network also has pre-release planning tools, resource guides, and case managers available to help you and your family through this difficult time. It is possible to have a better life, to never return to prison. We're here to help.

Sincerely,

**Prison Recovery Network**

## Inside Parent

- I. Own it. It doesn't matter whether you are guilty of the specific crime for which you've been incarcerated. You are responsible for your decisions, your lifestyle, the friends you chose, where you chose to hang out. You are responsible for your situation. Own it.
- II. Let your children know that YOU are the only one responsible for your situation. They will blame themselves, don't let them. You will have to do this regularly for your entire time in prison, and maybe afterward as well.
- III. Being in prison doesn't relieve you of any of the responsibilities you have as a parent. Even if you lose your parental rights! It just means you have to try harder, in ways that will be much more uncomfortable than if you were at home with them.

- IV. Never blame your child's Outside Parent, no matter what. It can only hurt your child. It's no different than if you were to blame your child for your situation.
- V. Talk with your child's Outside Parent about how you are going to explain your situation to your child. If you have a serious disagreement about this, try to support the Outside Parent. Even if it makes you feel bad. They are dealing with the consequences of your actions in ways you aren't. This is part of your burden.
- VI. Never put any extra responsibility on your child because of where you've put yourself. They will feel it anyway; they don't need you telling them that you aren't there or that they need to step up, whether they are 8 or 18. You can encourage responsibility and good values but never tell them they're "the man of the house" or that they "have to take care of \_\_\_\_\_" since you're not there.
- VII. Write your child letters! Often. If you don't have money, most prisons and jails have provisions for free pen, paper, and postage; use it! You have no other way to maintain a meaningful, consistent, and enduring presence in your child's life than with your letters of advice, encouragement, and your stories.
- VIII. YOUR CHILDREN ARE UNDER NO OBLIGATION TO WRITE YOU BACK, NO MATTER HOW MUCH THAT SUCKS FOR YOU! You are the parent, it is your responsibility to communicate with them no matter what. In most cases being consistent and positive will yield great results. Even if you don't see the results, your child will appreciate it. Be consistent.
- IX. Ask your child's Outside Parent to setup a regular phone call and visiting schedule. It probably won't be as much as you'd like. Remember that being consistent is the most important thing for your child. Be sensitive to the cost – your phone calls are unreasonably expensive – do not put your family, friends, or children in the position of having to refuse your calls or spend 100's of dollars they don't have. It hurts everyone, MOST OF ALL THEM! You are responsible for where you are. Live with it. WRITE LETTERS!!
- X. Be sensitive to how difficult visits may be for them. Let them start slowly if they need to. Some children may not be able to handle leaving, some will not be able to handle non-contact visits. You have to let them know that you are ok with that NO MATTER WHAT, and that their well-being is the most important consideration for you. Write Letters! Give them something to hold on to.
- XI. Don't make promises you can't keep – about your release or how things will be when you get out. It doesn't help anyone. You can tell your child

how you are working on yourself so that you don't repeat your mistakes (planning to "get away with it" the next time is NOT OK), telling you child what your goals are and how you are working on them is great!

- XII. Get to know your child's home life, even if it's hard for you. It doesn't matter if there is a step parent in the picture, that you missed a really important milestone, or that you're going to miss a lot more. The only thing that matters is that you are interested. Ask about daily routine, school, friends. Get to know it as well as possible. Encourage your child to set and work toward goals.
- XIII. Never ask your child for information about their Outside Parent. No matter what. They have enough on their plate, your job is to be their support. Never try to get between them and their Outside Parent, or step parent, it can only hurt them. Bring up your concerns with the Outside Parent themselves.
- XIV. Talk with your child's Outside Parent about setting expectations for school, behavior, etc... and how you can help support them. Some phone calls and letters will suck, if you're doing it right. It's ok to be disappointed – but never angry. Sometimes you'll have to have entire phone calls helping your child's Outside Parent deal with a behavioral problem or tough situation. That's what being a parent is.
- XV. Don't let your children become the victims of your circumstances. Gently, but firmly let them know that you expect them to do better than you did. Don't give them permission to use your absence as an excuse – and don't make things worse by criticizing their Outside Parent, in any way.
- XVI. Do most of this through letters! It doesn't matter if your handwriting is bad, you can't spell, you don't speak the same language. Have someone help if you if you need to. Take some classes if you don't have your HS diploma. Be a good example to your kids in any way you can! No excuses.
- XVII. Tell your child your stories from when you were a kid – the good ones, not the nightmares. Tell them what you do every day – any job you have, classes, sports, exercise – no fights, arguments, or weirdoes. Let them get to know the real you – the one they would know if you were with them.
- XVIII. Be deliberate about setting expectations for this relationship. Use our Family Planning Tool & Guide to create a consistent, open, and healthy relationship with your child's Outside Parent. It will take much of the stress out of the relationship for everyone involved, allowing you to put your energy into planning for a more positive future for all of you!