

## Communicating with the child

### **1. Listen non-judgmentally so that children feel safe talking with you.**

Most children who have a parent in prison don't have somebody they can easily talk with about what they are experiencing. Even when you think they already know this, tell children that you want to hear from them. Let the child lead the conversation, and respond with encouraging, open-ended questions when appropriate. Just listening can help kids feel more comfortable. Accept their feelings, and acknowledge their opinions—you don't have to agree. You can disagree respectfully. Don't press for more details than you need or pry out of personal curiosity. Keep your personal reaction private. Focus on the child's experience.

### **2. Build trust by telling the truth.**

Children need to understand what is happening in their family. Even if it feels uncomfortable—even if you want to protect them, or you feel insufficiently informed—when children ask what happened to their missing parent, try to give prompt, accurate information.

*It is more frightening for children to sense trouble and not know the truth, and eventually they will find out. Lying—even when it is intended to protect—rarely works, and once children figure out the truth, they become less likely to trust others. If the grown-ups in their world have been dishonest, the child feels betrayed. They are also inclined to feel even more angry, ashamed, fearful, or hopeless.*

Being truthful doesn't mean you have to provide every detail. As a general guideline, simply answer what is being asked—no more, no less. Let the child be your guide, and offer more when he or she asks for more. Trust that if a child is capable of asking about something, they are capable of hearing the answer—delivered thoughtfully, with care. Tell the child in concrete terms with age-appropriate language that he or she can understand. If you don't know the answer to their question, say so. When kids see that you are paying attention, and trying to answer honestly, they feel heard and respected.

### **3. Be watchful of inadvertently creating conflicting narratives.**

Do your best to align your conversation with what the child's primary caregiver has told her. Conflicting versions of events can be confusing and frustrating. If the child has heard an invented story—"your dad's away on a job," or, "mom's in the hospital for a while"—you may face a dilemma for which there is not always a clear or immediate resolution. Try to work through discrepancies in a way that honors the caregiver's intentions.

### **4. Help children understand their feelings.**

Children of incarcerated parents need reassurance that all their feelings are normal—that it makes sense to have all kinds of mixed up emotions. Many children need help learning to recognize their emotions, and learning the words to talk about them. If a child finds it hard to talk about feelings,

you can encourage expression through drawing, music, or other creative arts. You can tell stories about yourself as a child, too. Share some of the hard times and feelings you struggled with, and what helped.

*It is important not to tell children what they should be feeling, but to allow them the freedom to explore what they are feeling. Some children will need you to give them space, and they might not want to talk right away. Let them know they can come to you whenever they want to. Allow time and space to grieve their loss.*

## **5. Help them know they're not alone.**

Other kids have parents in prison too. There are many useful books about parental incarceration. Looking at them together may help ease a child's sense of isolation. In some communities, you might be able to help the child connect with other children and families who have loved ones incarcerated. *Resilience Beyond Incarceration* periodically offers groups for children in Lamoille County. *Kids-A-Part* hosts special visits just for children and their moms at the Chittenden Facility. During these visits, a child can meet other children who have an incarcerated parent.

## **6. Anticipate their questions, and think about how you will answer.**

There are several common questions that children of incarcerated parents will ask as they try to make sense of what has happened. Sometimes these questions will be straightforward, and other times they may come out indirectly, or even nonverbally, through challenging behaviors. As a compassionate person who wants to be both protective and truthful, you may find yourself struggling with how to say things, what to include and what to leave out. Try to be calm, attentive and patient when having these powerful conversations with children in your care.

*Keep in mind that there are a couple of questions kids don't usually ask directly, but still need to have answered. Anticipating and addressing these unspoken questions can offer some relief as they struggle with the uncertainty, fear, and burden of wondering:*

### **1. Is this my fault?**

### **2. Does my parent love me?**

Children often have trouble making sense out of the events that led up to their parent's arrest. They may have a confused understanding of cause and effect, and may be haunted by the belief that their parent's incarceration is the consequence of something they did. Regardless of whether they ask these questions or not, all children need reassurance that what happened to their parent is not their fault, and reassurance that they are well-loved by their parent and others.

## The five questions most kids ask

### **Where is my mom or dad?**

Consider how much the child understands of wrongdoing and consequences, and shape your answer accordingly. “Prison is the place where adults go if they do something wrong so they can learn to make a better choice.” Provide simple, concrete answers when you can. Explain how close or far away the parent is.

### **Why is mom or dad in prison?**

When a parent has done something wrong, acknowledge it—to the extent you believe the child can make sense of it. Children generally understand what it means to break a rule, take something that doesn’t belong to them, or hurt somebody. Affirming the parent’s worth as a person is important—“Dad did a bad thing but that doesn’t make him a bad person,” or “Mom is a good person who loves you and doesn’t want to be away from you, but she made a bad mistake and now she has to take care of making it better.”

### **Is it safe in prison? Is my mom or dad OK?**

Children need reassurance their parent is doing alright and isn’t going to be hurt. They may ask questions in an effort to figure out if their parent is able to manage the difficult circumstances, and if their parent still loves them. Assure children that where they are, there are lots of people— called corrections officers—to make it safe.

### **When is she or he coming home?**

For people who are detained, awaiting trial or a plea-deal, there is a terrible uncertainty about sentencing and the likely duration of incarceration. Even when a sentence is being served, most parents will not have a definite release date, and the outcome of parole hearings is uncertain. Keep children up to date about what you know, even if all you can say is “We don’t know yet what will happen.”

*Keep in mind that children have a different sense of time than adults. To some extent it can be helpful to let the child know in concrete terms when their parent won’t be home (not for another three birthdays, or not until after the snow melts). This can be painful and disappointing, but much better than allowing false expectations to create even worse disappointment when the expected parent does not show up.*

### **Who is going to take care of me?**

Explain what will happen to them while their parent is in prison—what will stay the same and what will change, where they’ll live and go to school. Talk about whether they will be able to see and talk to their mom or dad in prison—how and when that can happen.