

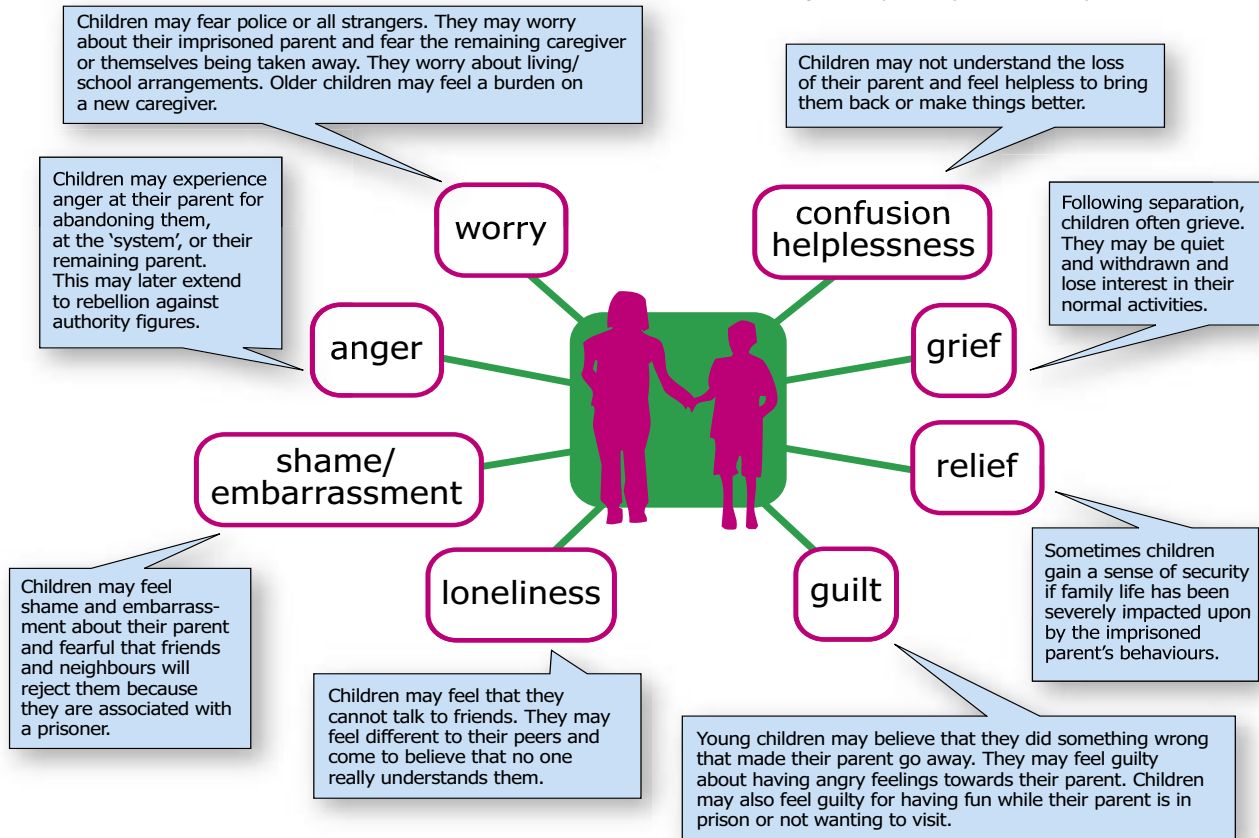


# CHILDREN OF PRISONERS

A guide for the family and friends of adults  
in the criminal justice system

# How they may be feeling...

The imprisonment of a parent can be a devastating experience for a child or young person and may also be different for each child. Knowing typical responses and being able to determine how they differ from normal developmental changes may help you support your child better.



# What might the child experience?

After the initial experience of grief and separation most children will move through to a stage of acceptance with their current family situation. However for those children who feel traumatised by their experience they may exhibit some of the behaviours shown below.

## Changes to look out for

### Physical

- Headaches, injuries or illnesses

### Emotional

- Nightmares and fear of the dark
- Retreating into denial and/or a fantasy world
- Regressive behaviours like bedwetting, thumb-sucking and clinging to their remaining custodial parent or caregiver
- Withdrawing from participating in social relationships or in activities that used to absorb them

### Behavioural

- Experience a decline in school work and social relationships at school

- Showing anger, aggression and hostility toward the adult in charge or toward authority figures
- Increased disobedience and defiance at home or at school including truancy
- Begin to become involved in criminal or violent behaviours

*(The Osborne Association: How Can I Help?, 1993)*

**'Sometimes you think that they have forgotten about him, but then they come out and get really upset and really miss him.'**

*(See our factsheet titled **Caring for the Children of Prisoners** for information on how to support yourself.)*

## What can you do to help?

### Stability

Children and young people need predictability and routine in their lives. Like anyone else, they like to know what to expect each day. Stress can be reduced by trying to keep routines as stable as possible, including new routines such as regular times to ring and/or visit the prison.

## Care

Children and young people need to feel loved, cared for and supported. Tell them regularly that they are loved and worthwhile, and reassure them that they are not to blame for their parent's imprisonment. Give plenty of positive feedback and encouragement.

Emotional support can also be provided by extended family, friends and teachers. Sometimes children may not feel that they can talk to their carer about what they are feeling. It can be helpful for children to know that there is someone else they can talk to, such as an auntie or teacher.

Given that there are no formal mechanisms for informing teachers about parental imprisonment, it may be beneficial for carers to tell the child's teachers about what the child is experiencing. You could also ask if students have access to a psychologist or school counsellor for further support.

## Protection

Children and young people are dealing with the discovery that outside forces can remove their parent. They may suddenly feel unsafe, especially if they saw the arrest, were searched or questioned. It is important they have the chance to talk about what happened and to ask questions. They need to feel loved and secure in their family, and assured that their other parent/carer will not be taken away. It is very important

that young people can grow up with a positive image of police by understanding that the police also have other roles such as protecting the community.

## Open communication

Talk openly to your children about their parent, and about how they are feeling as this helps them to cope better with the situation. Let them know that there is nothing so bad that they cannot talk about it with someone. Allow time to ask questions, and answer them as honestly as you can, given their age and level of understanding. You don't need to feel that you have to make everything better; listening is more important than giving advice.

## Getting outside help

If children and young people are showing signs of distress, there are a number of avenues for help. A child psychologist or a counsellor at school may also be able to assist.

## Adolescents

During the teenage years, children develop an identity separate from their parents/caregivers and become more independent. It is normal for teenagers to withdraw from their parents to some extent, but this increasing distance can be painful for imprisoned parents who may take this as a personal rejection. If contact is not regular, the imprisoned parent may

find it difficult to keep up with the rapid developmental changes that occur in adolescence. They may have an outdated image of their child as they were before the imprisonment. This can result in further relationship problems, when the imprisoned parent treats the adolescent as if they were a younger child. Carers may be able to help by gently reminding incarcerated parents that their child is growing up, and by keeping the prisoner up to date with what their child is doing.

VACRO services include:

- Family Counsellor
- Children's Counsellor
- Mentoring Service
- Video Visits

Call VACRO for more information regarding these services on **1800 049 871**.

## Talking to the children & young people

### When

As a rule, the sooner you talk to the children, the better. Children will want to know where their parent is and why. Young ones need to be reassured that their parent is safe and that they will be able to see them or talk to them.

## Choices

Every situation is unique and it is hard to know what information to give to the children.

**If you are unsure, talking to a VACRO family worker or another professional in the field may help you clarify the issue.**

## Untrue Stories:

You may choose to tell the children a story such as 'Dad's gone overseas to work' to protect them from getting teased or feeling ashamed. This can work for some children or if it is a shorter sentence.

However, children often pick up inconsistencies in stories they are told, or know from the 'vibe' that something is wrong, which may leave them with feelings of confusion and worry. Without honest and open communication, they cannot work through their own feelings of loss.

It is also possible that children will find out the truth in other ways which can cause them to lose trust in their carer. It is better for children to find out that their parent is in prison from their caregiver than in the school-yard or in the media.

## Keeping Secrets

Others may be told the truth but asked to keep it a secret to protect themselves and the family. Secrecy

can increase children's feelings of shame and guilt and can prevent the child from receiving support from friends. In this case, you may like to encourage your child to just tell specific people who you all can trust.

## Telling the Truth

What children and young people need to know will depend on their age. Young ones need simple explanations of why their parent is in prison, such as "Dad hurt someone" or "Mum stole something".

They need to understand that their parent did the wrong thing but this doesn't make their parent a bad person. Older children will probably have more questions and need more detail. The questions that children ask often indicate the detail that they are ready to hear.

Children will usually want to know when their parent is coming home. Be honest with children. If their Mum will be in prison for four years, tell them that their Mum will not be able to come home for a very long time (or in four birthdays/four summer holidays time).

## Talking to children about feelings: bad, sad, mad or glad

A good way to talk about emotions with children is in terms of four basic emotions: bad, sad, mad and

glad. In explaining these feelings, it can be helpful to let children know that all of these emotions are okay. Everybody has these feelings and it is okay to talk about them.

<b>Bad</b>	includes feeling frightened, anxious, uncomfortable, guilty, ashamed
<b>Sad</b>	includes feeling unhappy, depressed, miserable, hopeless, gloomy, low
<b>Mad</b>	includes feeling angry, irritable, furious, enraged, spiteful
<b>Glad</b>	includes feeling happy, joyous, cheerful, excited, content

You can explain that it is possible to experience a mixture of these feelings at the same time. For example, when seeing Mum or Dad in prison, the child might feel sad to see them in prison, but happy (glad) to be with them. Or a child might feel angry (mad) with their parent for having gone to prison, and at the same time guilty (bad) for having this feeling.

This basic four-word emotional vocabulary and the message that all feelings, including mixed feelings, are okay, can be very helpful for children.

# Keeping up contact

## Telephone calls

Regular short conversations can be very satisfying for young children. Prisoners can call children for a couple of minutes just to say goodnight, see what the child did that day, or tell the child that they are thinking about them. If the conversation feels strained, imprisoned parents can play games, such as 'I-spy' or tell jokes and riddles.

Sometimes children might not say very much. This is normal, and does not mean that the call is a waste of time. Children like to hear their parent's voice. Teenage children may also be unresponsive but still need phone contact, even if it is just to hear that they are still loved.

Phone calls can be stressful. Everyone feels pressure to make the call enjoyable. Children may feel guilty talking about the enjoyable things they did without the parent. Making the calls regular help the parent and child relax and connect with one another.

## Letters

Letters can be picked up and read many times and this gives children the sense of having enduring contact with parents between visits and phone calls. It is often easier to express certain feelings and thoughts

in letters and drawings than it is on the phone or in person. Prisoners may also find it easier to express their love for children in a letter than in a visits centre or a short phone call.



Child's Response after counselling.  
(Children's Counselling Service: VACRO 2006)

# Tips for children's writing

Infants	School-age	Teenagers
Keep some stamped envelopes addressed to the prisoner for spontaneous letter writing		
Ask children what they wish they could tell their Mum or Dad, keep a running list on the fridge, then help them write a letter		
For children who cannot write, write down the child's exact words and have the child draw a picture		
Keep a box of coloured paper, pencils, crayons, magazines and cut out pictures to motivate children		
It is often better to send regular short letters, with pictures or cartoons stuck on, than long letters		
Help children start a picture or story and send it to the parent in prison. The parent can then add to the story or picture and send it back		
	Children can play games or arrange footy competitions through the mail	
Keep the prisoner informed about birthdays, school events and achievements and other events in the child's life		
	Letters that describe the parent's thoughts, feelings and daily life in prison are appreciated by the older child	
	Letters convey feelings better when prison visits cause embarrassment	

# Should I bring children to prison for visits?

## Infants and school age children

Families and caregivers often grapple with the issue of whether to allow children to visit their parent in prison. Some people think children should not visit because “it is no place for a child” or “they’ll think prison is okay and won’t be afraid to break the law”. Some people worry that seeing parents in prison is too upsetting and could be unsafe.

There are many hardships involved in bringing children to prison, including travelling long distances, limited toys and play equipment, rigid security procedures, waiting times for visits, and restrictive visiting centres that prevent children from making noise and running around.

Despite these difficulties, visits often help both parents and children to deal with the pain of separation. Visits allow primary school age and younger children to replace their fears and fantasies with a more realistic understanding of their parent’s circumstances. Seeing their parent reassures children that they are safe. Regular visits allow imprisoned parents to maintain a parenting role and a sense of being needed and valued outside prison. This can increase their motivation to get out and stay out of prison. Regular

contact gives children some sense of routine in their communications. It builds a sense of security and predictability, both of which can reduce the negative effects of parental separation. Visiting prison and seeing other families and children of prisoners helps children know that they are not alone. Keeping in contact can make family reunification easier when the prisoner is eventually released. However the difficulty of prison visits can mean it is not appropriate for all children.

**You can talk with the VACRO Family Support team if you have any concerns.**

## Adolescents

Teenagers often give more importance to their peer group and less to their family so they may appear disinterested in the family concern for the offender. Concepts about a parent doing the 'wrong' thing can impact on the development of their own identity in different ways. Some may need to turn away from the parent, some will want to idolise their parent as 'tough' and others will feel conflicted between their love and their shame. They may feel angry about the disruptions to their life, feel they are missing out on what their friends are doing and not want to visit the parent in prison.

**Remember:** It is important for all children to keep a balance between visiting their parent and continuing on with their life. Make sure visits are not too disruptive to other relationships with peers and family.

# Bringing children to prison for visits

All visitors less than 16 years of age must be accompanied on visits by an adult unless certain circumstances exist.

**More information can be obtained from Corrections Victoria on 8684 6600 regarding the circumstances under which children can visit a prisoner without being accompanied by an adult.**

The type of offence committed by the prisoner can influence children's visits.

## Preparing children for visits

Ideally, the carer should visit the parent on their own first in order to find out what prison visits are like. It is helpful to give children factual information about what to expect during prison visits. When there is less mystery, they will be less worried.

Tell children about:

- How long it takes to get to the prison
- What the prison officers will be wearing
- What their parent will be wearing and any changes to their appearance since the child last saw them
- Security and search procedures (including dog squads)

- The difference between contact and non-contact visits. Don't promise a contact visit; it may not happen.
- What the visits centre looks like
- How long the visit will last
- What behaviour is okay and what behaviour is inappropriate and why.

Imprisoned parents can also help to prepare their children for coming to prison by writing them a letter explaining what the visit will be like and telling them that they are looking forward to seeing the child.

There are a few factors that can make visits easier for you and the children:

- Give children food to eat as close to the visit as possible. Vending machines may be out of order and children can become distressed when hungry.
- Co-operate with prison officers and procedures.
- Prior to the visit, tell the incarcerated parent to focus their attention on the child(ren). It may be useful to tell the prisoner about the child's current activities so that they can ask the child(ren) relevant questions.

## Talking to children immediately after visits

Leaving their parent behind in prison can be very upsetting for children. It is important to reassure children that you are there to listen to them and that

they will have a chance to talk to their parent, see them again or write them a letter. Ask children what they liked about the visit and also what they did not like. Encourage them to ask questions and be honest in your answers. On the other hand, if children do not want to talk, that is okay too. It can be helpful for imprisoned parents to write a letter to the child(ren) soon after the visit to thank them for coming or to say how good it felt to see them.

## Useful contacts

- Kids Help Line **1800 55 1800**  
[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)
- Parentline **13 22 89**  
(8am-12pm, Monday- Friday; 10am-10pm weekends)  
TTY (hearing impaired service) **13 63 88**  
[www.parentline.vic.gov.au](http://www.parentline.vic.gov.au)
- Good Beginnings Home Visiting Program  
**(02) 9211 6767**  
[www.goodbeginnings.net.au/index.shtml](http://www.goodbeginnings.net.au/index.shtml),
- Council of Single Mothers and their Children  
(CSMC) **9654 0622**  
(9:30-3pm, Monday- Thursday)  
Tollfree for country callers: **1800 077 374**  
Level 2, 54 Victoria St, Carlton South  
[www.csmc.org.au/](http://www.csmc.org.au/)
- The Bouverie Centre **9385 5100**  
8 Gardiner St, Brunswick  
[www.latrobe.edu.au/bouverie](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/bouverie)

## **Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders**

**Level 1, 116 Hardware Street, Melbourne VIC 3000**

**Phone: (03) 9605 1900 Toll Free: 1800 049 871**

**Website: [www.vacro.org.au](http://www.vacro.org.au)**

**Email: [info@vacro.org.au](mailto:info@vacro.org.au)**

**Postal Address: PO Box 14093,  
Melbourne VIC 8001**

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***While this booklet refers to children who have a parent in prison, the information may also be useful for a child with a sibling who has been incarcerated.***

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