



# REINTEGRATION

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

When a person returns to their family after spending time in prison there is the potential that things will not go as well as expected. This may be due to difficulties that the ex-prisoner may have in readjusting to life in the community, changes in family members and in the relationships during the period of imprisonment, and difficulty adjusting to new roles.

## Re-adjusting to life outside

It is common for ex-prisoners to feel paranoid that everyone will know they have been in prison, as if it were written across their forehead. In some cases, fear and insecurity can cause them to withdraw from the world altogether, locking themselves in their room or their house, much as they were when in prison. Returning to a world of noise, mess and activity can lead them to experience severe mood swings and become emotionally unpredictable. They may also feel disoriented and out of touch with how things have changed such as how much things cost, or how to get around on public transport.

Others may feel a need to fully experience their freedom and may disappear for periods of time without informing anyone where they are, or attempt to participate in social/coping activities of drinking or drug use at pre-imprisonment levels which could be dangerous for their health and well-being.

While incarcerated, the prisoner may have had to use intimidation, aggression, or withdrawal to try to solve or avoid conflicts. Whilst these can be helpful in a prison setting, these strategies do not make for good relationships on the outside. While it is important not to take their behaviour personally, let them know how they make you feel so they can learn to take responsibility for their actions again. However, some behaviours should not be tolerated and if your family member is being abusive, seek outside help quickly.

## Useful Contacts

- Mensline Australia **1300 78 99 78**  
[www.menslineaus.org.au](http://www.menslineaus.org.au)
- Women's Domestic Violence  
Crisis Service of Victoria **9373 0123**  
Toll free **1800 015 188**
- Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA)  
**1800 806 292**  
<http://www.casa.org.au/>

# Changing roles

## Ex-prisoners

A prisoner returning to their family has to make many difficult changes in order to readjust to having a role in family life; whether as a parent, son or daughter or partner. Prison life is highly structured. There are few personal responsibilities and little need to deal with other people's feelings and choices. Prisoners have described life in jail as being quite 'black and white' or highly structured. Yet when they come back to a family, the situation is much more complex, and it is not possible to be as self-focussed as it was in prison. Many ex-prisoners initially struggle to come to terms with these more complex demands.

## Partners

Partners often have to take on more responsibility for financial and other matters than before their partner's imprisonment. They may feel surprised or even uncomfortable about how well they have coped during the imprisonment. This does not necessarily mean that they love their partner any less, but it shows they have found a way to get on with things. In some cases, this sense of independence can lead partners to question whether they need or want to continue the relationship with the ex-prisoner after release.

This newly found independence can create difficulties for the ex-prisoner as well, who may assume that everything will be as it was before. Men in particular may be used to being in charge, and have mixed feelings when they see that their partner does not depend on them as much as before. If they have been in prison for a long time, they may also struggle with the fact that they actually have to depend on their partner to explain how to do some things, like use new technology.

If there is a history of Family Violence, families will be highly vulnerable to returning to these patterns of behaviour due to the intense stress of the post release period. There are a couple of steps that families can take to assist them to manage this.

- Partners can voluntarily place themselves on the Corrections Victoria 'Victims Register'. This register will provide information to the family such as release dates or when the prisoner is being considered for parole if the prisoner is not returning to the family home.
- There is a Police Code of Practice for responding to Family Violence that ensures all reports will be treated seriously.

**See [www.vacro.org.au/fork](http://www.vacro.org.au/fork) for more information**

## Carers

Difficulties can also occur when a person returns from prison and wishes to resume a parenting role. The person who has been looking after the children during the period of their parent's imprisonment may find it difficult to let go of the role, especially if they have different ideas from the ex-prisoner about how to parent. Carers often form a close emotional bond with the children, and both the child and the carer may find it painful to have this relationship suddenly disrupted or changed.

Rather than trying to sort out all these issues after the parent returns from prison, it is a good idea to discuss care arrangements in visits leading up to release, so that carers, children and parents have a chance to talk about their wants and expectations. Some carers may be quite happy to let go of their role once the parent returns. Others may wish to negotiate some kind of ongoing involvement in the children's lives.

## Parents

Parents of ex-prisoners may have found a sense of peace in the home in the absence of their son or daughter, who may have been difficult and chaotic to live with prior to their imprisonment. Parents may be feeling worried about what it will be like to have their child at home again. They may also be extremely worried that their child will re-offend or use drugs again. As a result, they may try to monitor or control

their son or daughter's behaviour. This can backfire, with the ex-prisoner offending or using drugs as a way of 'breaking out' of their parent's control and asserting their own will.

If you are planning for your son or daughter to live with you when they get out of prison, it may be a more helpful approach to ask them how they would like you to support them, rather than trying to control their actions. However, remember it is your home and you have the right to expect that people living in it will live by your house rules.

**The Dispute Settlement Centre offers free mediation that may assist in resolving these issues on 1800 658 528.**

However, if there is a unresolvable conflict about what is acceptable behaviour, it may be better for your son or daughter to find alternative living arrangements.

## Expectations

Because of the limitations placed on a prison relationship during the incarceration, both prisoners and their family members outside can have quite unrealistic expectations about what the relationship will be like after prison. Prisoners have a lot of time to daydream about how good things will be, with little opportunity for 'reality testing' these fantasies. Prison

relationships can sometimes seem 'perfect' because there is so little 'real' contact. No relationship is perfect, and this usually becomes apparent once the relationship is back in the real world.

Sometimes your family member's behaviour may have caused damage to family relationships long before they went to prison. If this is the case, it can be tempting to believe that things will be better after prison. They may have made promises to change and have specifically attended programs in prison to help with this. However, no change is easy and it is not until they are living back in their normal life that some issues can really be dealt with. If there are long-standing matters that are unresolved, it is important to be realistic. Try to sort through these before the prisoner is released, or as soon as you can post-release. The more communication there is about everyone's expectations, the better prepared family members will be.

## Some tips for reintegration

- Be prepared for the possibility that your family member will have difficulties adjusting after prison
- If things were difficult in the relationship before prison, don't expect that the problems will have gone away by themselves
- Allow them some privacy and personal space
- Make time for your own needs
- Be honest and open about your feelings

- Negotiate your expectations of each other and the roles each of you takes on
- Spend time talking to children, before their parent is released, about what will happen
- Get support, either separately or together, from family, friends and professionals
- Take it slow to allow time to get reacquainted

## Getting help

**VACRO's Family Support team can assist families and the ex-prisoner to manage the post release experience.**

Counselling may be useful to assist you to renegotiate roles, re-establish effective communication and work through relationship difficulties.

**VACRO also publishes resources for ex-prisoners called *Getting Out and How to Survive It*, which provides information about the process of readjusting to the community.**

Most prisoners will receive these factsheets before they are released.

**Electronic versions are also available on the VACRO website and the Department of Justice website: [www.justice.vic.gov.au](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au)**

# Accommodation information

If the prisoner is not returning to the family home the following may be able to assist.

## Post Release Accommodation

Some prisoners may be referred to a pre and post release support service that will pursue accommodation options for the prisoner.

**The Tenants Union on (03) 9416 2577, can help with matters to do with renting accommodation. You can also refer to the Housing factsheets at [www.vacro.org.au/fork](http://www.vacro.org.au/fork)**

## Public Housing

Your family member could ask for support to complete an application for housing while they are still in prison. However waiting times can still be a number of years.

## Transitional Housing Managers

Are based in every region and provide:

- Financial assistance for rent or bond in private rental;
- Assistance with public housing applications; and
- Short term housing for people who are homeless

## Drugs and alcohol use in released prisoners

The initial response to a family member who has an addiction is to try to control their substance abuse. You may find yourself pleading, threatening or organising their admission to treatment. You may also be giving them money if they are struggling financially. You may be going around in circles, engrossed in their life and forgetting to manage your own.

Family Drug Help is a service for people affected by another's problematic alcohol or drug use. It offers services to assist families to deal with the devastating effects that alcohol and drug use in the family can have on all family members. It also offers 'Renegotiating Relationships', a program run in prisons to assist prisoners with alcohol or drug issues and their families to prepare for release.

**You can get access to Family Drug Help through their website at [www.familydrughelp.org.au](http://www.familydrughelp.org.au) or call 1300 660 068.**

## Readying a released/paroled relative for work

Getting a job for a former prisoner can be a daunting task. While it is not necessary to mention time in prison on a resume, it is an offence to lie to an employer about a criminal record when you are asked. Many employers run a police check on prospective employees and while this shouldn't necessarily stop your family member from applying for the job, it will depend on what the job entails and the approach of the employer. For example, a role driving an armoured car will not suit someone with a history of armed robbery.

Finding a job is one thing, keeping it is another. If your family member has spent months or years in prison, it can be difficult adjusting to a working life again.

Expectations in the workforce are higher than they are in prison setting, and taking orders from a boss may remind your family member of the officers in prison, with whom they may have had issues.

Given the issues outlined above, it is important not to expect your family member to rush into the workforce. Some may need to focus on reintegration in other areas of their life, some may require a slow reintroduction back into the workforce, either looking at volunteer roles or part-time work.

## Employment Support Services

There are a range of community based employment services in all local areas who can provide assistance with resumes and give advice on what types of jobs could be applied for depending upon criminal history.

### Personal Support Program

Centrelink can refer long term unemployed people to receive intensive support for job readiness including access to training programs.

### Fitted For Work

Is an organisation that provides job readiness support and clothes for interviews to women returning to the workforce. Contact them on **9620 5533**.

## Home detention

Home detention is an alternative to prison that allows offenders to live at home and maintain family ties and their employment, educational and other commitments. Home detention allows primary caregivers to remain with their child(ren) and assists the family's main financial provider to keep supporting their family, however only certain prisoners will be eligible.

## Families have a say

Assessments for home detention will include interviews with family members. All family members must agree in writing (age permitting) to the prisoner living with them. The information provided in these interviews will not be shared with the prisoner, in line with privacy laws. Families have no 'policing' role and can withdraw their consent to home detention at any time. Family members can also access support services provided by the Home Detention Unit.

Families should consider that there can be a significant dependence on family and friends to help with practical things like shopping, providing emotional support and reducing boredom. It can be stressful living with someone straight out of prison who is still very limited in their freedoms. Some family members say that it was a far more difficult period than when the prisoner was first arrested. There was no escape for anyone.

**Contact the Corrections Victoria  
Home Detention Unit for more information,  
on (03) 9415 2600.**



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and Resettlement of Offenders**

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