

# Caring for children of prisoners: Looking after yourself

When a child's parent or guardian is imprisoned, relatives often take up the role of primary carer. However, you can still make choices about how you will take on your new caring role and how you will look after yourself in this role.

In the early days, you may experience a range of emotional, physical and financial difficulties that may be intensified if you felt you had little choice in the matter. There is often a great deal of personal sacrifice involved in caring for a prisoner's children. Carers often worry about their ability to provide good parenting and may find it difficult to leave the children with others because of concerns about the children's unstable behaviour or emotional state and carers may need to leave employment to look after children. This can make it hard for carers to have enough time out.

Being a carer can also involve a sudden need to increase finances. Those retired or receiving fixed benefits may feel pressure to return to the workforce to meet the financial needs. Dealing with court orders, child custody issues, child protection issues and other such matters can also be difficult and time consuming.

## Relationship between carer and prisoner

The relationship between carers and imprisoned parents can often be strained. This can make shared decision-making about children difficult and make prison visits feel like a huge burden. It can also result in carers not wanting to bring children to visit their parent in prison. The carer must come to a decision about what is best for each child involved. Not maintaining contact with an imprisoned parent can have negative effects for both child and prisoner. However, it is also important

that the child feels safe and secure about visiting their parent in prison. In some cases, it may be better for the child to stay away or for their visits to be infrequent.

Carers in conflict with the imprisoned parent could ask another family member or trusted family friend, who knows the children well, to take them to visit their parent.

**Alternatively, carers can ring VACRO's Family Support Team for information on the Video Visit program between families & prisoners.**

## Department of Human Services (DHS)

DHS may place children and young people with carers when out of home care is required to ensure their safety. There are three types of care arrangements:

- Care is arranged by family, relatives or friends, without reference to the Court system
- The child/young person is placed with a carer as part of a Child Protection Order
- The child/young person is placed with a carer as part of a voluntary agreement. For more information go to [www.cyf.vic.gov.au](http://www.cyf.vic.gov.au) or find your regional office in the White Pages under 'Human Services, Department of'

## Self care tips for carers

- Setting routines for children helps them to feel secure but remain flexible to deal with changes
- Take care of your relationships with friends
- Organising your time can help you have more time for yourself
- Don't try to do too much at once
- Have outings with the children that are enjoyable
- Take advantage of offers of help

**More information for families is available on the VACRO website at [www.vacro.org.au/fork](http://www.vacro.org.au/fork)**

## Child support

You may still be eligible to receive payments through the Child Support Scheme if you are no longer in a relationship with your imprisoned ex-partner and have responsibility for your children or are a carer of an imprisoned parent's children. However, if the imprisoned parent already pays the minimum child support amount and earns no income while incarcerated, their child support payment responsibilities may be reduced to nil.

Contact the Child Support Agency (CSA) on 13 1272 or visit the CSA Internet site at [www.csa.gov.au](http://www.csa.gov.au)

### Centrelink

There are several payments you may be eligible to receive if you are the partner of a prisoner and/or you are caring for the children of a prisoner. These are the Family Tax Benefit A, Family Tax Benefit B, Child Care Benefit, Parenting Payment, and the Double Orphan Pension. Contact the Family Assistance Office on 13 6150 between 8am and 8pm Monday–Friday, or visit the [www.familyassist.gov.au](http://www.familyassist.gov.au) or [www.centrelink.gov.au](http://www.centrelink.gov.au) internet sites for further information.

For those on payments, you can see a Centrelink Social Worker or Psychologist by calling the Centrelink Customer Service Centre on 13 1021, or the Family Assistance Office on 13 6150. You can also request an appointment in person at your local Centrelink office.

## Grandparent carers

If you are the grandparent, taking on a parenting role at a later stage in life is hard. It may involve losses to your

### Tips for grandparent carers

You may be experiencing:

- Confusion about where to find prison information
- Worry about where to get help with money
- Grief and loss about your own child's situation
- Difficulty supervising small children or teenagers
- Social isolation, loneliness or exhaustion

You could try:

- Joining an on-going support group
- Seeking out other grandparents in similar situations
- Being more involved in your grandchildren's activities and recognising their accomplishments

freedom, financial security, time to pursue your own interests, and adult friendships. Fatigue, mental distress, and physical health problems are commonly reported by grandparent carers.

Centrelink can advise grandparents on the various financial supports that grandparents in different circumstances are entitled to. The website can provide information on what is available, but a face-to-face interview will be necessary to assess eligibility. There is also a list of grandparent support organisations.

[www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/individuals/pg\\_grandparents.htm](http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/individuals/pg_grandparents.htm)

Other useful contacts are:

- Mirabel Foundation 9527 9422  
[www.mirabelfoundation.com](http://www.mirabelfoundation.com)
- Seniors Information Victoria 1300 13 50 90  
[www.cotavic.org.au/seniors](http://www.cotavic.org.au/seniors)
- Carers Victoria 1800 242 636  
[www.carersvic.org.au](http://www.carersvic.org.au)

### VACRO support 1800 049 871

- Family counselling, support and information
- Family support group
- Assistance with travel and accommodation
- Children's counselling
- Children and young people mentoring
- Video visits

- Regularly connecting with your other children, grandchildren, extended family and of course, your friends

- Learn as much as you can about caregiving through reading and getting expert help

- Not taking it personally if your grandchildren are feeling angry, disappointed or think they are a burden

- Talking to Centrelink about financial and personal support

Please refer to the VACRO *Children of Prisoners* booklet for ways to help children and young people to cope.