

Returning to Family

GETTING STARTED



8

This is Booklet 8 in the Getting Started Series.

**Getting Started is a guide
for people leaving prison.**

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Returning to Family

Going home to family and connecting with friends is an important part of returning to the community. Family may be an important source of support. They also have their own needs.

There is no magic formula for getting it right. Don't expect them to drop everything when you get home. Tell your family what you need but listen to what they need from you.

Lifeline 13 1114

24 hr counselling service

Parentline 13 22 89

Counselling and Advice line for parents and carers

Change

Be prepared for changes. Don't expect things to be the same as they were before you went in.

Prison time changes everybody – you and your family.

The lives of your family members continued while you were inside and there could be new additions to your family. They could be living in a different house or working in new jobs.

Children grow up very quickly. Their hobbies and friends change. They may have moved schools or left school and started work. Whatever your children are doing their interests and concerns may be different.

Adjustment

Everyone takes time to adjust to a new living arrangement. You might not be able to step back into the same role. You will have to earn people's trust back. This won't happen overnight.

Try to take time out if you need it. Your family will also need some time out. Talk about this together and come to an agreement. Don't wait till you feel like walking out.

If you're having a hard time, one of your options is going to a Family Relationship Centre. To find out more information you can call the Family Relationship Advice Line on 1800 050 321

Trust

It can be difficult to trust people again after prison. It might feel like everyone is nagging you and looking for you to stuff up. Your family are probably just worried and scared about losing you again.

If you're feeling really hassled, say sorry and tell them you need some space. Work it out later when you are both calm.

Pre-release

It's probably been difficult for you to maintain your relationships while you've been in prison. Your family has been doing it tough as well.

Have a think about some of the things your family had to deal with:

- The time and costs of prison visits: it takes a lot of travel time to visit any of the country prisons and might require an overnight stay which is expensive
- Paying for rent, shopping and all the bills on one income instead of two
- Other families and children no longer wanting to be friends
- Children not coping
- Unwanted media or police attention

If you've got some visits before you get out, ask what's been happening for them. This will help you know what you're returning home to. It might also be a relief for them to talk about it.

This is also a good time for you and your family to plan your first couple of weeks home.

Expectations

It's difficult to know what your relationship will be like when you get home. You know how hard it is to talk about problems over the phone or during visits. It's also impossible to be intimate.

Things you haven't been able to talk about are going to pop up when you get home. Keep this in mind but you don't have to deal with it all at once. These issues have waited all this time so don't let them stop you enjoying your time back together.

You may have had a lot of time to think about how good things will be when you return home. It's easy to remember the best things and forget the problems. Be realistic, though, it can take some time to work it all out.

Partners

Your partner has been coping with extra responsibility while you were in prison.

Sometimes they cope better than they were expected to. Before you were in prison you may have 'looked after' your partner. It can feel strange if they no longer depend on you.

You may be faced with a new role in the relationship. You may also find that you now have to depend on them.

Consider sharing the decision-making as well as the workload.

Remember when you go home your partner:

- may be unwilling to give up their new found independence, friends and lifestyle
- may be fearful of demands of returning to things as they were before you left for prison

Difficult relationships

Even with the best intentions you may find it hard to communicate with your partner without negative emotions getting in the way. If this is happening, consider getting some counselling. You can get counselling for yourself, or with your current or former partner.

Relationships Australia and **Lifeworks** provide counselling at a variety of locations across Victoria. Both of these services charge for counselling according to your level of income.

Services include:

- Relationship counselling
- Individual counselling

- Men's behaviour change therapy
- Family dispute resolution
- Family violence prevention
- Post-separation
- Parenting counselling
- Children's programs
- Gambling help

Relationships Australia 1300 364 277

Life works (03) 8650 6200

For men who are feeling out of control with their emotions and anger, the Men's Referral Service provides free, anonymous and confidential advice from a male telephone counsellor.

Men's Referral Service 1800 065 973

Mensline 1800 789 978

Ex-Partners

Not all relationships survive the test of prison. Supporting a family member in prison is difficult and hard to maintain over the long term.

You may have been told directly by your former partner that he or she is moving on with their lives, or that person may have stopped visiting you.

For you, the relationship may feel unresolved because you haven't had the chance to talk things through. You might feel angry or bitter that they didn't make more effort. While these feelings are normal, it's not fair to blame the other person for moving on with their life. People just adapt the best they can to different circumstances.

Letting them dominate your thoughts will stop you from focusing upon other important relationships in your life. Think of this as a time of new beginnings. Deal with the things you can control and don't obsess about the things you can't.

If you have children in the care of an ex-partner or other carer, look at ways of developing an open and co-operative relationship with that person. Sometimes reducing conflict in your kid's life is better than having things done your way.

If your relationship with your ex-partner isn't working at all you may be able to organise access visits so that you limit the contact with your ex-partner.

A local family support agency might be able to assist you with advice on how to do this.

Returning to Parenting

Your children learn to adjust when you go to prison. Now they have to adjust again when you go home. The longer you have been in prison, the harder this will be.

If your child was very young when you went away, they may have no memory of you at home. It may seem to them like having a stranger join the household.

Young children might feel insecure when you return. They can be overly clingy or ignore you because they are worried you may leave again.

Some children may be resentful when you return home. Particularly older kids. They may be jealous of the time you spend with your partner

and want to compete with you for attention. It will take time for them to accept you. Their other parent has been the boss for a while.

Your kids are older now. Ask the other carer about their needs and discipline strategies. If you have different rules it can lead to clashes.

It might take your kids a while to get used to the new arrangements. No matter how they are acting you are still very important to them.

In prison, the one thing you have control over is your cell. You can expect to find it difficult to cope with children who leave toys around and make a lot of mess. Remember that this is normal behaviour for children.

Trying to control the house will only create more stress for you and for them.

Sole Parenting

If you are going to be parenting solo, it is a good idea to discuss care arrangements in the visits leading up to release. It will be an emotional time for everyone involved.

The person who has been looking after the children might find it difficult to let go. Carers often form close bonds with the children. It can also be hard on the kids to have this relationship suddenly disrupted or changed.

You may have different ideas about how to look after children. This means your kids will need to get used to a different routine.

Some carers may be quite happy to let go of their role once you return. Others may ask to stay involved in your children's lives.

It could help to slowly take over the care of your kids. For example you may want to just start with weekends. This will give you time to adjust and make it easier to complete Parole.

Rather than trying to sort everything out after prison, you should start having the talks before you get out.

Self Care

If you will be returning to full time care of your children, make sure you organise time out for yourself. If family or friends are unable to help, look for other childcare options.

Neighbourhood houses often provide occasional childcare at very low costs.

Association of Neighbourhood Houses

(03) 9654 1104

Getting Help with Parenting

If you are having trouble coping or you feel isolated, get support before things get out of hand. Call on friends and family or seek out parenting support.

Parenting Support can include:

- Parenting skills (information and training)
- Support groups (other mothers with similar experiences)
- Childcare assistance
- Counselling
- Social activities

Women that are having trouble balancing children and a Parole Order can get assistance from VACRO's CCATS program.

For more information see Getting Started 9: Women

The **Caroline Chisholm Society** has free telephone counselling on family issues:
(03) 9370 1800 134 863

The **Sky Program** provides counselling around issues with Children. Sky also provides counselling and mentoring for kids and youth.

Call **VACRO (03) 9605 1900**

Parentline 13 22 89

Confidential advice and counselling for parents and care-givers.

Child FIRST 1300 786 433

Intake, assessment, advice and referrals for vulnerable children and their families. This is funded by the Department of Human Services.

Foster Care and Child Protection

If your child is in temporary care with the Department of Human Services (DHS) you should be in touch with them before you get out.

Think about writing a letter to the carer and the DHS case-manager. Inform them of your release date and where you will be living. Tell them you would like to work towards regaining custody or access visits.

If you are in the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre talk to the Melbourne Citymission Family Worker.

Custody & Access Agreements

Unless both parents make an agreement, a parent's legal rights are decided by the Family Court.

The other parent might not want to keep the custody and access arrangements you had before prison. You will need to come to a new agreement or return to court.

Most custody and access disputes will go to mediation before Court. You will need to access legal advice to help you through this process.

Victoria Legal Aid

Melbourne **(03) 9269 0120**

Rural areas **1800 677 402**

Family Relationships Advice Line is a national telephone service established to assist families affected by relationship or separation issues. **1800 050 321**

Returning to Parents

No matter how old you are, parents find it hard to stop being a parent.

They can worry about you re-offending or using drugs again. They can feel they need to monitor or control you.

Feeling that you are being watched over, or that your parents don't trust you, can be hard. It can tempt you to break out and do something that might breach your parole.

Talk to your parents about how it makes you feel. Do this before you react and work out some strategies that help you cope.

While you live in your parents' house, they will expect you to live by their rules. If you don't think you can do this, talk about it. Maybe living somewhere else will be better for everyone.

Some tips for returning home:

- Think about the most important things to you when you get out
- Choose 1 or 2 of these to talk to your family about before you get out
- Try to work out who will be responsible for what in the house. For example: who will do the shopping? Who will make sure the bills are paid on time?
- Try to respect each family member's need for privacy and personal space
- Take it slow: allow time to settle back in with your partner and/or children
- Get support, either separately or together, from family, friends and professionals
- It is OK to think about your mates still inside, but it is important to move on for yourself and your family

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