

# Families of Offenders Resource Kit

*An instrumental tool for workers*

“No one asked how we were doing...”



# Who are we?



Cover photographs by Caroline Bushell

VACRO was established in 1872 and is a non-profit, non denominational community organisation whose mission is the care of offenders, ex-offenders and their families. Services include:

- The information and support team provides support with navigating the correctional system;
- A Family Counsellor who specialises in the specific experiences of the families of offenders;
- Travel assistance for families visiting their family member in prison;
- Aboriginal Family Travel Assistance providing travel and accommodation assistance to the family members;
- The Family Worker at the Neighbourhood Justice Centre offers support to the families of defendants and offenders
- Family Liaison Worker at the Melbourne Assessment Prison;
- Family Support Group;
- Further information is available on the website:

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

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

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# What are we talking about?

*Australia wide, approximately 38,000 children experience parental incarceration each year.*

## **Who is this kit for?**

This publication is a practical tool for those who come into contact with the families and children of prisoners. It offers information regarding the impact of imprisonment on these families and strategies for support. The term 'family' has an inclusive definition in this kit as it is recognised that there are a range of family structures existing in Victoria. The term 'family' encompasses not only traditional family structures such as the nuclear family, but also sole parent, intergenerational and those of various cultures including the kinship ties within Aboriginal culture.

**Kinship = All members of the extended family group or family clan held together by strong kinship ties and relationships**

## **The Principles Behind It**

This kit is guided by the concept that it is important to have a coordinated service system in order to support earlier intervention and prevention. This is clearly articulated in the following documents: A Fairer Victoria, Children, Youth & Families Act (2005), and Child Friendly Communities (NAPCAN).

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# Engaging Families of Offenders

It is important for professionals and volunteers to be aware of their own values and judgements when working with families of offenders. It is not an easy issue to talk about, particularly if the working relationship is new and it is hard for the family to come forward. CALD families may find it especially hard to disclose their situation. It is not uncommon for workers to be unfamiliar with these issues and this can also make the family feel excluded from the service. Connecting with the family is the key ingredient.

*“I found it really hard to tell anyone; even my maternal child health worker and child care centre didn’t know my husband was incarcerated. I was so worried that they would judge me and my children. It would have been easier if I knew they understood what I was going through” (Partner)*

## Tips

- Make it clear to the family that you are supportive of them and the issues they are facing. Separate your feelings about the crime from the experience of the family.
- Seek secondary consultation with the Family Counsellor at VACRO
- Take time to engage, develop trust through positive support before entering difficult territory
- Consider alternate methods of engagement. Can you meet at a coffee shop instead of the office?
- Include questions on criminal justice as part of your initial assessment or intake form. [E.g. Are you supporting anyone in the correctional system? / Is your family involved with the correctional system?](#) However make them aware that they are not required to answer the question to receive a service.
- Be clear and transparent about the type of information you are collecting and what it will be used for.

(There are a growing range of resources available to assist workers on [www.vacro.org.au/fork](http://www.vacro.org.au/fork))

# Families Grief & Loss

## Families: The Invisible Victims of Crime

*“Families and communities are weakened when prisoners are forcibly prevented from participating in the reciprocal relationships that form the foundation of family life”*

*(Bernstein, N. All Alone in the World: Children of Incarcerated Parents, 2005).*

## Grief and loss

Many relatives of prisoners have said that the grief they felt when their loved one went to prison was similar to bereavement. While there is still contact, grieving the missing relative can be more difficult for prisoners' families due to the fact that:

- Neighbours, friends and family may not be very supportive and understanding, causing families to feel very isolated from their community and networks;
- There are no grieving rituals to help prisoners' families cope with their loss. Their pain is not regarded as 'legitimate' in the same way; and
- There is no finality. The loss seems to drag on indefinitely.

This lack of social support can result in families hiding their feelings from others and trying to 'soldier on'; however this can lead to other problems, like long-term depression.

## Tips

- Your client may not currently be in contact with their family, but if the family exists it can be worthwhile working toward reunification.
- It is important to encourage the families to seek support where they can have the opportunity to talk about their experiences. A referral to Child FIRST could help. See page 9. Or refer to the Health & Welfare Community Guide at [www.lifeline.org.au/geelong](http://www.lifeline.org.au/geelong)

*“After his third incarceration, he had made new friends who stuck by him. This made a big difference both for him and took the pressure of us.”*

*(Mother)*

# Families Guilt & Shame

## Guilt & Shame

*“I have found that families of prisoners are often treated and dealt with in the very same way as their incarcerated family member is; as though the family member somehow is a criminal as well” (Worker)*

Stereotypes of prisoners and widespread fear of crime and criminals can lead people to discriminate against the families of prisoners. As a result, they are often the ‘invisible victims of crime’. Some families will experience intense media attention, judgment and fear within the local community and even among family and friends. They may feel so ashamed of their relative they isolate themselves from family, friends and community.

- Visit the FORK website for information on the impact of the media on families

As the partner of a prisoner, people may be given a hard time for wanting to maintain a relationship with someone in prison. For children, their relationships with extended family members can be broken through no choice of their own. A parent with a child in prison is likely to feel extreme guilt about their own parenting, their relationship with their child and be searching for answers on how/why they seemingly failed their child.

### Tips

- Consider the fact that some families will still be disrupted by regular contact with police and police lock up or short prison terms rather than lengthy involvement with the prison system.
- It is important to encourage the family to give friends and family a chance to support the family. The support of a counsellor or support worker can assist or contact the VACRO family counsellor.
- VACRO has a Family of Offenders Support group in Geelong or go to Health & Welfare Community Guide at [www.lifeline.org.au/geelong](http://www.lifeline.org.au/geelong) for other support groups in Geelong.

# Families Financial Loss

## Financial loss

The imprisonment of a family member increases the economic insecurity of the family because of:

- The loss of his/her wage;
- The loss of the main carer for the children; and
- Increased costs of maintaining family contact, such as providing goods and money for the prisoner, travelling to rural prisons, moving house to live closer to the prisoner, and loss of the family home.

*“I can’t even afford to buy my grandchildren presents, as I am always running back and forth to see my son” (Mother)*

### Tip

- Refer families to the Financial Counsellor at Diversitat for assistance in managing the financial changes. See page 37.

## Centrelink

There are several payments available for the partners of a prisoner and/or the carers of the children of prisoners. These are the Family Tax Benefit A, Family Tax Benefit B, Child Care Benefit, Parenting Payment, and the Double Orphan Pension.

For more information on these benefits, contact the Family Assistance Office on 13 61 50 between 8am and 8pm Monday–Friday, or visit [www.familyassist.gov.au](http://www.familyassist.gov.au) or [www.centrelink.gov.au](http://www.centrelink.gov.au)

# Families Communication

## Communication

Families will experience many barriers in maintaining contact with their loved one. These include:

- Travelling and accommodation costs. Many families may need to stay overnight near the prison due to the length of travel time and the time it takes to be 'processed' at the prison and get through to a visit;
- Phone calls can only be made by the prisoner; families are not permitted to call. Calls are charged at STD rates and are time limited (average of 10 minutes). Prison staff will phone the family first to ask if they will accept calls from the prisoner. Calls may be monitored and recorded and can be denied if the prisoner breaches prison rules; Letters are a highly valued form of communication for prisoners.
- Families and prisoners can write to one another as often as they like, however these can be inspected by the prison at any time;
- Visits at the prison are crowded and noisy, and there are limited activities for children;
- Prisoners are restricted in their parenting during visits, such as not being able to take their child to the toilet;
- It is difficult to raise negative issues when one cannot be around to follow up how that person is feeling.
- Police cells provide extremely limited visiting options for family.

*“You can be waiting for 3 hours if it is busy and then be told that visiting is closed and you are not going to be able to see him”  
(Mother)*

### Tip

- Remind the family that there are a range of factors out of the prisoner's control that can prevent the prisoner from contacting them.

# Families Stress

## Stress

The parent/carer left to cope with the children is likely to experience a lot of stress. They are likely to feel lonely and isolated with nobody to turn to. They may feel overburdened with responsibility, anxious about money and worried about visiting the prison. It may be hard to focus on their own needs when they are so concerned about their relative's situation and feeling frustrated by their inability to assist them. It is vital that their health and wellbeing is given priority. Fathers who are suddenly left with the children are sometimes not practiced in their carer skills and may have less knowledge of parenting routines. They may not be aware of changes in the children's behaviours thus there is greater potential for family breakdown.

## Tips

- Encourage them to obtain factual information about the process of imprisonment and what supports are available.
- VACRO has an information book for families titled "Prison- What Now". This can be sent to the family or is available to download off the FORK website.
- Ask if families would like to access a local Family services agency for support & coordination of services. See Child FIRST on page 9.
- Provide fathers with access to parenting information and support. Resources are available on the FORK website.

*"Quite often the families get forgotten. The wives will ring me and say, 'My husband's getting looked after in there – what about us?'" (Support worker)*

## Risk factors and Early Intervention

If you are concerned about the child or family there are resources to assist you to identify when behaviours are an indication that they are at risk. You will find an example on [www.vacro.org.au/fork](http://www.vacro.org.au/fork) or refer to your local family support service.

# Children Telling the Children

## Children

All children face adversity and difficulties at some stage in their lives, however the elements that enable children to develop their resilience such as parent-child attachment and the self esteem and role modelling of the parent; are interrupted when a parent goes to prison.

Children need to know that the imprisonment of a parent is not synonymous with **abandonment**; that they are still loved and that the parent has not been harmed. Fostering the relationship and maintaining the bond between imprisoned parent and child has an integral role in reducing the impact of parental imprisonment and allowing the child to maintain their process of development.

*“If you lie to your children you are destroying their trust in you, when the other parent has already let them down” (Partner)*

## Telling the Children

One of the most difficult things to face is what to tell the children. It is important that children understand what is happening as early as possible, as they often hear things that they can't understand, or understand too well.

*“I did tell her the truth, but just a watered down version. She is only 3 and doesn't need to know every detail” (Partner)*

## Tips

- It is generally best to tell the children the truth.
- If the carers prefer not to, assist them to pick a scenario that will last & make sense, even to a young child.
- Remember that children need answers to questions like; ‘why can't I see him?’, ‘where are you going?’.

# Children Where to start?

## Where to start?

Adult

the child already knows: which is certainly that Daddy or Mummy isn't home. For a child who is three or four they need enough information to satisfy their curiosity. An example could be:

*"Daddy's away in a place called prison. He can't come home for a while, but you can visit/talk on the phone to him. He knows you still love him".*

Older children require more information and if you encourage the carer to tell them, then they have some control over the quality of the information and some influence over its emotional impact.

*"When it was all on the news, I used to run in the room and shut off the TV before they could see anything. For ages I told them he was away. It was only when the youngest girl wrote a letter to Father Christmas asking for him back that I felt I had to tell them the truth. The girls cried, I cried, but in the end it was all alright" (Action for Prisoners' Families: Telling the Children, 2003)*

## Tips

- Suggest the parent in prison writes to their child to inform them that they are okay and reveal as much information as possible about what they do day to day;
- Refer to the FORK website to access guidelines on involving children in decision making rather than adults making decisions for them.

# Children

If children have witnessed the arrest, they may need support to help them deal with the discovery that outside forces can remove their parent. Also, their home and community may suddenly feel unsafe for them. They will need explanations and support that:

- They are still loved and secure in their family;
- The other parent/carer will not be taken away;
- Police are not bad (children need to understand who is available to protect them).

(Action for Prisoners' Families: Telling the Children, 2003)

Children are often told not to say anything about where their parent is as this is believed to protect them from being bullied. Whilst it may do that sometimes, it also leaves children feeling very isolated and teaches them that talking about problems may result in a lack of support. This effectively encourages children not to communicate in a way that promotes the expression of feelings or asking for support.

*“The Youth Resource Officer generally chooses to send other police to attend any incidents at the school. That way he can maintain a positive relationship with the kids.”*  
(School Principal)

## Tips

- The women's prison has a Mother & Child worker. Contact Dame Phyllis Frost Centre on [9217 8400](tel:92178400).
- Barwon Child FIRST connects children, young people and their families who are experiencing crisis or ongoing difficulties or who need family support. They provide assessment & referral to a range of services including: parenting support, family counselling, casework, casemanagement, youth support and family mediation. See page 37.
- There are a range of “Seasons’ grief support groups for children. Check with your school or family support agency for more information.



# Children Early Years & School

## Early Years & School

Prisoner's children are largely invisible in their social and learning environments; however teachers & childcare professionals play a vital role in identifying children who are struggling to cope as they see them on a daily basis and notice any behavioural changes. Children of prisoners may experience a decline in their performance and a decreased motivation to achieve. If they are finding it hard to concentrate and focus, they can become disruptive, engage in attention seeking behaviour or may refuse to attend their centre or school. It is also possible that other children may be bullying them, particularly if the court case had a high media profile.

As teachers & childcare professionals are often the adults whom children and adolescents will disclose worries to in the first instance:

### Tips

- They can encourage the child to reveal what they are feeling and seek appropriate support;
- Other professionals should encourage families to inform the school or centre of the family situation as children are more likely to be resilient when a supportive plan for the child and family can be developed collaboratively.

*“We realised that there were a lot of problems at school, he was really struggling at his high school, getting picked on a lot”.*  
(Father)

*“We have a student with a Mother in prison... This little boy is missing his Mum and is very anxious. He was really grieving for his Mother and I would see him regularly at my door, wanting to talk about how he felt”.* (Teacher)

# Children Strategies for Support

## Strategies for Supporting the Children

- Adults involved with the child/family can ask if the child feels particularly comfortable with any of their teachers (or other professionals) and liaise with this person;
- Contact Barwon Youth for assessment and support for adolescents;
- Consider linking the child with the Youth Resource Officer at the local Police Station;
- Non-specialist one-to-one mentoring projects who provide 'role models' such as Big Brother Big Sister offer excellent opportunities for children;
- Early intervention in educational support such as tutors, homework clubs can provide direct support to these children;
- Referral to PATS Peer Support Group in Geelong for children of parents with mental or emotional health problems [5222 6911](tel:52226911);
- Be supportive about the issues but maintain the importance of school;
- Provide outreach if possible, as these families are easier to engage within their community rather than through office visits;
- Balance the child's need for their own support, with their need to feel 'normal' and not be seen as a 'problem'. While specialist supports may need to be accessed, ensure that there is also concerted effort in improving community connectedness and pro-social skills by linking children into sporting and recreational clubs and other mainstream community services;
- Ensure school support programs are not targeting specific disadvantage but that information is presented in a broader way;
- Make a referral to Child FIRST for support from a local Family & Children's Service. See page 37. Or refer to the Health & Welfare Community Guide at [www.lifeline.org.au/geelong](http://www.lifeline.org.au/geelong)

# Children What might the Child Experience?

## What might the child experience?

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

- Physical symptoms: headaches, injuries or illnesses;
- Nightmares and fear of the dark;
- 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;
- Retreating into denial and/or a fantasy world;
- Showing anger, aggression and hostility toward the adult in charge or toward authority figures;
- Increased disobedience and defiance at home or at school;
- Experience a decline in school work and social relationships at school or become truants;
- 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”. (Mother)*

*“My daughter had him on a pedestal; he was her big brother, her protector. My youngest son wouldn’t get too close to him as every time in the past he has let him down” (Mother)*

# Youth

## Youth

Dealing with incarceration can compound the confusion and stress of adolescence. Young people can be a vulnerable, overlooked and hard-to-reach group, and having a parent or sibling in prison may also cause a double burden if they step into or are pushed into a role of supporting other members of the family and protecting younger siblings.

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. The potential for acting out behaviours can also be exacerbated by bullying and again by shame.

Young people often give more importance to their peer group and less to their family so they may appear disinterested in the family concern for the prisoner. 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. It is particularly embarrassing to visit prison and talk about themselves with other people listening.

*"I'm so tired of caring. I can't go out and just spend time with my friends anymore because I have to look after my brother"*

### Tips

- Be aware that the young person may have taken on extra responsibilities;
- Consider ways of keeping in touch with their parent other than visiting;
- Assist in applying for special consideration for assignments, timetables etc;
- Consider a referral to Barwon Youth for support services;
- For more information on youth visit the FORK website.



# Carers

## Carers

In taking up the role of primary carer, carers may experience a range of difficulties at a time when they are least able to cope themselves. These include such matters as are dealing with court orders, child custody issues and child protection issues. These difficulties are often intensified as a result of being thrust into the role without a lot of choice. Carers may find it difficult to leave the children with others, although they may need to leave employment to look after the children because of their unstable behaviour or their emotional state.

*“I wish I could ring him when I have difficulties with the children”*

For a grandparent, taking on a parenting role at a later stage in life can involve losses to their freedom, financial security, and adult friendships. Fatigue, mental distress, and physical health problems are commonly reported by grandparent carers. Encourage carers to:

- Make an effort to maintain regular contact between the parent and child;
- Ensure they have enough self/environmental support themselves;
- Keep routines with the children but understand that maintaining the relationship with the incarcerated parent might require some flexibility;
- Book pre-school aged children regularly into childcare or kindergarten;
- Organise their time to have more time for themselves and their friendships;
- Have outings with the children that are enjoyable;
- Take advantage of offers of help;
- Make a referral for support from a local Family Services agency such as Bethany or the Glastonbury Grandparents as Carers' support group; and,
- Contact the VACRO Family Support Team. See page 37.

# Care Arrangements for Children

## Care Arrangements for children when the primary caregiver is incarcerated:

DHS Child Protection will only become involved if there are no identified carers for the child and/or there are identified risk and safety issues for the child with the remaining parent/caregiver. For Aboriginal children, where DHS is involved, the VACCA Lakidjeka program needs to be consulted as to the best cultural response and/or placement for the child.

Children may be unwilling, angry and resentful if they need to be placed outside their family home, and a child who is fostered is experiencing further instability in addition to the changes and loss of their primary carer. A number of studies have also made the observation that siblings are often separated during these care processes.

There are three types of care arrangements:

1. Care is arranged by family, relatives or friends, without reference to the Court system
2. The child is placed with a carer as part of a Child Protection Order
3. The child is placed with a carer as part of a voluntary agreement

For more information go to [www.office-forchildren.vic.gov.au/](http://www.office-forchildren.vic.gov.au/)

Carers can apply for certain Centrelink benefits. See Page 4

*“My Mum has my boys. She does a great job but doesn’t speak English. My oldest is putting on weight, struggling at school and becoming depressed. He needs someone to talk to”.*  
(Female Offender)

# Family Relationships with the Prisoner

## Family Relationship with the Prisoner

Due to their isolation, prisoners often have limited perceptions of the realities facing their families who are continuing to act as a constant source of support for the prisoner while hiding their own difficulties.

### Partners

Partners often experience pressure to visit every weekend which may not be possible given financial, time and emotional factors. They may be experiencing suspicion from the offender about activities in their life and jealousy about their freedoms. Partners may also feel stressed about financially supporting the prisoner; however their basic needs are catered for. It is important that families take care of their own and their children's needs first.

### Tips

- Encourage partners to reassure their family member that the relationship is important to them.
- Encourage partners to talk about their limitations to their family member and arrange a realistic visiting / support plan together.

*“I noticed some families during visits were pressured to provide expensive items to help maintain the prisoner’s status within the prison” (Mother)*

If the family member has concerns about their relative they can contact:

- VACRO Family Liaison Worker if their relative is at Melbourne Assessment Prison;
- Salvation Army Chaplain at each prison;
- The Prison Supervisor: Prison contact details are available at [www.vacro.org.au/fork](http://www.vacro.org.au/fork)

# Family Relationships

## Parents of Offenders

### Parents of Offenders

Parents frequently experience strong and conflicting emotions about their child's situation which include:

- Anger that their child could have committed a crime;
- Worry about their child's health and safety in prison, no matter how old the offender is or how bad the offence was;

□

- taking them back home when they are released;
- Blame that they are responsible for their child ending up in prison;
- Isolation and alienation from friends or extended family who reject the offender and condemn the parents' continued feelings of loyalty or concern for them; and,
- Relief that their child is safe if they were abusing drugs or alcohol, or endangering themselves or others.

### Tips

- Encourage them to separate what their child did from how they feel about them as a person. They can disapprove of their behaviour, but still love them.
- Help them to set a boundary around what they are prepared to provide and to understand how difficult this can be to achieve.
- Encourage them to attend VACRO's Geelong Family Support Group or to contact a local Family Service. See page 37.



# Family Relationships Siblings of Offenders

## Siblings of Offenders

Siblings are often a neglected group who require their own attention and need for information. While they are experiencing a similar range of emotions as the parent, they are not always as well informed and may be suffering a lack of attention due to the changes in the family and the increased levels of stress. Their confusion and worry about what is happening to their sibling, their loneliness and their unacknowledged grief can lead to negative changes in behaviour. However, they can also be a vital source of support to parents and other children.

### Tips

- Ensure that the sibling receives the information that they need
- Encourage parents / carers to make time for the sibling too
- Ask if they would like to be referred for individual counselling support.

See page 37.

*“I feel bad if I cry or get upset when I am there because he’s the one that’s in there. I get to go home to our house with Mum and Dad. It’s ok for me” (Sister)*

## Carer of Offender’s Children

The relationship between carers and imprisoned parents can be strained due to difficulties such as shared decision-making about children and pressure to visit. These issues may result in carers not bringing children to visit their parent in prison.

- Carers who do not get along with the imprisoned parent may 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 to find out who could supervise the children during a visit with their parent.

# Criminal Justice System

## Criminal Justice System

Common responses people have when a loved one is arrested are that they:

- May find it hard to believe that the person they know could have committed a crime;
- Might be angry at the police or their loved one for breaking the law;
- May feel ashamed and/or worried that people will judge them;
- May have fear and confusion about what is happening to their loved one.

The arrest of a family member can be shocking and confusing as arrests are often unexpected and public. They may be carried out with force, which is even more distressing if children are present. Other families may be used to contact with the police and not notice the impact on the children or themselves.

*“The family’s house had just been raided by the police to arrest their son. They had no idea where he had been taken. It was very stressful for them” (Prison support worker)*

### Tips

- Contact Geelong Community Legal centre for information on the family’s rights or the family can direct complaints about police behaviour to the Office of Police Integrity. See page 38.
- Contact Corrections Victoria for information on what may be happening to the arrested family member. See page 38.
- Men are held at the Melbourne Custody Centre in Lonsdale St and then Melbourne Assessment Prison (MAP) in Spencer St to receive security and health ratings. They are then moved to Metropolitan Remand Centre in Laverton
- Women are held at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre in Deer Park.
- A VACRO Family Liaison Worker is based at MAP or families can call the VACRO Family Support Team
- Contact the Law Institute for free assistance in locating a lawyer. See page 38.
- For information on programs to support people on bail go to [www.magistratescourt.vic.gov.au](http://www.magistratescourt.vic.gov.au)

# Criminal Justice System What are Courts like?

## What are courts like?

Courts can be intimidating and are very public places. The language used during trial can be hard to understand and frustrating. Families may hear things they disagree with or that upset them, and unless they are a witness, they will not be able to have their say during the trial. It helps to be aware of the codes of conduct before the trial begins. For example: Children under 16 should be accompanied by a parent/guardian although judges do generally not approve of children being in court.

*“There’s no privacy. You’re not even supposed to have your own children there but its okay for school kids to come in and out, listening to your family’s personal history” (Mother)*

## Tips

- Court Network volunteers can help families by explaining how the courts operate and can show them around the court
- See [www.courtnetwork.com.au](http://www.courtnetwork.com.au)
- A Guide to Court Support Services is available on [www.magistratescourt.vic.gov.au](http://www.magistratescourt.vic.gov.au)

## Sentencing

If the person is given a prison sentence there is no opportunity to say goodbye as they will immediately be escorted by court officers into a police van and taken into custody.

- Help family members to prepare for the possibility of sudden separation;
- Pack a bag with underwear.

*“I had no idea that he would just disappear. We didn’t pack a bag for him and we didn’t get to say goodbye” (Partner)*

# Visiting

## Visiting

Prison visits do matter. Children, families and prisoners want to see each other despite the hardships and families feel that it humanises the prison experience for their loved one. Maintaining consistent contact helps the family to cope with separation and usually plays an important role in the family's ability to reunify post release. Seeing other families in the same situation can also be helpful.

There are a range of visit types:

- Contact visits
- Non-contact visits
- Residential visits
- Special visits

*"I went for my first visit with my son at MAP. I checked in at reception then waited for 2 hours to be called up. That was when they asked me for my identification points and couldn't see him. I was distraught". (Mother)*

### Tip

- For more detailed information visit [www.vacro.org.au/fork](http://www.vacro.org.au/fork) or ring the VACRO family services for support.

To make a **professional visit** you must:

- Have permission from the prisoner;
- Provide the prison with your name and D.O.B. prior to the visit;
- Inform the prison of the day and time of your visit;
- Have a total of 100 points of identification.



# Visiting

Visiting times and conditions vary between prisons however most prisons have 'information for visitors' sheets. This provides information on visiting times and frequencies, prisoner property, money, telephone calls, being searched and travelling to the prison.

## Tips

- All visitors less than 16 years of age must be accompanied by an adult unless special circumstances exist (E.g. the type of offence). Check with the prison.
- On the day of the visit it is advisable to ring and confirm that the visit can go ahead (E.g. there may be a prison 'lock down' during which prisoners cannot leave their cells)
- Many visitors' centres provide play facilities that can assist the child to cope with the situation but check beforehand so that the child's expectations are not inappropriately heightened.
- There are strict rules about what can be taken into the prison, even for children and babies.

*"My 8 year old was excited about taking in his new school photo to his dad for his birthday. He had made a special frame for it. When we got to the prison, they had changed the rules about the size of the photos, and he wasn't allowed to take the photo in. He felt miserable that he had let his dad down" (Partner)*

*"If you made an effort with the guards they would often reciprocate and treat you with respect. This made a big difference when you felt welcomed at the prison." (Mother)*

# Visiting

## Should Children go to prison for visits?

### Should children go to prison for visits?

Families and caregivers often grapple with this issue thinking that seeing parents in prison is too upsetting and could be unsafe.

- Regular contact gives children some routine in their communications, building a sense of security and predictability, which can reduce the negative effects of parental separation. Visits help to replace their fears and fantasies with a more realistic understanding of their parent's circumstances and reassures children that their parent is safe and seeing other families and children of prisoners helps children know that they are not alone.
- Regular visits allow imprisoned parents to maintain a parenting role, keep in touch with each stage as their child grows up, and gives them a sense of being needed and valued outside prison. This can increase their motivation to get out and stay out of prison and can make family reunification easier when the prisoner is eventually released.

### Tips

- The decision to visit should be case by case based on the individual children and the family relationship, the length of incarceration and regular monitoring of the experience. It may include variations of phone and direct contact and variations on the regularity of contact.
- Use language that is non-directive and dispassionate to allow the family to work towards their own decision about visiting.

*"I moved regularly to follow my husband from prison to prison and I thought I was doing the right thing to keep us together as a family. I believe the ongoing contact had a detrimental effect on my eldest daughter. I made the decision for my youngest 2 children to only have phone contact with him, which was a good decision as in 25 years he has only been out of prison for about 2 Christmases" (Partner)*

# Visiting

## How to prepare Children for visits

If a child is not visiting their parent, it may be because:

- The parent does not want their child to see them “like this” or to be exposed to the prison environment;
- The parent / carer doesn't have the time or resources to travel to the prison;
- There is a history of violence in the parental relationship;
- There is a breakdown between the parent / carer and the incarcerated parent;
- There are legal reasons why the child cannot visit their parent.

### How to prepare children for visits?

There are many hardships involved in bringing children to prison, including travelling long distances, limited toys and play equipment, rigid security procedures, long waiting times for visits, lack of privacy, crowded and restrictive visiting centres that prevent children from making noise and running around. In most parent/carer's experience, prison visits are stressful and exhausting, especially with small children.

#### Tip

- Encourage the carer or family member to visit the parent 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 the visiting experience matches children's expectations, they will be less worried.

*“It's dead boring just sitting and waiting. It's a bit scary being searched and having to take your shoes off. It makes you feel horrible, like you're the one who's done something wrong. We couldn't really talk when we saw him; there was too many other people around”.*  
(Daughter)

# Visiting Tips

## Tips

- Suggest the parent/carer tell the 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 (include the possibility of the 'Sniffer Dogs');
  - The need to do what the prison officers ask of them;
  - 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, what is inappropriate and why.
  
- Encourage the parent/carer to ask the imprisoned parent to write them a letter explaining what the visit will be like and telling them that they are looking forward to seeing them;
- Ask them to keep the imprisoned parent informed about the child's current activities so that they can ask the children relevant questions;
- Ask if they feel comfortable to seek out another visiting family member who seems to be coping well;
- Ask VACRO for a copy of a Children's storybook about visiting a prison.

*"The most important thing is to ask the child themselves if they actually do want to see their parent and to make sure that they don't feel guilty if they don't". (Partner)*

*"When I took my son to visit, we made a happy day of it. You don't have to tell them too much, just make sure they are comfortable". (Partner)*

# Visiting Family Violence

## Family Violence

If a family member has been violent or threatening towards the mother/carer then they may be feeling greatly relieved that the offender is in prison. When addressing the issue of whether to visit them and/or whether they should have contact with the children, professionals need to consider:

- The safety of the mother/carer and of the children;
- The possibility of re-traumatising children who have witnessed the family violence;
- The ambivalence of the mother/carer in wanting to maintain the relationship but not accepting the violence.

## Tips

- It is a good idea for the child to be assessed to ascertain their level of trauma;
- Consider the option of counselling for the child;
- Reassure the mother/care that someone else can accompany the child;
- Contact the Specialist Family Violence Service at Bethany for secondary consultation. See Page 37.



# Release & Re-intergration

## What are Rehabilitation & Transition Permits?

These allow eligible prisoners to temporarily leave the prison for the purposes of:

- Preparation for release;
- Maintaining family ties if the prisoner was a primary care giver;
- Maintaining family ties with significant persons who are unable to visit the prison.

## What is Parole?

Parole means that the individual is permitted to serve part of their sentence in the community, under the supervision of a Community Corrections Officer. The Adult Parole Board makes decisions in the interest of both the community and the prisoner and takes into account many factors before giving parole.

## Home Detention

What is Home Detention? (not available in Geelong in 2007)

Home Detention allows some offenders to complete their sentence at home under intensive supervision. Family involvement is essential to help provide practical and emotional support.

*“Home Detention was a tremendous psychological journey as I played a key role in its successful completion but was also acting as his jailor” (Mother)*

- Families can write to the Adult Parole Board to suggest specific support for the prisoner on release
- For more information contact Corrections Victoria

## Homelessness

Some families will experience housing issues such as losing the family home, the offender may be legally unable to return to the area or they may lacking a rental history.

- Inform the family that a housing worker attends all prisons to assist in release preparation.
- Contact Barwon Housing & Homelessness Support Services. See page 37

# Release & Re-intergration Ex-Prisoners

## Ex-prisoners

During their time in prison the family member had few personal responsibilities and little need to deal with the family's feelings and choices. In addition, their prison coping strategies such as intimidation, aggression, or withdrawal do not make for good relationships on the outside.

On release, ex-prisoners may have become unfamiliar with such things as how much items cost, or how to get around on public transport. They may experience severe mood swings, become emotionally unpredictable and 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.

*“His girlfriend really struggled to understand why he didn't want to go out as he used to be quite extroverted”  
(Mother)*

There may also be barriers to returning to employment. They may be unable to return to previous positions, find it difficult to explain their absence from the workforce and employers are increasingly undertaking Police Checks.

## Tips

- Encourage family not to take their relative's negative reactions personally and to develop skills in using assertive language to protect themselves

*“I was very nervous about his release, more so than during the court period.  
He was so moody; it felt like we were walking on eggshells” (Mother)*

- If the Adult Parole Board makes a quick decision to release the prisoner, it is unlikely that Centrelink will have time to process any payments. The family will be not only be adjusting to the sudden return of their family member, but also coping with the extra financial burden.
- Consider referrals to employment programs such as Vitality ([5222 8585](tel:52228585))

# Release & Re-integration Children & Carers

## Children

The longer the parent has been in prison, the greater the changes will be.

- Some may be very resentful of the parent's return home, especially if things have been going reasonably well in their absence. They may become competitive and not accept their authority and be protective of the other parent.
- If the child was very young when mum or dad went away, s/he may have no memory of that parent at home and it may be like having a stranger join the household.
- Younger children may feel insecure, being overly clingy or ignoring / withdrawing from the returned parent, and will need reassurance that the parent is not going to leave again.
- Even if links have been maintained by regular visits, children who have become used to relating to only one parent may be very unwilling to relate to this parent and see them as an intruder. They may also strongly resent the time their parents spend together and feel they are competing for their attention, time and affection. (Action for Prisoners' Families: Telling the Children, 2003)

## Carers

When a person returns from prison and wishes to resume a parenting role, carers and grandparents may find it difficult to let go of the role, especially if they have different ideas about how to parent. A close emotional bond is formed between the children and the carer, and both may find it painful to have this relationship suddenly disrupted.

## Tips

- Encourage communication between family members or carers as early as possible. Let them know that it is normal to have a mixture of feelings, both good and bad. Expressing these concerns can mean less likelihood of the children 'acting out'.
- It is important that the feelings are acknowledged and discussed openly between parents and children if the situation is to improve
- 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. This is a re-integration plan.

# Release & Re-integration Planning

## Assisting families to develop a Reintegration Plan

Because of the limitations placed on prison relationships, both prisoners and their families can have quite unrealistic expectations about what the relationship will be like after prison. Prison relationships can sometimes seem 'perfect' because there is so little real contact. The offender may have made promises to change however, if there are long-standing matters that are unresolved, it is important to be realistic. The family will not be included in any pre-release planning conducted by Corrections Victoria with the prisoner.

*“You have to put the prison stuff aside and work on rebuilding the relationship and the trust. The rest will work itself in.” (Mother)*

### Tips

- Encourage communication between family members or carers as early as possible;
- Encourage families to sort through unresolved issues before their relative is released, or as soon as they can post release;
- Prepare them for the possibility that everyone will have difficulties adjusting to the change;
- Explain that pre-existing issues in the relationship will not have gone away by themselves;
- Assist them to negotiate their expectations of each other and the roles each will take on;
- Encourage the parent/carer to talk to the children about what might happen;
- Explain how to allow for each family member's privacy and personal space;
- Get support, either separately or together, from family, friends and professionals. See page 37.

# Aboriginal Families Cultural Difference

## Aboriginal Families Cultural Difference

*Approximately 5% of all Australian children and 20% of Indigenous children have ever experienced parental incarceration*

When working with Aboriginal children with a parent in prison consider acknowledging the following:

### Cultural Difference

Understand that the words and actions of Aboriginal communities do differ from that of other Australians. Be aware of your own culture and the assumptions that you have. Aborigines have a different concept of family and relatives to the non-Aboriginal concept of a nuclear family. Kinship networks involve social relations, personal family connections, responsibility, and behaviour expectations which have a big influence on how well Aboriginal kids cope generally. Family business often involves the whole family as there may be several adults living in a household, all whom share responsibility for the child and children are rarely excluded. Aboriginal children may consider an auntie or family friend to be a mother.

### Tips

- Not having the support of kinship networks make's the child's experience of parental incarceration twice as hard than if such support existed.
- Aboriginal children may have a parental figure in prison who is not a biological parent.
- Do not overlook the child's kinship network, or broader Aboriginal community events, but use these as a valuable resource.

# Aboriginal Families Cultural Difference

## The Impact of the past on the present

Be sensitive to the particular story of the child and the child's family as it can impact on their experience of parental imprisonment. For instance:

- Intergenerational trauma as a result of colonisation may affect the ability of the child to deal with additional trauma.
- Low educational attainment of some Aboriginal Australians may mean they need help to write letters to and read letters from their parent.
- Over-representation in the prison system (Aborigines make up 22% of the prison population) means that Aboriginal children are likely to have a loved one in prison. They may know of someone who died in custody which makes them fear for their parent. Partners or other family members may be unable to take the child to visit their parent in prison because they have a criminal record, so alternative means of visiting parents are required.
- Fear and distrust of authority figures/formal situations may mean the child will be more prepared to co-operate or undertake a task out of desire to please you rather than responding to your role. Formal situations are likely to stress Aboriginal children and not indicate their real capacities
- Racism is not a thing of the past and bullying that a child may experience for having a parent in prison may be compounded by racism.
- Loss of culture, identity, connection to land and family as a result of the practice of removing Aboriginal children may be aggravated by separation from a parent who is in prison, or change of residence due to a parent's incarceration.

# Impact of past on present

## The importance of culture

Make it clear to the child that you are supportive of them and their culture.

### Tips

- Some Aboriginal children consider it rude to look someone in the eye or ask direct questions, they are not being evasive. A way to evoke information from such children is to share information about you which may invite them to do likewise.
- Some Aboriginal children may prefer to visit or phone their parent in prison rather than write a letter, as Aboriginal culture is oral. Other children may touch an adult to communicate rather than to verbalise what they need.

Some Aborigines prefer to access Aboriginal organisations because they provide a culturally sensitive service. Some prefer to access mainstream organisations due to privacy issues as they know a worker at the Aboriginal organisation.

- All prisons and courts have Aboriginal Liaison Officers, Service Officers or Wellbeing Officers that you can use as a resource
- Children may benefit from days that celebrate Aboriginal culture such as NAIDOC week which is celebrated in prisons
- The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service is based in the City of Darebin

Reference by: Greta Jubb: Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service; and

The Aboriginal Resource and Cultural Guide: Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

- For more information on working with Aboriginal Children and their families go to the VACCA website on <http://esvc000737.wic021u.server-web.com/about/products.html>

# Culturally & Linguistically Diverse Families

## Culturally & Linguistically Diverse Families

The emotional impact of imprisonment may be increased for CALD families; particularly their experience of stigma within their community. Their extended family is often overseas leaving them with less avenues of support. It can also be harder for the family to retain confidentiality as their communities can be quite small. Important principles such as complete respect and obedience by children can reflect upon the family's reputation within some cultures.

*“The father of one prisoner returned to his home country, leaving his wife and children in Australia, as he was unable to face the shame of the imprisonment of his son” (worker)*

They may have experienced harsher regimes in their own country and hold great fears about the activities that occur in prison. CALD families may also need to depend on a professional or supportive adult to help negotiate the correctional system due to their cultural and language barriers.

*“Dinner can be early in police cells and a female prisoner believed it to be afternoon tea. She only ate a small amount and then thought she was being systematically starved by not being given dinner.” (Legal worker)*

### Tips

- Consider the length of settlement in Australia as this will impact on the family's understanding of the systems and how vulnerable they may be feeling
- Contact Diversitat for secondary consultation. See page 37
- Consider using an interpreting service. Contact TIS [131 450](tel:131450).

## HEALTH

Both the families of offenders and the offender themselves may experience difficulty in accessing appropriate health care. They may feel judged by health professionals due to their presentation or externalising behaviours. Social disadvantage such as poverty, lack of education and isolation may result in the families dealing with multiple health issues including:

- Anxiety driven illness such as asthma or hypertension;
- Addiction related illness;
- Limited access to primary health care such as dental and GPs;
- Addiction to prescription medicines such as pain relief.

Post-release the families may be dealing with issues such as:

- Managing blood borne diseases within the family home;
- Protecting prescription medicine from misuse by the ex-offender.

### Tips

- Consider facilitating GP visits for early intervention and referral on stress related illness;
- A community health centre is more likely to pick up on co-related grief issues;
- Provide information on blood borne diseases to assist families in managing these conditions effectively;
- Families experiencing chronic illness are eligible for longer visits to a range of health professionals under Enhanced Primary Care.
- Visit the FORK website for information on Hep C

# Impact of Multiple Issues

## Families Dealing with Multiple Issues

Some families who are coping with complex issues may feel differently about the imprisonment of their loved one. The impact of addiction, mental illness, alcohol related brain injury or dual diagnosis on families can mean that they may already:

- Be used to feeling abandoned or disengaged from their family member
- Have already experienced not knowing where their parent is (for children)
- Have already had contact with police, court and community orders
- Have experienced an absence or inconsistency of rules (as children)

They can be used to erratic and violent behaviour and poor memory skills but may be unaware of the causes if the family member's condition is undiagnosed. They may:

- Feel a sense of stability and security during the family member's incarceration
- Feel concerned about their family member receiving D&A support while in prison

“It took my son 9 months to receive any drug and alcohol treatment while he was in prison because of the waiting lists” (Mother)

- Feel nervous about the family member's release and possible return to substance abuse

“I was relieved when he went to prison the last time. I knew that he was safe- he had a roof over his head and food to eat” (Mother)

### Tips

- Suggest the family contacts the local Family Drug Help support group at Barwon Health Drug & Alcohol Services on [5273 4000](tel:52734000).
- Suggest the family contacts ARBIAS to seek secondary consultation [www.arbias.org.au/](http://www.arbias.org.au/)
- Suggest the family contact Barwon Health Mental Health Service. Refer to page 37
- Consider a referral to the Homeless Psychiatric Outreach Service. Contact [5229 8225](tel:52298225).

# Services

## Specialist Services

City of Geelong	52270270	<a href="http://www.geelongcity.vic.gov.au">www.geelongcity.vic.gov.au</a>
Barwon Health & Mental Health Service	52267111	<a href="http://www.barwonhealth.org.au">www.barwonhealth.org.au</a>
Family Relationship Centre	5246 5600	1300 656 043
Specialist Family Violence Service	52788122	<a href="http://www.bethany.org.au">www.bethany.org.au</a>
Health & Welfare Community Guide	52222255	<a href="http://www.lifeline.org.au/geelong">www.lifeline.org.au/geelong</a>
Child FIRST	1300551948	<a href="http://www.bethany.org.au/www/barwon_child_first/index.html">www.bethany.org.au/www/barwon_child_first/index.html</a>
Diversitat	52216044	<a href="http://www.diversitat.org.au">www.diversitat.org.au</a>
Barwon Youth	52214466	<a href="http://www.barwonyouth.org.au">www.barwonyouth.org.au</a>
Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative	52770044	
Barwon Adolescent Task Force	52270699	<a href="http://www.batforce.org.au">www.batforce.org.au</a>
Barwon Housing & Homelessness Support Services		1800 993093
VACCA		<a href="http://esvc000737.wic021u.server-web.com/flash.html">http://esvc000737.wic021u.server-web.com/flash.html</a>
Family Drug Help	1300 660 068	<a href="http://www.familydrughelp.sharc.org.au">www.familydrughelp.sharc.org.au</a>
Mirabel: children & carers of substance users		<a href="http://www.mirabelfoundation.com">www.mirabelfoundation.com</a>

Please refer to the FORK website [www.vacro.org.au/fork](http://www.vacro.org.au/fork) for an updated listing of agencies who have attended the FORK training.

# Services

## Prison/Legal

VACRO FREECALL	9605 1900/1800 049 871	<a href="http://www.vacro.org.au">www.vacro.org.au</a>
Geelong Community Legal Service	52214744	<a href="http://www.communitylaw.org.au/geelong/">www.communitylaw.org.au/geelong/</a>
Legal Aid	5229 2211	<a href="mailto:getinfo@vla.vic.gov.au">getinfo@vla.vic.gov.au</a>
Youth Police Liaison Officer	52253240	
Police Family Violence Advisor	52 253197	
Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service	9419 3888	<a href="http://www.vals.org.au">www.vals.org.au</a>
Problem Gambling Resource Kit	<a href="http://www.problemgambling.vic.gov.au">www.problemgambling.vic.gov.au</a>	
Court Network Geelong	52253333	<a href="http://www.courtnetwork.com.au">www.courtnetwork.com.au</a>
Salvation Army Chaplaincy (court & prison)	9329 6022	<a href="http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/courtprison">www.salvationarmy.org.au/courtprison</a>
Prison Fellowship(volunteer ministry support)	9431 3877	<a href="http://www.pfi.org.au/vic">www.pfi.org.au/vic</a>
Corrections Victoria	8684 6600	<a href="http://www.justice.vic.gov.au">www.justice.vic.gov.au</a>
Office of Police Integrity	1800 818 387	<a href="http://www.opi.vic.gov.au">www.opi.vic.gov.au</a>
DHS Youth Justice Unit:	52214466	
Barwon Youth (Community Support Program)	52214466	
Law Institute	9607 9311	<a href="http://www.members.liv.asn.au/livweb/Referal.aspx">www.members.liv.asn.au/livweb/Referal.aspx</a>

**Please contact VACRO if any of this information is out of date**

# How did we do it?

1. The Geelong working group provided advice on what type of information would be useful to local agencies.

Chiara Reilly, Newcomb Secondary College

Danielle Kirsopp

Bask Cassar, Bethany Community Support

Elsie Coates, Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative

Fay Costin, Court Network

Greg Chadwick, Geelong City Council

Christine Bone & Kristy Woolley, Barwon Youth

Kaye Norris & Pamela Rodriguez, Diversitat

Darren Evans, Department of Human Services

Glen Fairweather, Prison Fellowship

Gary Mackenzie, SASHS

Debbie Kent

2. Individual interviews were held with a range of local workers to capture as broad an input as possible. These included Barwon Health, BatForce, Geelong Police and Centrelink.

3. Local residents who had experienced a family member in prison were either involved in the working group or were met with individually to provide their personal experience.

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“...until now.”

