

Families of Offenders Resource Kit

An instrumental tool for workers



City of Whittlesea



Who are we?



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 Prison Information Helpline Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm. The Helpline offers support to families with a member in prison and accurate information about the prison system.
- A Family Counsellor who specialises in working with 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;
- Family Liaison Worker at the Melbourne Assessment Prison;
- Family Support Group.
- Further information is available on the website:

www.vacro.org.au

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, while 145,000 children have ever experienced this loss.

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' is taken to encompass not only traditional family structures such as the nuclear family, but also 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 the Kit

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?) How ever 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)

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.

Tip

- It is important to encourage the families to seek support where they can have the opportunity to talk about their experiences. A referral to a local family support service could help. See page 36.

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 that they isolate themselves from family, friends and community.

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.

Tip

- It is important to encourage the family to give friends and family a chance to support the family. The support of a counsellor, social worker, or support group can also be invaluable. See page 36.

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;
- 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)

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 Ph: 13 61 50 between 8am and 8pm Monday–Friday, or visit www.familyassist.gov.au or 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.

“When I’d be talking to my son on the phone, I could tell they were listening. If he mentioned anything about the prison, we’d get cut off. It worried me that we couldn’t even have a proper conversation” (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.

“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)

Tips

- Encourage families to obtain factual information about the process of imprisonment and what supports are available.
- Ask if families would like to access a local Family services agency for support & coordination of services. See page 36.

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 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.

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.

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?'.

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

"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)

Children Where to start?

Where to start?

A useful starting point in regard to what to tell a child, is to think about the age of the child, their individual needs and what 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)

Tip

- 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

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 the imprisonment may result in a lack of support. This effectively teaches children to lie and not to communicate in a way that encourages the expression of feelings or asking for support.



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.

“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)

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.

Children Strategies for Support

Strategies for Supporting the Children

- Children will talk to teachers and other supportive adults if the relationship is positive;
- 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;
- Non-specialist one-to-one mentoring projects who provide 'role models' such as Big Brothers Big Sisters offer excellent opportunities for children;
- Early intervention in educational support such as tutors, homework clubs and training School Captains and prefects about these issues can provide direct support to these children;
- Be supportive about the issues but maintain the importance of school;
- Provide outreach if possible, it may be easier to engage families 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 for support from a local Family & Children's Services agency. See page 36.



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)

Carers

Carers

In taking up the role of primary caregiver, carers may experience a range of difficulties at a time when they are least able to cope themselves. These include such matters as 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, due to concerns for their emotional state or unstable behaviour; and they may need to leave employment to look after the children.

“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 caregivers. Encourage caregivers 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 or contact the VACRO Prison Information and Helpline. See page 36.

Carers Care Arrangements

Care Arrangements for children when the primary caregiver is incarcerated:

DHS Child Protection will only become involved if there are no identified caregivers 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:

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

For more information go to www.office-forchildren.vic.gov.au/

Caregivers 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 Partners

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.

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

- VACRO Family Liaison Worker if their relative is at Melbourne Assessment Prison;
- The Prison Supervisor: Prison contact details are available at www.vacro.org.au/fork.

Family Relationships Parents

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;
- Guilt that they have negative feelings towards their child or if they do not want to support them by putting up bail or 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;
- Relief that their child is safe if they were using drugs or alcohol, or endangering themselves or others.

Tips

- Encourage parents 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.
- Encourage them to attend the Family Support Group at VACRO or to contact a local Family Service. See page 36.

Family Relationships

Siblings & Carers

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 36.

“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)

Caregiver of Offender’s Children

The relationship between caregivers 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 caregivers not bringing children to visit their parent in prison.

Tip

- Caregivers 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, caregivers can call VACRO to find out if there are services available to supervise the children during a visit with their parent.

Criminal Justice System

They've been arrested!

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 even 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. They may be carried out with force, which is even more distressing if children are present. In an American study, many children who had witnessed their mothers' arrests had suffered classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome (Bernstein, N. All Alone in the World: Children of Incarcerated Parents, 2005).

"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)

Contact the local Community Legal centre (page 37) for information on the family's rights or the VACRO Prison Information and Helpline for information on what may be happening to the arrested family member.

Criminal Justice System What is Bail & Remand?

What is Bail?

Bail means that the offender is allowed to remain in the community until they need to appear in court. Impacts on the family during this time include:

- Feeling under pressure to put up bail money;
- Police may call at the family home to ensure bail conditions are adhered to;
- Routines can be interfered with to meet the bail conditions;
- Feelings of responsibility to ensure their family member meets the conditions of bail.

For information on programs to support people on bail contact www.magistratescourt.vic.gov.au

What is Remand?

Remand prisoners are held in custody prior to and during their trial. They may not have applied for bail or may have been refused it if the charge is serious. Some are unable to pay bail or don't meet the conditions set out in the bail bond.

- Men are held at the Melbourne Assessment Prison in Spencer St to receive security and health ratings, then moved to Metropolitan Remand Centre in Laverton.
- Women are held at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre in Deer Park.

The initial period of incarceration is highly stressful for families.

- A Family Liaison Worker is based at MAP or families can call the VACRO Prison Information and Helpline for support and/or information.

Criminal Justice System What are Courts like?

What are courts like?

Courts can be intimidating 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 to court by a parent/guardian; although judges do generally not approve of children being in court.

Tips

- Court Network volunteers can help families by explaining how the courts operate and can show them around the court before the trial. Court Network can sit with the family in court, and refer them to other services that can assist them. See www.courtnetwork.com.au
- A Guide to Court Support Services is available on 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.

“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)

Tips

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

Visiting

Visiting

Prison visits do matter. Children, families and prisoners want to see each other despite the hardships. Maintaining consistent contact helps the family to cope with separation and usually plays an important role in the families ability to reunify post release.

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 or ring the VACRO Prison Information Helpline.

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 'lockdown' 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)

For more information contact VACRO's Prison Information and Help Line or Corrections Victoria.

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.
- 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.

Tip

- 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.

“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)

Tip

- Encourage the caregiver 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.

Visiting Tips

Tips

- Suggest the parent/care-giver 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/care-giver 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/care-giver and of the children;
- The possibility of re-traumatising children who have witnessed the family violence;
- The ambivalence of the mother/caregiver 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-giver that someone else can accompany the child;
- Contact Northern Family & Domestic Violence Services at Berry St for secondary consultation see Page 36.



Release & Re-intergration

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.

What is Home Detention?

Home Detention allows non-violent, low security offenders to complete their sentence in the community under intensive supervision and a strict curfew. Offenders can maintain employment and education but most other liberties are restricted. There is a significant dependence on family and friends to help with practical things such as shopping and also to provide emotional support and reduce boredom.

“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)

For more information contact the VACRO Prison Information Helpline or Corrections Victoria

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.

*"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)*

Tips

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

Release & Re-integration Children

Children

Children learn to adjust to the change when a parent goes to prison and then have to adjust to further changes around the times of home leave and release. The longer the parent has been in prison, the greater the changes will be.

- Some children 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*).

See page 30 and 31 for strategies to assist families to prepare children for the parents return.

Release & Re-integration Care-givers

Care-givers

Difficulties can occur 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 from the ex-prisoner 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

- It is a good idea to discuss care arrangements in visits leading up to release, so that care-givers, children and parents have a chance to talk about their wants and expectations;
- 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;
- Help the parent/carer to develop a re-integration plan for the family.



Release & Re-integration Preparing a Plan

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 36.

Impact on other Cultures

In the 2005-2006 year, 19.5% of all Victorian prisoners identified as being born in countries other than the United Kingdom, USA & Canada and 5.5% identified as Indigenous Australians.

When working with families from other cultures with a relative in prison it is important to consider the following:

Kinship

The concept of family often holds greater significance for cultures other than Anglo-Australian. Family groups may involve a complex system of kin relationships that provide personal family connections and a structure for responsibility and behavioural expectations. It can be harder for the family to retain confidentiality as the friendship network is more complex. Because of this, the emotional impact of imprisonment may be increased for these families particularly by their experience of stigma and shame within their community. For example, 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)

The family may have been surrounded by a strong support network in their country of origin with a range of adults offering collective parenting. They may have lost that sense of community connectedness and now be sole parenting which can lead to difficulties supervising children and older siblings often taking on this responsibility so that the parent can work.

Impact on other Cultures

Tips

- Not having the support of kinship networks may make these families' experience of familial incarceration twice as hard;
- Some children may have a parental figure in prison who is not a biological parent;
- Look at the child's kinship network, or broader cultural & religious events, as valuable resources. Many of these families can benefit from the support of their local church/community group.

Resettlement

Many of these families will already be grieving the loss of their home country and the connections of family and culture. They may have experienced harsher regimes in their own country and hold great fears about the activities that occur in prison. Their understanding of the justice system may be poor and there is limited access to culturally appropriate support in this area. This may result in families hiring inappropriate or expensive legal counsel or simply finding it difficult to negotiate the legal system.

“Dinner is at 3pm every day 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)

Impact on other Cultures

Alongside of this, individuals may be experiencing a range of resettlement issues that can impact on family functioning. For example, Western individualistic concepts that the adolescents may be adopting can create intense conflict and potential for family breakdown. Workers find that if these young people move away from the family environment that supports them when they still have a limited understanding of their new environment, they are at greater risk of coming into contact with the law.

Tips

- Make it clear to the family that you are supportive of them and their culture. You may not agree/understand their practices, however connection is the key ingredient;
- Focus on helping them maintain some connection to family even if it is an auntie/uncle or contact with a leader within their community;
- Ensure that they receive the support they need to negotiate the system;
- All prisons and courts have Aboriginal Liaison Officers, Service Officers or Wellbeing Officers that you can use as a resource;
- 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 the Settlement & Family Services Unit at the Northern Migrant Resource Centre www.mrcne.org.au

Resource: The Aboriginal Resource & Cultural Guide from VACCA

For more specific information on working with particular cultures visit www.vacro.org.au/fork

Substance Use Impact on Families

Impact of Offender Substance Use on Families

Families who have experienced D&A issues may feel differently about imprisonment. They may:

- 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);
- 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)

Alcohol Related Brain Injury (ARBI)

Many offenders may have an undiagnosed ARBI where families are coping with erratic and violent behaviour and poor memory skills.

Suggest the family contacts ARBIAS or seek secondary consultation www.arbias.org.au/

Services

Direct Referral (agencies who have participated in Families of Offenders training)

Please refer to the FORK website www.vacro.org.au/fork for an updated listing of these agencies in Whittlesea

Specialist Family/Children Services

Child Protection Northern	1300 369 563	
Child FIRST		www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au
Northern Migrant Resource Centre – (Settlement & Family Relationships Support Services Team)	9463 7800	www.mrcne.org.au
Kildonan Child & Family Services	8401 0111	www.kcfs.org.au
Anglicare	9465 0322	www.anglicare.org.au
Berry St	9458 5788	www.berrystreet.org.au
Plenty Valley Community Health	9409 8787	www.pvchs.org.au
Centacare Northern Region	9873 4344	www.centacaremelbourne.org
Community Connections	9401 6666	http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ciwwhit/index.html
VACCA		http://esvc000737.wic021u.server-web.com/flash.html
Family Drug Help	1300 660 068	www.familydrughelp.sharc.org.au
Mirabel: children & carers of substance users		www.mirabelfoundation.com

Services

Prison/Legal

VACRO Prison Information & Helpline	9602 1366	www.vacro.org.au
VACRO FREECALL	1800 049 871	
Brosnan Centre (young offenders)	9387 1233	www.jss.au/programmes/brosnan
Whittlesea Police Youth Resource Officer	9409 8110	
Whittlesea Community Legal Centre	9401 6655	www.communitylaw.org.au/whittlesea
Northern Assessment, Referral & Treatment Team	9409 8787	www.pvchs.org.au
Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service	9419 3888	www.vals.org.au
Problem Gambling Resource Kit		www.problemgambling.vic.gov.au
Australian Community Support Organisation	9320 4000	www.acso.org.au
Court Network	1800 681 614	www.courtnetwork.com.au
Salvation Army Chaplaincy (court & prison)	9329 6022	www.salvationarmy.org.au/courtprison
Prison Fellowship(volunteer ministry support)	9431 3877	www.pfi.org.au/vic
Corrections Victoria	8684 6600	www.justice.vic.gov.au
Australian Vietnamese Women's Welfare Association		www.avwwa.com
Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Organisation	9416 4266	
DHS Northern Juvenile Justice Unit:	1300 664 977	

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

How did we do it?

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

Brigid Keele, City of Whittlesea
Trish Hudson, Senior School Psychologist
Raul Foglia, Plenty Valley Community Health
Halina Cumbo, Centacare
Anna Hedges, School Focused Youth Service
Tanya Zabenko
Tim Forster, Police Youth Resource Officer

2. Individual interviews were held with a range of local workers to capture as broad an input as possible. These included Juvenile Justice Northern, Kildonan Child & Family Health Service, and Whittlesea Community Legal Centre.
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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Design and Resource Development provided in kind by:



In His Cell

*In his cell he must sit
For drug addiction was the crime he did commit*

*Just another time the Judge shook his head
And guilty is what he had said*

*I've missed him today
I'll miss him tomorrow
I'll miss him now through all the sorrow*

*So maybe this is the last time
That we will be away from each other
For I love him
As he is my big brother
(Sister 2001)*

FEORIK