



## Opening Hours

Monday to Friday  
9.00am - 8.00pm

Saturday and Sunday  
10.00am - 3.00pm

## Supporting a child with a close relative in prison

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### Should I tell a child when a close relative goes to prison?

All situations are different and there is no right or wrong answer when talking to a child about imprisonment, your personal circumstances can determine what is suitable. It is important to consider the following when talking to a child affected by imprisonment:

- The age of the child
- The offence the individual has been convicted of.
- The length of sentence
- The child's relationship with the individual
- Whether you wish the child to have ongoing contact with the prisoner.

It is also important to recognize the following factors when deciding what to tell your child:

- Any mention of the case in local or national press (especially if high profile)
- The child's interaction at school (it is important to speak with someone at your child's school to ensure they are aware of the situation)
- Other family members/older siblings who may talk about the situation.

### What should I tell the child?

A sudden disappearance of a family member can cause confusion and distress for a child of any age, it is important to address these issues and answer any questions the child may have.

If you do choose to tell your child the individual is in prison it is important to make sure they know they can talk to you about it, it is likely they will have lots of questions and it is important that they have someone to talk through these with.

A sudden disappearance without explanation can leave a child confused and scared as they can often sense when something has happened. A child may worry and imagine things which may be distressing for them. This might be especially true when the adults around them are upset or angry. Children can often internalise their feelings which can result in nightmares, tantrums and withdrawal from others. By being open and honest with your child you will show them that it is ok to ask questions and talk about how they feel.

### What are the alternatives?

You may choose to tell your child that the prisoner is working away, on holiday or something along these lines. This is a personal decision however you should still consider the points mentioned previously, If a child is told a prisoner is working away and is then told contradicting information this will lead to confusion and other issues.

### **When is a good time to tell a child that their relative has gone to prison?**

There is no right or wrong time to tell a child that someone they love has gone to prison. You may find you have time to prepare for the eventuality if legal advice has indicated that a custodial sentence is likely, or you may have to make your decision quickly if the arrest was sudden and bail refused in court. You should aim to tell the child when you have plenty of time to answer questions and offer comfort and when you will not be disturbed.

### **How do I tell the child?**

When you are telling a child about the imprisonment of a close relative it is important to keep it simple and age appropriate. Children may need reassurance that the missing family member still loves and cares for them. They may need to know that it is not their fault that their relative has gone away and they should also be told the duration of the absence where possible. You can assure the child that their relative is not a bad person, even if they have done something wrong. You can also talk about the contact they could still have with their relative and what this might include, for example, letters, telephone calls and visits. It can be very tempting to believe that a child is too young to understand, or is not aware of what is going on. Some parents believe it's best not to say anything. But even very small children will be able to sense tension or change of atmosphere at home. Children who don't know where their parent is can get confused, as they often sense that something has happened which they don't understand.

### **Will I have to tell the child's school?**

You do not need to tell anyone about the imprisonment of a close relative if you do not want to. No one is automatically notified that a child has a parent or a sibling in prison. However, it might be a good idea to inform the child's school so they can be alert to any changes in the child's behaviour and their need for extra support. In schools they usually have a pastoral worker that supports children and can meet up in school time to discuss any stress they are going through and how to cope etc.

Additionally, schools (under current DFES guidelines) can authorise a child's absence in order for them to visit a parent in prison but only if they are aware that this is the case. This would then be recorded as a code C 'authorised' absence on the school register. However if a child is missing too much school, you could discuss other ways of keeping in touch – letters, recorded messages etc. Each school will consider applications individually based on the specific circumstances.

### **Will Social Services get involved if I tell the school?**

No. Social Services do not need to be involved with a family purely because a relative is in prison. The only time Social Services would need to be in contact with the family is if the child is at risk of harm. If Social Services are involved, the Family Rights Group (0808 801 0366), a charity, can advise families.

### **What if my child is bullied?**

Unfortunately, it can be very difficult to stop other people from knowing about your situation, especially if it has been reported in the press. This may mean that other people say or do things that upset you or your child. It is important that your child knows that they have people to turn to for support, reassurance and comfort. This can include you, their teacher and other close relatives or trusted friends. If you need someone to talk to, please call us on **0808 808 2003**.



### **Should I take my child on a visit?**

Allowing a child to visit their relative in prison can be an important step in helping them come to terms with the situation. It will enable the child to understand that their relative still loves and cares for them and that they are safe.

It may be a good idea for you to visit the prison without the child at first. This will help you to understand the visits process and better prepare you for answering any questions the child may have before the visit. By doing this you will be able to establish what facilities there are for children, how much contact they can have with their relative and if there are any special visits offered that allow more contact. It may be that you decide that you do not want to take the child to visit the prison. This is your decision to make and you should not feel under any pressure from others to change your mind if your decision is made in the best interest of the child.

### **What happens if my child does not want to visit?**

Some children may decide that they do not want to visit their relative in prison. You should not force the child to visit if they do not want to but it is important to talk to them about the decision they have made and for them to understand that they can change their mind at any time.

### **What if my child wants to visit but I do not?**

If your child wants to visit their relative but you do not you can, if you chose, arrange for another person to take them. This person must be over 18. If there is any social services involvement, it can be sometimes arranged for an escort to take the child to a prison visit.

### **What should I tell them about the visit?**

There will be a lot to explain about the prison visit, especially the first time. Sometimes prison visits can be very short (as little as half an hour for some remand prisoners) and the child should be prepared for this. The child will also need to know about the security measures in place for example searches, sniffer dogs, people in uniforms and doors being locked behind them.

### **What If I am the victim?**

If the child/children's parent committed a crime against you, particularly if it was a violent or sexual nature, you may not want to talk about it with the child or children, or want to visit.

Of course if you don't want to keep in touch with your partner that's completely understandable, but your child may still be able to visit without you (depending on whether the parent is seen as a risk to the child/children) – other people such as a friend, relative, or social worker may be able to take them.

### **Resources and help**

Many agencies provide useful resources to discuss imprisonment with a child, storybooks, short films and leaflets are all widely available for a small cost. You can access these by visiting:

<http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/>

Or call the helpline direct on: 0808 808 2003 where a member of the team can post or email you a selection of resources.

For information and support you can talk to your local health visitor or counsellor (you can find out how to do this through your GP surgery) or you can call these freephone helplines;

- Childline 0800 1111 (only for children)
- Family Lives 0808 800 2222
- Lone Parent Helpline 0808 802 0925 (England & Wales), 0808 801
- Gingerbread 0808 802 0925
- Offenders' Families Helpline 0808 808 2003

