

Family & Corrections Network



The Incarcerated Fathers Library

Resources for Dads Behind Bars and Those Working with Them

Preparing a Child for a Prison Visit

For Incarcerated Parent and Caregiver to do Before the First Visit

Inform the child specifically as to when he/she will be seeing the parent.

Give the child a day, date, and time that he/she will visit.

Indicate how long the visit will be, approximately 1-2 hours on average.

Use good judgment as to how far in advance of the visit you inform the child. As a general rule, the younger the child, the closer to the visiting date you would want to tell the child. Younger children have a difficult time putting several days of a week into perspective, so you might want to inform them a day or two before the scheduled visit. Older children usually need more preparatory time.

If the child and parent have had a long separation, it helps for the parent to write the child a letter saying simply that they have missed the child and are looking forward to seeing him. In the letter, describe what you will do together during their visit, what you will be wearing, any changes in your appearance (weight, hairstyle, or anything your child might notice).

Describe the physical environment of the prison and visiting room (the color of the walls, arrangement of tables and chairs, other people, the guards, etc.).

If the child and parent have had a long separation, it helps for the parent to write the child a letter saying simply that they have missed the child and are looking forward to seeing him.

Both the parent and the caregiver should give the child as much information as possible about what to expect on the day of the visit.

For the Caregiver (or Chaperon) on the Day of the Visit

Remind the child about what they can expect today. Describe the ride to the institution, what the institution looks like, and what the check-in procedures will be. The more information the child has and the more he can anticipate, the greater control the child will have over any anxiety they may be experiencing.

Help the child to identify and label their feelings and offer them reassurance. For example, 'I bet you are excited about seeing your Mom/Dad today.' or 'I guess you might be wondering what you will see there.' or 'You must be wondering what you will talk to your Mom/Dad about.' These types of statements will open up a line of communication between you and the child. This will allow you to address his concerns or questions and reassure the child that there will be other children visiting their parents, too. Also, this would be a good time for you to help the child formulate questions for their parent and help them focus and rehearse the specific things that they want to tell their parent about.

Since the visiting time is limited to only a couple of hours, helping the child focus on a few specific topics for discussion will in turn help them organize their thoughts. This gives you the opportunity to assist the child with focusing on positive things that are going on in their lives, such as; school, extra-curricular activities, favorite books and movies, etc. This is a very important part of your role as their chaperon, because children's thoughts can be scattered.

They are excited, afraid, or nervous. Often times they forget what they wanted to tell their parent, so rehearsal on the ride to the prison is important. Your involvement will assure that the child and inmate parent will have a positive, quality visit.

Wear a watch. Let the child and parent know approximately 15 minutes before you need to leave to go home. This allows them time to say goodbye and briefly discuss their next visit, letters, etc.

You can discuss the visit and how the child feels about seeing their parent during the ride back home after the visit. Sometimes children may become withdrawn and sad. It's a natural reaction to leaving behind their parent. The most important thing that you can do is reassure them. Remind them when they will be returning to visit, if a pre-arranged date has been set. Focus your discussion around the positive aspects of the visit. Don't force the child to

express his feelings if he is not ready, however. The child might just be tired. It has been a long day, emotionally exhausting day.

This material is provided courtesy of Assisting Families of Inmates, Inc., (formerly Prisoner Family Support Services) Richmond, Virginia, web site, <http://www.pfss.org/Preparing.htm>, 1 North 5th Street, Suite 400, Richmond, Virginia 23219, (804) 643-2401, (804) 643-2464 Fax.

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