



The separation of child and parent is one of the most difficult issues involving incarceration, especially for the child. And an unfortunate reality is that children of inmates are statistically more likely to become incarcerated than children who do not have a parent in prison. Having a parent in prison creates unique hardships other children never contend with. We say this not to discourage you, but to prepare you. This guide is designed to help you strengthen the bonds between you and your child and to help both of you improve on a bad situation.

First, a reality check. Perhaps you were not the most involved parent you could have been before you were incarcerated. Perhaps your own parents were not the best role models. You may be tackling “parenting from prison” with a lot of unresolved related issues. These could get in the way of your attempts now to be the best parent you can be while incarcerated. But, instead of allowing these to become excuses that keep you from reaching out to your child, embrace them as reasons to reach out. Children want and need their parents’ involvement, even if that parent is incarcerated.

**STEP 1 Reach out.** If you are not currently in contact with your child, get in contact. Whether by mail, phone or third party, you need to establish contact. There are some cases where you may have been ordered by the court not to have contact with your child, and you must, of course, avoid contact if you have been court ordered to do so. These instances are rare, but they must be respected, or that can further jeopardize your relationship with your child.

**STEP 2 Stay in contact.** Make note of important dates in your child’s life such as school projects, events with the family, etc. Send cards on birthdays and holidays. In some cases, you may need to make the cards if none are available to you for purchase. Do so. Your child will likely appreciate the gesture even more. Relying on artists around you (there are usually many), you may likely create an even more meaningful and personal card than you would have by just purchasing one. Maintaining contact is absolutely essential. Write letters. Be positive, and be consistent. Staying in contact won’t always be easy. Sometimes your child may pull away because of incarceration. It is up to you as a parent to make this work. One suggestion for a child having a phone conversation with his or her incarcerated parent is to have some recent photos of the parent in hand or at least nearby while talking. This is something you could suggest to the current guardian of your child if your child is too young to approach with this request.



*We'd said we'd keep in touch. But touch is not something you can keep; as soon as it's gone, it's gone. We should have said we'd keep in words, because they are all we can string between us--words on a telephone line, words appearing on a screen.*

- David Levithan



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**STEP 3 Get along with family.** Regardless of your relationship with the child’s caretakers (current spouse or partner, ex-spouse, grandparent, aunt/uncle, foster parent, etc.), respect the relationship the child has with this authority figure. Resist any urge to meddle, second-guess, or criticize. Model the value of respect. Respect the person caring for your child, and encourage your child to do the same. Create a support system either using family or pen-pals. It will be much easier to stay involved with your children if you have a good support system on the outside. A positive relationship with your child’s caregiver is essential.

Keep them informed, and ask them to keep you informed. Let them know the positive progress you're making in your life as well so it is reiterated to your child. Try to work as a team if possible. It will be important for your children to see that you and their caregiver have faith in each other and operate in unison for their benefit.

**STEP 4 Keep promises.** If you make a promise, always keep it, and try to never make a promise you are unsure of. Your incarceration may prompt your child to question the confidence they once placed in you. Work to rebuild trust. Be honest.

**STEP 5 Get Involved.** Focus on your child's hobbies such as music, sports, etc. Be aware when related topics are in the news so you can discuss these events or mention them in letters. Work with your social network outside of prison to find some after-school or weekend programs related to these topics in your child's hometown. Make a list of locations, days, times, materials needed, etc. and give them to your child. They will be thrilled to see how much you care, and they may feel empowered to see that you are capable of doing things just like any other parent could do. You do not need to go into detail on how you obtained the information. In some cases, you will find caring staff members who will help you do this. Suggest this to the prison as an actual option for other parents. If they won't help, ask a pen-pal or family member on the outside for help.

**STEP 6 Help with homework.** No you can't look over their math homework each night, but you can and should ask what they're studying, how they're doing, and how you can help. If they are older, ask them to share papers with you – stories or essays they've written, things like that. Give them specific praise and feedback. Learn the names of the teachers, administrators and coaches. Listen. If they are having difficulty in a subject, offer guidance. Since you can't study with them, encourage them to talk to the teacher, guidance counselor, coach, etc. Encourage them to find a tutor if necessary. Avoid talking negatively about the teacher or school. Encourage the child to take responsibility and learn to solve problems at school. Talk about the future – college and careers – and how being a good student now will lead to success. Encourage them to participate in clubs, band, chorus, sports or other extracurricular activities that will help keep them in school. Research shows that kids who are involved in at least one extracurricular activity are less likely to drop out. Always ask for copies of report cards. Discuss these with your child. Knowing you are interested will increase their motivation to do better. Don't criticize if they do poorly, but discuss with them how they can do better. Let them make suggestions. Listen, and offer guidance. Discuss issues such as tutoring or discipline with your child's caregiver. Be as involved with decision making as possible.

**Parents held in the nation's prisons—52% of state inmates and 63% of federal inmates—reported having an estimated 1,706,600 minor children, accounting for 2.3% of the U.S. resident population under age 18.**

Data provided by a 2008 Bureau of Justice Statistics Report titled *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*

**STEP 7 Promote positive behavior.** You are no longer in a position to be a disciplinarian, but you are in a position to reinforce positive behavior by praising your child. Thank and praise them for good behavior, focusing on school, etc., but being careful not to burden them with guilt or responsibilities that should not be theirs. For instance, don't ask your son to be "the man of the house" or your daughter to be "the woman of the house" (depending on which parent is incarcerated). Their job is simply to stay out of trouble and do well in school and to help at home the way all children should with regular chores and responsibilities – not taking on the role of an incarcerated parent! Don't make them feel guilty about things. They have enough to deal with. Be positive. Don't lose your temper.

**STEP 8 Know your child's interests.** Prolonged periods of incarceration can cause gaps. Children grow up quickly and it is important to stay connected as their interests evolve and change. No child wants to fill out a questionnaire, however, incorporate some questions you would like to know into your letters. You can ask about favorite color, favorite food, type of music they listen to, dream vacation, etc. Keep track of these personal details and use them in your iterations.

**STEP 9 Invite them to visit.** While visits may not be something you can do all the time, try to arrange to see your child as often as possible. Keep up appearances when you visit with your child. It is important for them to know that you are safe and doing well. Let them know what productive activities you do while in prison. Visiting time can grow idle sometimes. Prepare a mental list of positive issues to discuss. Talk to your prison about programs that may be available to parents. In some cases, they will let you record a book to tape or CD to send to your child. If your prison doesn't have such a program, suggest it to a caring staff member. Ask your prison to email us if they would like some children's games for the prison visiting room. We will try to send them some: [general-information@writeaprisoner.com](mailto:general-information@writeaprisoner.com)

*Additional Resource! Our Tips for Visiting Prison Self-help Guide is loaded with information for individuals visiting loved ones behind bars.*



**SEND A SELF-ADDRESSED STAMPED ENVELOPE TO\*:**

WriteAPrisoner.com  
Tips for Visiting Prison Self-help  
P.O. Box 10  
Edgewater, FL 32132 USA

\* Prison staff or pen-pals can also print this guide at <http://www.writeaprisoner.com/self-help>

**STEP 10 Say, "I love you."** All children need to hear this. Say it on the phone, in letters, in cards, and during visits. Say it with your actions. Even if you did not have a positive relationship before you were incarcerated, it's not too late to build one now. Your child may be angry with you or even feel responsible for your incarceration. Regardless of your child's attitude today, consistently showing your love can make a long-lasting and positive difference.

**STEP 11 Parent.** Parenting is never easy even under ideal circumstances. Your incarceration affects not only you but your family as well, especially your children. Of everything you can do while in prison – furthering your education, working at a prison job, etc. – nothing is more important than reaching out to your child with love, respect, and consistency. Set a good example. Be positive. Communicate frequently. Address problems as they arise honestly and with a real desire to resolve them. Be a role model. Yes, even in prison you can be a role model. Show them that you take responsibility for your actions, that you don't blame others, that you can still better your life, and that you love them and intend to be there for them to the best of your ability. Don't shy away from the subject of incarceration with your child. Talk to them about what brought you to this situation and most importantly, how they are going to avoid it by learning from your mistakes. WriteAPrisoner.com has created CrimeFreeKids.com, a non-commercial site just for children impacted by crime and incarceration. Your child will find similar stories to relate to there. It is largely set up as a crime awareness and deterrent website. Provide your children with the opportunity to ask questions about your incarceration. Open the dialogue on the subject, and keep it open should they have more questions as they get older.

Success story or suggestion? We want to know what worked for you so we can share it with other inmates.

If you have a suggestion to make about this guide, please do so at:

Self-help Suggestion - P.O. Box 10 - Edgewater, FL 32132 USA

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