

Reaching Beyond Bars: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin and their Families



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Published By:

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June 2019

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Reaching Beyond Bars: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin and their Families

*Note: Incarcerated parents may be male or female. To keep the wording in this handbook simple and avoid using “he/she” or “him/her” over and over, we have chosen to refer to the incarcerated parent as “he” or “him.” Likewise, caregivers to children of incarcerated parents may be male or female. We will refer to the caregiver as “she” or “her.” We will also refer to the child as “he” or “him.”

Introduction

Being in prison does not end a parent’s duties . . . nor does it end all of the rewards. Being away does make it much harder to stay connected to your children. The parent must continue to work at being involved in the child’s life. The parent, child and child’s caregiver will have to “reach beyond bars” to strengthen the bonds that keep the family together.

Incarceration brings about many challenges, but it also provides an opportunity to show your child how much you love and care for him. Your love and support are the most important things to help him cope with this difficult situation.

The incarcerated parent, the child and the child’s caregiver all suffer as a result of the separation. The longer the parent and child are separated, the more likely they are to grow apart.

A parent being in prison often causes a family’s financial and living situations to get worse. These problems can result in the children being more likely to:

- Show delays in development
- Do poorly in school
- Suffer emotional distress
- Develop substance abuse problems
- Commit serious delinquent acts
- Be incarcerated themselves in their lifetime

Studies have shown that communication and interest in each others’ lives reduces the harmful effects of incarceration. Staying connected helps both the child and the offender to grow, learn and change. After the parent’s prison time is served, the move back to the home is easier for everyone when communication remains constant. There is less fear, less “catching up” to do, fewer bad feelings, more helping the child to heal, and less chance of repeating the cycle of incarceration.

Communicating on a regular basis:

- Helps the child to understand why the parent is gone
- Allows the child to deal with feelings
- Helps the child learn to cope without judgment or fear

- Develops a healthier relationship between the parent and child
- Strengthens the parent-child bond

Studies show that prisoners who receive visits, maintain family ties and are released to a stable home are more likely to succeed in leading productive, crime free lives. Prisoners who have failed as citizens can succeed as parents. Prison can be an opportunity to become a better parent — more caring, concerned, and informed.

To help the incarcerated parent, the caregiver and the child to cope with incarceration, the Correctional Education Association-Wisconsin (CEA-Wisconsin) has created this handbook, *Reaching Beyond Bars: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin and their Families*. CEA-Wisconsin has partnered with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC), the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) and community agencies to make this handbook available to parents and caregivers.

By using the advice and information in this handbook, incarcerated parents and their families will find ways to “Reach Beyond Bars” to help strengthen the bonds between them.

Thanks to:

The Correctional Education Association-Wisconsin wishes to thank these agencies and people for the inspiration to create and publish this *Reaching Beyond Bars* handbook and permission to use their materials.

The Council on Crime and Justice and the Minnesota Department of Corrections

A big thank you for the inspiration and help we received the Council on Crime and Justice of Minnesota who got us off to a great start by allowing us to use the design and some materials from their handbook, *Staying Connected and Staying Strong: A Handbook for Families and Friends of Those Incarcerated in Minnesota State Correctional Facilities*, that they created with the Minnesota Department of Corrections. Although no longer in existence, the Council on Crime and Justice had worked for over 60 years with the community and the criminal justice system to address the causes and effects of crime and violence.

Jan Walker

Jan Walker is the author of one of the most valuable books for incarcerated parents, *Parenting from a Distance: Your Rights and Responsibilities*. Now in its 3rd Edition, Jan’s book gives advice for incarcerated parents who are committed to remaining involved with their children and willing to accept the responsibilities that go with parenting from a distance. Her book is used by parenting instructors in prisons throughout the country. Several passages from her book are used in this handbook.

For more information about *Parenting from a Distance* and other books written by Jan Walker and to read her Blog Feed, go to her websites: <https://teachinside.com/> or <https://www.janwalker-author.com>.

Co-Parenting

The caregiver to the children of an incarcerated parent may be the offender's spouse, unmarried partner, parent, grandparent, sibling, friend, or foster family. No matter what is the bond, a positive working relationship between the caregiver and the incarcerated parent is needed to build healthy communication between the incarcerated parent and the children.

The caregiver for the children faces many challenges in dealing with the criminal justice system and raising children without the incarcerated parent. On the one hand, the caregiver might be more comfortable being involved in the children's daily lives. On the other hand, she might feel overwhelmed and bitter about being left to care for the children alone. The time and energy invested in caring for the children and dealing with incarceration often leads to stress and exhaustion. At times, she may feel like she is "doing time" just like the offender.

While the caregiver may worry about the offender, she must first care for herself and her family. The caregiver should see to her personal needs and make sure she gets enough sleep, eats a good diet and gets plenty of exercise. She may find it helpful to seek out support groups, counseling and close adult family members and friends to talk to about her needs.

Good communication is the best way to support the child. The incarcerated parent and caregiver need to build a positive relationship so he feels support and love from both. The caregiver should encourage the incarcerated parent to stay involved in his child's life by encouraging communication between them.

Co-Parenting Tips for Caretakers

- Let your child know it is okay for his family to be different from other families
- Help your child to feel secure and express feelings
- Reassure your child by surrounding him with reliable people
- Let your child know what to expect during everyday activities
- Provide your child with a comfort item to keep during the day, such as a paper heart or family photo
- Ask your child questions to help him open up
- Answer the child's questions with answers right for his age
- Talk honestly with the child about his parent's incarceration
- Let the child know the incarcerated parent is safe
- Let your child know that the parent being away is not his fault
- Encourage the child to maintain contact by sending letters, holiday cards and photos
- Explain to the child when and how often he can see the incarcerated parent
- Tell the child that his incarcerated parent still loves and cares about him even though they cannot be present
- Speak positively about the incarcerated parent
- Be patient as the child works to understand what has happened
- Let him know he's not alone

Co-Parent Communication

- Involve the incarcerated parent in making some decisions about the children
- Discuss co-parenting details in a calm and pleasant manner
- Listen patiently when the other parent is speaking
- Demonstrate your understanding and respect for each other's opinions and suggestions
- Be supportive and show appreciation of the other parent's efforts
- Be sensitive to what is said in front of the children
- Do not put children in the middle of arguments or discussions
- Resolve conflicts sooner rather than later to maintain a good relationship
- Discuss child care providers, schools, extracurricular activities and health care for the children

Spouse/Partner of an Offender

Having a partner incarcerated puts a lot of strain on the relationship. Both partners have to deal with the physical and emotional separation. In order to stay committed to each other, both will need to find ways to express their love and concern for each other. They also need to find ways to help their relationship continue to grow.

Here are some suggestions:

- Write letters daily and share honest details about your life
- Tell your partner about what your plans
- Visit often, weekly if possible
- Talk on the telephone, as your budget will permit
- Invite some friends to come with you on visits
- Share a common interest, such as reading the same book or watching the same television show
- Share the family's budget concerns
- Make decisions about money, children, housing and jobs together

The incarcerated parent may feel a lack of control in the relationship. The offender may be angry or upset when the partner is not around when he phones or when she misses a visit. The offender may also get upset if she has to make an emergency decision without his input. Some offenders may not like having to depend upon others. These feelings are normal, but need to be understood and controlled. In these situations, both must talk about their feelings and concerns with each other openly and honestly. The partner will also have to learn to say 'no' when she cannot do something for the offender. The partner needs to take care of herself, even if the offender feels threatened at times.

Parent of an Offender

Having a child who is incarcerated can place a heavy burden on the parents. They may have many mixed feelings. They may feel guilty and think that they should have done more for their child. They may feel that they have done something wrong which led to their child being in prison. These feelings of guilt are shared by many parents. Often they dwell on their incarcerated child, such as thinking that they need to "make up for" what they did not do "right" in the past. They need to remind themselves that every person is responsible for his own actions and that they are not to blame for their child's incarceration. To dwell on their child will only increase their stress. It will not free the son or daughter.

The parents may also feel angry with their child because of what he did. Their child might have brought them shame from people in their community. They may be suffering physical and emotional hardships or have bad feelings and even hate. These feelings may be mixed with feelings of love. Anger mixed with love is common. Don't try to mask these feelings, because they are normal. Talk about these feelings with family or friends you trust. This will help the parents find a way to accept the fact that their child is in prison.

Eventually, the parents may come to terms with these mixed feelings. However, it is important for their own health and well-being to keep living a full life on their own. They need to do things that they enjoy like a new activity or hobby. They need to focus on their relationship or other children. Taking an interest in them will help them adjust to the new situation.

Supporting the Children

Every child responds differently when a parent when a parent is arrested and imprisoned.

Children may have different feelings and sometimes even several feelings at once when a parent is in prison. Some common feelings children may have include: fear and worry, sadness and loneliness, anger, guilt, shame, and confusion.

Fear and Worry

The sudden disappearance of a parent can be a terrifying experience. This fear can be greater for very young children who do not understand where their parent has gone. It can also be worse if the child witnessed the arrest. The child may think, "What is going to happen now that Mom or Dad is gone?" This fear may lead to nightmares, not wanting to go to daycare or school, resistance to staying alone or clinging behavior to a person, animal or object.

Children may also feel fear about their parents' welfare. Children may hear scary stories about prison and may worry about the safety of the incarcerated parent.

Sadness and Loneliness

Children separated from their parents may feel abandoned or may feel that someone close has been lost. They may grieve this loss.

A child may also feel lonely when a parent goes to prison. The caregiver may be busy trying to make ends meet and supporting the offender in prison and may not have as much time for the child. A child may feel like he is being shuffled around in the process. Children who have a parent in prison need to be told that both the absent parent and the caregiver parent still care.

Children with incarcerated parents may also feel isolated from friends. Peers may tease a child about his parent in prison. Other peers and adults may not know what to say to a child about his new situation and avoid contact out of their own discomfort.

Anger

At first, a child may feel anger toward Mom or Dad who is in prison, and may not want anything to do with the parent. Children often feel the offender caused them a lot of pain and may not want to deal with the situation.

The child may be angry at the parent for abandoning him, or at the other parent or family members. It is very difficult for the child to express his anger at the incarcerated parent since he is not present and also may be described by the family as the victim. Often the child's anger is expressed at the remaining parent or caregiver, teachers or other adults, "the system," or at the world. In some cases, it can be expressed against the child himself.

Guilt

Children may feel guilty about having a parent in prison. Young children may not understand that it was Mom or Dad who did something wrong. They may think it is their fault and have thoughts such as, "If only I had been a better child, this would have never happened." If the child was home when the parent was arrested, he may feel upset by the sight of a parent being handcuffed or may feel guilty if he opened the door for the police to come into the home.

Shame

The shame experienced by the families of those who commit crimes is real and it is painful. The child may admire the parent and be ashamed at the same time. He may be loyal to and also want to reject the parent.

Due to the disgrace of having a parent in prison, a child may be embarrassed because he needs time off for visiting a parent in prison. Other children may bully and tease him. In this situation, he may be angry at those who criticize his incarcerated parent and may be moved to defend of the parent. Or he may also feel shame about the parent and move to reject his parent. Some children will withdraw and may become depressed, while others may become aggressive and hostile.

Confusion

One of the most burning questions that most children ask is, "When will my daddy be home?" When children or their parents do not have control over events and cannot explain situations, fear and confusion increase greatly.

A result of incarceration is that a child may be moved to take on the role left vacant by the incarcerated parent. A child may be forced to become the "man of the house," to parent his siblings, provide advice to others in the family, and sometimes even to become a provider for the family. These roles are usually too big for the child to fill and he should be protected from taking on responsibilities beyond his age. It is important to allow him to remain a child in this difficult time.

Tips to Help Children Cope

- Build security by providing infants and young children with consistent routines. In the morning, let your child know some of the things that will happen throughout the day.
- Reassure children and adolescents that they will always have at least one parent to meet their needs. Children should also know that the caretaker will try to stay in contact with the incarcerated parent.

- Give children of all ages respect, care and support. Children and adolescents will not cooperate if they feel they are being treated with disrespect. Parents should monitor their tone of voice and language when talking to their children about their behavior.
- Encourage the child to do things that help him feel better. When children have interests and special talents such as sports, painting, dancing, biking, or reading; it helps build their confidence so that they can feel good about themselves. The caregiver needs to make time to do some of these activities with the child. By helping build the child's confidence, the caregiver will find that she is building her own confidence at the same time. They can be a family, even with one parent in prison! The child needs to know this.
- Take time each day to check in with your child and ask, "How are you feeling?" Remember to let your child know that it's okay to have big feelings no matter what they are. Allow children to express their feelings and respond to them. Don't tell children what they should be feeling, but urge them to talk about it. Remember that a child may not want to talk about it right away. Give children space to explore their feelings and come to you when they are ready to talk.
- Listen to your child's words and actions. If he says he misses dad, that's a good time to talk about his feelings. If you see a change in behavior during special times such as holidays or birthdays, that is an opening to talk. Think of creative ways to spend the holidays or special days, such as making greeting cards and sending them to Mom or Dad.
- Talk to the child about his parent being gone. Answer honestly when explaining where an incarcerated parent is, you can say, "Daddy is in a place called prison for a while. Grown-ups sometimes go to prison when they break a rule called a law."
- Help the child express his feelings in safe ways. Words or tears are a better way of expressing feelings than fighting, getting into trouble, or using alcohol or drugs.
- Support the child who wants to write his parent in prison or send pictures or greeting cards.
- If the caregiver is angry with the offender, she may want to punish him by not visiting. Work to put these feelings aside and do what is best for the child.
- Outside support can often help a child and the family. A favorite aunt or uncle, teacher, social worker, church group, or community program such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters can help the caregiver and the child during this difficult time.
- When the time comes, help the child prepare for his parent's release. This is very important even if a child will not be living with his parent.

Telling Children the Truth

The simple truth matters. Honesty is important. Talking to your child about his parent's incarceration can be scary. You may worry about the questions he will ask. As difficult as it is, tell the truth. It is the best way to help him to feel loved and to build a special, trusting bond.

A child whose parent is in prison feels many mixed emotions. The handbook *Staying Connected and Staying Strong* stresses the importance of helping the child deal with these feelings by telling the child the truth about what is happening:

"To help your child deal with all of these feelings, it is important to tell the truth about what is happening. It is more frightening for your child not to know the truth. If you tell a child that Mom or Dad is away at school or in the Army, it can be harmful because your child will wonder why Mom or Dad never comes home to visit. When your child is told a story to protect him from the truth, more stories will need to be made up to answer further questions.

By telling your child the truth, you and the offender can help him build trust in both of you. Talk with your child and answer questions honestly. One way to share what is happening with your child is to say something like, 'Daddy did something wrong; he broke the law. He is not a bad person just because he did a bad thing. He loves you and does not like to be away from you, but he was sent to a place to be punished.' From here, you can talk about what life is like without Dad being home and talk about visiting at the facility. You can also talk with your child about what to say to kids at school or people in their neighborhood. When your child sees that you can handle the new situation, your child will feel more confident about being able to handle the situation as well. Keep in mind that every child is different and will react in different ways to the truth about a parent being in prison. Help your child draw his own conclusions about the situation. Overall, you, the offender, and your child will have a better relationship and feel good about each other because you are dealing honestly with the new situation together.

The first talk with your child will be one of many. Your child will continue to have questions and feelings about a parent being locked up. You may also notice that your child is competing for the time and attention from you or the offender. This may happen when your child is feeling insecure. Your child needs attention, love, understanding, and honesty more than ever now. If you feel too much stress to help your child deal with the situation, talk with someone about the problem. You may be able to talk with a school guidance counselor, a mental health professional or a ministry group. You may also be able to find a mentor for your child. In some communities, you may also be able to connect with other families who have loved ones incarcerated. These people can help support you and your child because they understand the situation as no one else can.

It is important that you take responsibility for explaining your absence. You must be open and honest."

In her book *Parenting from a Distance*, Jan Walker writes to incarcerated parents, "You have the right to choose what you want your children to know about your separation and to give them that information. You will not be able to control what others tell them, though, so you will want to consider very carefully what you tell them. If you give them accurate information, but that information does not fit with what they hear from other persons, they will have to weigh the validity of what they hear from each of you. Most children are capable of sensing when adults are telling the truth. Regardless of what others tell them, your relationship with your children will be healthier if you tell the truth."

When children are separated from a parent for any reason, they may suffer "separation anxiety." They need to know that the parent still cares about them and they can rely on other adults in their life for help. The amount of information you tell children and how you tell them will vary depending on the age and personality of the child. The incarcerated parent and the caregiver need to plan what they are going to tell the child and how you are going to say it. The child not only needs information about the incarcerated parent's separation from them, but also needs to know about the caregiver's relationship with the incarcerated parent, divorce issues, and custody issues.

Guidelines for Explanations

- Be open and honest
- The incarcerated parent must accept responsibility for his actions
- Include what you think is important
- Exclude what is not needed or confusing
- Prepare for the children's questions
- Urge the children to express their feelings

- Waiting too long leaves the children open to being told by someone else
- The incarcerated parent and the caregiver need to discuss what they are telling the children

Answering Difficult Questions

Where are you?

“I’m in a place called prison. Grown-ups go to prison when they break a rule called a law. I’m not here because of anything you did. This is not your fault.”

An age-appropriate truth is the one that is most helpful for children, and this truth can be built on as children get older, want to know more, and can handle more complex explanations.

Why did you go to jail?

For young children - "People have to go to jail when they do not obey the laws and rules of their town. I disobeyed the law when I made some mistakes, like when children disobey rules and get put in time-out. Jails and prisons are like time-outs, but they last longer for adults."

For adolescents - "All actions have consequences for breaking rules. When someone breaks the law, they might have to go to jail as a consequence of their misbehavior."

When children ask this question they are not looking for all the details. They are trying to make sense of what has happened. Explaining in an age-appropriate way what has happened also provides an opportunity for the parent to take responsibility and distinguish between “bad” actions and “bad” people. This is also an opportunity for the parent to say he is sorry for the harm he caused. It is not helpful for children to hear that the parent does not know why he is incarcerated, or that it is due to racism or unjust laws.

When are you coming home?

“I won’t be home for a while. I am waiting for more information and will let you know when I find out. I’d rather be home with you but know that wherever I am, I will be thinking about you.”

For those who are awaiting trial, there is a terrible uncertainty about the sentence they are facing. Even when a person is in prison, the exact amount of time he will be incarcerated is often unknown. Parents may be tempted to minimize the length of time in order to relieve the child of the stress of waiting such a long time. Responding that they will be home “soon” is not helpful. Children have a different sense of time than adults. The parent should let the child know when he won’t be home by Christmas or for a birthday. While this can be painful to the child, this hurt is much less than that of a child waiting for a parent who does not show up.

Are you okay?

Children worry about their parents and need to know their parent is safe. It is best to let children know that while their parent is not in a good place, because he is being punished, he can handle it and will be okay.

Where do you live in jail?

"When people go to jail, they live in small rooms that all look the same. I live in one of those rooms when I sleep. I have a bed, sink, desk and toilet. When I need to shower, I ask a guard to take me to a bigger bathroom with showers."

What do you do with your time in jail?

"People in jail can take classes, work, read books from a library and participate in programs that can help them. I can also have hobbies such as watching television or exercising."

Do you blame me? Do you love me?

Children will not ask this question directly, but they may hint at it. Children often blame themselves or feel that if the parent really loved them, their parent would not have committed a crime.

Will I get to see you?

If your child can visit: "You can visit me in prison once in a while. Your caregiver will let you know when. Between visits we can write letters and talk on the phone."

If your child cannot visit: "We may not be able to see each other often, but I want you to know that I'm always thinking of you."

For More Advice:

In "The Explanations" chapter of the book *Parenting from a Distance*, Jan Walker gives more specific advice on how to tell the toddler, the preschooler, the grade school child, the preteen, or the teen.

In some prisons, a parenting instructor, social worker, or chaplain may be able to suggest other resources. If available, offenders may benefit from participating in Parenting classes or Parent Support Groups. They may also ask other inmates how they explain things to their children.

In many communities, social service organizations or churches hold support groups for families with incarcerated family members. Check with these groups for information on how they explain things to the children.

Helping Children Stay Connected

When the incarcerated parent is involved in his child's life, the child will know that he will always be cared for.

Many people think that successful communication is when they speak and others act in response to their speaking. What really counts is when the parent listens to what the child is saying. The subject matter is not as important. Whether the conversation is in the visiting room or on the phone, parents can show interest in their children's lives and ask detailed questions about their interests. While incarcerated parents

and their children can't do many things together, they can do a lot of things "together apart." They can plan to read the same book or watch the same television show, and talk about what they thought of it.

Sometimes parents turn the conversation to talking about what it will be like when they come home, making promises which are difficult to keep and which shift from the present to an uncertain future. Children need support in coping with the reality before them and in building their relationships with their parents in the here and now. Conversations focused on listening on the part of the incarcerated parent — rather than talking — mean so much to children, and offer them the chance for in-depth communication that they may not get to have with their busy caregivers on the "outside."

Facts to Remember

If you are concerned about the child and you want to help him stay connected with the incarcerated parent, the following facts taken from the book *Parenting from a Distance* by Jan Walker will be important to you.

- Parenting from a distance is a stressful task
- Recognize that the incarcerated parent's needs are second to the children's needs
- The incarcerated parent and the caregiver must work to reduce tension between the two of them
- The caregiver must show the incarcerated parent that she cares about his relationship with his child
- Offer encouragement, not criticism
- Remember, giving up because the hurdles are too great damages the parent-child relationship and does not help the child's self-esteem
- Avoid blaming the incarcerated parent or others
- If the incarcerated parent is willing to work at the task of parenting from a distance, he will have some rights as a parent
- One of the most difficult facts about parenting from a distance is that the incarcerated parent has a very unequal balance of power in the relationship with the child and the caregiver. He must be shown that his role is valued

Letters

While letter writing may seem outdated in this age of internet, social media, and instant messaging, it is one of the main tools for communication between the child and his incarcerated parent. Letters can allow the child to share feelings without shame or fear of judgment. Some children are freer to express anger and hurt in writing and drawing. This may clear the way for a closer future relationship.

The child should be urged to write regularly to the incarcerated parent. If the child is too young to write, he can dictate a letter to the caregiver. If he has trouble expressing his feelings of sadness, loneliness and anger, the caregiver can help him find the words.

The child can be unsure of what to put in a letter. Keep a running list of things he can write about. He may choose to discuss things like going to school, what he is learning, or what they have in common. He can talk about the love he has for the incarcerated parent and how he misses him. Encourage the child to tell his feelings to the incarcerated parent. Tell the child that the feelings are not "bad" or "good," but it is what he does with them that is important. It is okay to be mad, but it is not okay to be aggressive or violent. Remind him that feelings are natural and learning how to cope with them is the goal.

It is helpful to set a routine of communication. Have the child send a letter the same day every week so the child has regular communication and can look forward to receiving a return letter on the same day every week.

Urge the child to draw pictures or write poems to send to the incarcerated parent. Have the child send completed school work or test papers.

An incarcerated parent can also express love and remorse more freely in a letter. He can communicate (with age appropriate details) the truth about where he is and why he is not with the child. He can reduce the fear that the child may be having by correcting “frightening images” and telling the child that he is okay. He should be very clear that his being gone has no relation to the child. The child often feels the parent’s absence is his fault, or the parent lacks interest in him. The letters should include love and say that although you are not together right now, you are interested and able to communicate with him.

The incarcerated parent should show interest in his child’s life and activities. Incarcerated parents can benefit from updates about the child’s current interests, so they can ask about these in their letters, but parents should not worry about length and details.

Younger kids would rather receive frequent mail than a few long letters. Parents can draw pictures for children too young to read. Letters can be written in large block letters making them easy for children who are beginning readers. If the parent has some artistic talent, he can draw pictures of where he lives, works, eats, and exercises to help children understand his daily life. Some parents send line drawings or tracings of familiar television or cartoon characters for their children to color and send back.

Older children need to know they are in their parent’s thoughts. Notes and cards of all kinds are appreciated, especially for birthdays, holidays and celebrations. Letters written and received can provide a valuable opportunity to share feelings without fear of being interrupted or shamed. Some children are better able to express their anger and hurt in writing and drawing, which can help to clear the way for a closer relationship in the future. Some incarcerated parents can better express their affection and remorse in a letter without the embarrassment they may feel in a personal conversation.

Saving the letters over time can be like keeping a journal, and re-reading a parent’s letters can give a child an experience of a growing relationship. Children of all ages enjoy finding a letter addressed to them in the mailbox and they also may enjoy responding with a letter.

Suggested Topics to Write About:

- Positive things you are doing
- Common interests (sports, hobbies, books)
- Current events in both your lives (friendships, new interests)
- How you celebrating special events such as birthdays and holidays
- Favorite memories about each other and the family
- Updates on familiar people (family members, friends, coaches, important people in his life)
- Classes he is taking and what he is learning
- Lyrics to a song you like
- A joke you heard

Sample Letter for Child to Write Parent:

Hi Dad,

How are you doing? I miss you so much. I hope you are ok. Things are going good in school. I got an A in math class and I made the baseball team! I'm being good and working hard in school.

Mom says we are coming to visit you next weekend. I can't wait to see you. I drew you a picture of the family. I hope you like it. Mom and Sis say hi and send their love. See you Saturday.

*Love,
Child's Name*

Sample Letter for Incarcerated Parent to Write Child:

Hi Billy,

I am writing to see how you are doing and let you know I miss you. It is important to me that we keep in touch and that you know that I think of you all the time. I want you to know that even though I am not with you right now, I think about you every day and I am looking forward to seeing you. In case you forget, I am going to keep reminding you in my letters.

So what did you do today in school? What was the highlight of your day today? Mine was sitting down to write you! I was in school today and they were teaching us about the solar system and I remembered when you told me about there being 9 planets in the solar system. You knew how many there were before I did, you are a smart guy. You have taught me how important it is to learn. Being your dad makes me proud because I shared with some of the guys in my class that you already knew the stuff we are learning. I showed them your picture today. I am sad because I am here and not able to be there for your basketball game on Friday but I know you will do great and I am cheering for you even though you can't see or hear me. Remember it is not important that you win but that you had fun and did the very best you could do. Let me know how it goes, okay? I am looking forward to coming to your games next year if you still want to play. Maybe we can play together, if you want to . . . what do you think?

Before I go to sleep, I was thinking that maybe we could try and do something at the same time like read the same book and tell each other what we think of it. It would be really neat to see what the other is thinking and it would be fun to share something together . . . so why don't you think about it and write back with a list of possibilities of what you would like to read, okay? I will wait to see what you think about this, okay?

I can't wait to hear from you buddy and I love you. Just thinking about you makes my day better! I hope you have a great week, keep up the good work in school, and I will be waiting to hear from you soon!

*Love,
Dad*

Division of Adult Institutions Mail Guidelines

The rules governing letters are generally the same no matter where a parent is incarcerated. In most cases, anyone can write to an incarcerated person. When writing to an incarcerated parent, be sure to clearly identify the name of the sender and return address, as well as the incarcerated parent's name, identification number, and the correctional facility address.

Certain things cannot be mailed into institutions. All mail that is sent to an offender will be opened and checked by staff for items that are not allowed. Staff will also check the content of letters.

This is a list of what you **can** send to an offender:

- Paper with words and drawings
- Signed greeting cards and postcards (Musical cards are not allowed)
- Photographs
- Magazines, newspapers and published materials shipped directly from the publisher
- Clippings or photocopies of published materials that meet criteria

This is a list of what you **cannot** send to an offender:

- Cash
- Coded material
- Photos and personal information of DOC staff
- Sexually explicit materials
- Personal photos displaying nudity
- Unsanitary items such as hair, saliva, and body secretions
- Stamps, instant cash cards, phone cards, and credit cards
- Items that pose a safety or sanitation hazard, including lipstick stickers or other foreign substances that have an odor, including perfume and aftershave

You may **not** write about the following things:

- Criminal activity
- Security threats
- Inferiority of an ethnic, racial or religious group
- Anything gang related

Legal mail is opened and inspected in the presence of the inmate. Legal mail includes letters to or from courts, court staff, and attorneys. Special mail includes letters to and from state and federal agencies and officials.

To address mail to an offender, you must include the offender's full legal name and DOC identification number and the institution address. Here is an example of how to address an envelope to an offender:

John Doe, DOC #000000
Dodge Correctional Institution
PO Box 700
Waupun, WI 53963-0700

Visits

Visits can be positive for children, but prisons can seem scary.

While many families communicate with through letters and phone calls, visiting provides the most intimate kind of communication and an important one for younger children who need closeness and touch to bond. For children of all ages, visiting allows for face-to-face contact which promotes the expression of feelings and builds relationships.

It is important to understand the difference between a jail and prison, because their visiting rules often differ. Jails are county facilities run by county sheriffs and are designed to hold individuals awaiting trial, being held on probation or parole violations, or serving sentences for minor crimes. Because jails are designed for short stays, they do not tend to be visitor-friendly. Visiting may be more difficult and only non-contact visits (through glass) may be allowed. County jails are subject to state law and minimum standards, but the rules and regulations about visits vary from county to county. Phone the county jail or go to its website for specific visiting rules and procedures.

Prisons are operated by the state and hold individuals convicted of more serious crimes. Prisons may have differing security classifications: maximum, medium and minimum security. Wisconsin prisons have more humane visiting policies, with contact visits. At the same time, state prisons are often located in rural areas, distant from major cities and difficult for some families to reach.

Bringing a child into a prison to visit can be a very meaningful way for the child to connect with an incarcerated parent and continue a relationship. To prevent any unexpected delays and make the visit a positive experience for the child, make sure everyone knows what to expect.

Each prison in Wisconsin has slightly different rules that you should be aware of before you bring a child on a visit. Here are some general guidelines for bringing children to visit in a facility:

- In all DOC facilities, a guardian can bring in a see-through bottle of formula, diapers that are not packaged, wet wipes in a see-through bag, and a blanket.
- Anyone under 18 years of age must be with their parent or legal guardian. If a child is with an adult other than their parent or legal guardian, this adult must be on the approved visitors list of the offender. Any person visiting under the age of 18 also requires the written approval of the minor's parent or legal guardian to be on file with DOC.
- Parents or legal guardians are responsible for supervising children with them on a visit.
- No diaper bags will be allowed into the visiting area.

To speed up visitor processing and make it less stressful, do not wear clothing or hairstyles with metal, or outfits that have hats, scarves, or outer layers that will have to be removed. If you travel by car, leave all items except your car keys, money and ID in your car and make sure to check all your pockets thoroughly to make sure there is nothing in there that you have forgotten about. Leave any questionable items in the locker provided or in your car. It's a good idea to call the visiting office before you visit with children so you know what is allowed at the facility you will be visiting.

Nothing is more important to the relationship between an incarcerated parent and the children than visits. The decision of whether or not to take children to visit parents in prison can be a difficult one. Each family situation is different and the many factors to be weighed in making this decision can include the child's desire and needs, the caregiver's relationship with the incarcerated parent, visiting policies, travel distance, transportation, and finances.

Preparing Children for a Visit

Visiting can be stressful. Whether the visit is positive or negative will depend on what the child and you expect. Before you take the child to see a parent, prepare the child for a prison visit. If possible, make one or two visits alone before the child visits so you can tell him what the prison looks like, where the visits take place, how long the visit will last, and what the rules are. It is important to learn as much as possible

about what the visit will be like and to share this information with children. This will greatly reduce a child's anxiety.

Children often have mixed emotions about visiting: excitement, fear, worry, concern. Depending on how long it has been since they last saw their parent, children may worry about recognizing the parent, how he may have changed, and whether the parent still loves them and will be the parent they know.

Although there may be vending machines in the visiting area, it is best to feed the child and yourself before the visit.

Children are likely to be frightened by the prison environment. Before the visit, explain to the child:

- How you will get to the jail or prison
- Security procedures that will occur (waiting in a line, metal detector, pat-downs, etc.)
- The incarcerated parent will be wearing a special uniform
- Layout of the visiting area
- Behavior which is acceptable
- Time limits of the visit
- If food is available in the visiting room
- He will have to say goodbye and leave without his parent
- Help your child think of things he'd like to tell his incarcerated parent.

Things to Consider During the Visit

The main purpose of the child visiting with the incarcerated parent is to maintain a positive relationship with him. Do not use visiting time to discuss the child's poor behavior or grades. Do that in letters. Spend your short time together talking about positive things.

Just seeing the incarcerated parent can show the child that he is okay. Here are some other things you can do:

- Your child may be nervous. Help your child feel comfortable.
- Let the child know you are happy to see him.
- Continue any customs you have together such as singing a song.
- Ask him questions about himself.
- Make the most of your time.
- Make good-bye easier. Come up with a special phrase you both can say at bedtime or something you will both do at the same time each day even though you are apart.
- Let children leave the visit before the parent returns to his unit or cell. It is usually easier to leave than to be left, if permitted.

Starting the visit may be awkward, especially if the children do not visit often. Be prepared to start the conversation.

Possible Conversation Starters:

- Similar interests
- Updates on family, friends, pets
- How your child may have changed since the last visit
- Favorite colors, music, or sports teams, etc.

- School events
- Special events like holidays or birthdays
- Something the child discussed in a recent letter

During a visit, the visitor and the incarcerated parent are responsible for your child's behavior. Usually giving the child attention will reduce the chance of misbehavior. But have a plan if misbehavior should occur.

If they are available, be prepared to play with toys or games, draw pictures or read books with the child. If more than one adult is visiting with the child, develop a tag-team approach where one adult plays with the child while the other visits with the incarcerated parent.

Things to Consider After the Visit

Allow the child time to feel his feelings after the visit. Adults want to make it all better right away, but it is important for the child to be able to express his feelings about the visit. Follow his lead as to whether he wants to talk or not. When given the space and support to feel sad and talk about his parent, the child is able to "bounce back" and will feel that his connection to his parent is supported.

It may be helpful to call or send a letter a few days after the visit to remind your child that there are other ways to communicate other than in-person visits. It could also be nice to ask a question or share a detail that your child told you during the visit to show that you were listening.

Division of Adult Institutions Visiting Information

The Department of Corrections encourages and supports visiting for offenders and their approved visitors. The following guidelines help ensure a safe and secure visiting area while promoting a family atmosphere. Check the doc.wi.gov website for specific visiting rules and procedures.

Prohibited Items and Controlled Substances:

Wisconsin laws ban delivery of any article to an inmate of a state institution or depositing or concealing an article within the state institution or receiving an article to take out of the institution that is contrary to the rules without the permission of the Warden. DOC is committed to keeping institutions drug-free and will investigate and prosecute any individuals bringing drugs into a prison. Any person found in violation of this law is subject to imprisonment or a fine.

Getting Permission to Visit an Inmate:

Anyone wishing to visit an inmate in a state institution or jail must be listed on the inmate's visitors list. It is the inmate's responsibility to add visitors to his list.

All visitors, including children, must complete a Visitor Questionnaire for approval to visit. It is the inmate's responsibility to obtain and mail the Visitor's Questionnaire to a visitor. The visitor needs to return the form to the institution to be added to the inmate's visitor list. Inmates will be notified when a visitor has been added to their visiting list. Visitors may be denied visitation on a number of grounds listed in the administrative code. If denied, a visitor must wait 6 months to re-apply.

Any child under the age of 18 must have the written consent of the legal, non-incarcerated parent or guardian prior to visiting. This consent is contained on the Visitor Questionnaire. Unless a minor visitor is

the legal spouse of the inmate, any visitor not yet 18 must be with an adult who is on the approved Visitors List.

Number of Visitors Allowed:

The Assessment and Evaluation (A&E) intake units at Dodge Correctional Institution (DCI), Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility (MSDF) and Taycheedah Correctional Institution (TCI) have several visiting rules that are different from other institutions. Offenders in A&E are permitted up to four adult, close family member visitors. A close family member is an offender's natural, adoptive, step-parents, foster parents, spouse, children, grandparents, grandchildren or siblings. If the spouse's last name is different than the offender's, the spouse must send a copy of the marriage license to prove the relationship. Offenders in A&E are allowed to have their own children visit. Offender's children under the age of 18 are not counted against the four visitor limit. However, offenders in A&E with sexually related offenses are not allowed to have visitors under the age of 18.

Once offenders have left A&E Status at DCI, MSDF or TCI or have transferred to another institution, they are allowed to have twelve adults on their visitors list. Children of the offender and minor children of approved visitors may also visit, and are not counted against the limit of 12 visitors. With the approval of an institution's Warden or Superintendent, an inmate may have more than 12 visitors on the visiting list, if all visitors are close family members.

General Visiting Information:

In addition to department-wide policies, each institution has its own specific visiting rules and procedures. Scheduled visiting hours, the number of visits allowed per week, and the number of visitors on any single visit can vary between institutions. It is a good idea to contact the specific institution prior to visiting, when being newly added to an offender's visiting list or when having a special or extended visit.

Visitors should not arrive more than 15 minutes before visiting hours. No loitering is allowed in the parking lot area. No one is allowed to wait on state property for other persons who are visiting, including waiting in the parking lot or in vehicles. Persons or animals are not allowed to be left unattended in vehicles. Vehicles must have their windows rolled up and doors locked. If your vehicle is found unlocked, your visit may be ended. Handicap parking spaces are provided for visitors who have a physical disability. Verbal communication, waving, sounding of horns or blinking headlights to signal inmates is strictly prohibited.

Visitors age 16 or older must provide photo I.D.s. Acceptable forms of photo I.D. are:

- State Driver's License
- Passport or Visa
- Department of Transportation Picture I.D. (Motor Vehicle Department)
- Military identification card
- Tribal I.D. (if it has a photo)

Only visitors on the approved visiting list will be allowed to visit. Visitors will not be allowed to stay in the lobby unless waiting to enter the institution. Anyone denied visitation must leave state property immediately, including parking lots.

Lockers are provided at no cost for items not allowed in the visiting room. Visitors' hands may be stamped and checked by Security staff when entering and leaving those areas.

Visitors will be denied entry to the visiting room if they are unable to successfully pass metal detection inspection after three attempts. In order to speed up the entrance process, visitors should avoid wearing clothing with metal attached, such as buckles, snaps, excess jewelry, bib overalls, and wire in undergarments.

Visitors who have a disability or medical condition that prevents them from clearing lobby or metal detector procedures will need to have their doctor complete a Visitor Requesting Accommodations Form (DOC-2424). A visitor may ask for this form when they complete the Visitors Questionnaire (DOC-21AA) by checking the appropriate box. The visitor must then send the Visitor Requesting Accommodations Form to a doctor who can complete, sign and return the form to the facility Security Director. Any visitor who uses a wheelchair on a visit must use an institution approved wheelchair. This may be a personal wheelchair or one provided by the institution, as determined by the institution. Personal wheelchairs may be searched.

Visiting Areas:

Each institution has a visiting area. Some institutions have both inside and outside visiting areas which may be used during appropriate times of the year. During outside visiting, offenders and visitors are not allowed to sit on the ground.

Offenders in segregation or under no-contact visiting restrictions may have added restrictions which may include using audio-visual equipment or limited hours, length of visits and number of visitors. Visitors may call ahead to find out if an inmate is on a no contact visiting restriction.

Some institutions may provide video conferencing visiting. Please check the visiting information for each institution.

Behavior While Visiting:

Visitors must act in a proper and courteous manner and must follow all visiting rules. It is the offender's duty to provide visiting rules to their visitors.

Visitors appearing to be under the influence of intoxicants will not be allowed to visit.

Whether visits are outside or inside, parents are responsible to supervise their children. Any child leaving the "visiting area" must be with an adult.

Excessive displays of affection are not allowed. Offenders may hug and kiss visitors at the beginning and end of each visit. Offenders may hold their own children who are age 5 or under. An offender's hands must be in view at all times.

Inappropriate conduct by visitors and offenders or their children may result in the end of the visit and suspension of visiting privileges depending on the inappropriate conduct.

The following items are not allowed in any institution:

- Weapons
- Illegal drugs
- Alcohol
- Tobacco and related products

- Matches and lighters
- Cell phones, pagers, or other electronic equipment
- Pets or other animals, except for those required as service animals for persons with disabilities
- Purses
- Cameras or video recorders (An offender photographer may be available if requested. There is a cost per photo, payable by the offender.)
- Food items (Vending machines are available)
- Reading materials or other papers without prior approval
- Children's books, games and toys (These are provided in the children's play area at each institution)
- Strollers
- At most institutions, visitors may not bring in any items for an offender

All items brought in will be inspected. Check with the institution about allowable medications. The list of allowed items is limited to the following

- Coins and bills, not to exceed \$15.00 for each adult visitor
- Comb, pick or brush, limited to one for each visitor
- Up to two baby blankets for each child
- Up to four diapers for each child (diaper bags are not allowed)
- Up to two plastic baby bottles for each child.
- One hand-held baby seat for each child
- Diaper wipes kept in a clear plastic bag
- One pacifier for each child
- One coat and one pair of gloves for each visitor
- Headwear (provided it does not conceal identity)
- One institution locker key

Visiting areas have a "family" atmosphere for family and friends of all ages. Visitors should dress and act accordingly. The following clothing is considered inappropriate and will result in the denial of visits.

The following restrictions apply equally to men, women and children:

- See-through clothing
- Shorts that are shorter than fingertip length with the visitor standing with proper posture, arms straight down, fingers extended
- Skirts and dresses shorter than fingertip length plus three inches with the visitor standing with proper posture, arms straight down, fingers extended
- Strapless, tube and halter tops and dresses
- Tops and dresses that expose the midriff (front or back)
- Spandex-like or Lycra-like clothing
- Exposed underwear
- Clothing with revealing holes, tears or slits
- Clothing or accessories with obscene or profane writing, images or pictures
- Gang-related clothing, headwear, shoes, logos or insignias
- Any clothing that may have the potential to cause a disruption
- Footwear and acceptable attire must be worn at all times

Phone Calls

Phone calls are a common way for incarcerated parents and their children to communicate. In general, phone calls from jail can be made with fewer restrictions than in prisons. All phone calls may be monitored or recorded.

Phone calls may be more personal than letters, but they can quickly become expensive. Because the caregiver gets the bill, she must discuss with the incarcerated parent the limits of phone expenses. It is not fair to put the caregiver in the position of having to choose between accepting charges to allow the incarcerated parent to talk with his children and paying other bills.

Some children have a hard time talking with parents on the phone. Parents often feel pressure to make the conversation meaningful. This stressful situation often results in the parent asking a million questions.

Help the children make a list of things to talk about on the phone. Have them use the notes as hints while talking on the phone. Encourage the children to talk about their lives – what they are doing each day.

Guidelines for Phone Calls:

- Decide ahead of time how long the call will be (what phone expense the caregiver can afford)
- Arrange the call to be when the child is likely to be free to talk
- Put your thoughts in order before the phone call
- Make a list of topics, because during the emotion of the call, you may forget something
- Focus on the child and encourage him to talk about his feelings and experiences
- Give your child a picture of his parent to look at as he talks
- Avoid topics that are too sensitive or require long explanations
- End the conversation on a positive note
- Remember, phone calls are not a substitute for letter writing

Holidays and Special Occasions

Birthdays, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, and other holidays are hard times for parents and children to be separated. Yet, they build family traditions which help bind the family together. Even though parents are incarcerated, they may play a role in family events.

Start by having the child keep a calendar of birthdays, holidays, school events, and sporting activities. Realize that the planning is an important part of the event to the child. To involve the incarcerated parent, the letters or phone calls must be made before the event. Mail takes time, mail early.

For most children, it is the attention and celebration that makes the day special. Focus on ways to make the children feel special on these days. Encourage the child to write about the meaning of the day to him and share memories of past holidays. Plan a phone call to go along with the holiday. Have the child pick out holiday cards to be sent. Homemade cards containing the child's own words or drawings are very special to the incarcerated parent.

If the child wishes to send a gift, help him to decide what to give and what is allowed in the institution. Again, homemade gifts and photos can become valued keepsakes. If the child makes homemade gifts that cannot be sent into a prison, have him take a picture of it and send the picture. Keep a "treasure box" of gifts the parent will get upon release.

Encouraging Your Children's Education

Children whose parents take an interest in their education do better in school and life. Although the parent may be in prison, he may still be involved in his child's education.

Even before the child attends nursery or preschool, the incarcerated parent should start writing about learning. The caregiver or other family members need to make up for the missing parent by reading to the child and buying books and educational games for him.

When the child starts school; send the incarcerated parent information about the school, teachers, and subjects the child is taking. Keep him informed about the child's progress. Send copies of the child's homework, test papers, and report cards. The child may even send some homework that isn't so good. Then the incarcerated parent may help by sending back ideas to make the homework better.

Some institutions have special projects for parents to encourage the children to develop their reading skills. These projects may involve inmates reading children's books while recording on CDs or DVDs and sending the books and recordings home to the children. Some institutions may also have special visiting projects which encourage inmates to read to their children. Urge the incarcerated parent to participate in these projects.

Family Finances

During an incarceration, the family members on the outside and the family member inside both may worry about money issues. Having a family member in prison can cause a real strain on the caregiver's budget. She may have lost a paycheck, yet still will have to come up with money for a mortgage payment or rent, as well as money for food, clothing, medication, and all of the normal living expenses.

If the offender is incarcerated far from your home, she will also have the cost of long-distance collect calls and travel costs when visiting. In the inmate's desire to see or phone his partner, he may forget how tough it is on her budget. The incarcerated parent may want her to buy things that the caregiver just cannot afford. Life in prison can be boring if the inmate is not involved with programming. He may want his partner to buy a TV or send money to buy things at the canteen. This can leave her torn between showing that she cares by sending money and paying the family's bills.

Even if the incarcerated parent understands that the caregiver cannot afford to send much money, money can still be an issue. The offender may have many different feelings about money and may feel guilty or worthless since he is not helping with the family budget. The longer he is in prison, the harder it is for the offender to understand how much things cost and how difficult it can be to live on the outside.

The incarcerated parent may also become angry if his partner applies for some temporary aid from a social service agency, such as welfare or medical aid. But she needs to consider her family's health needs and need for a stable home and good food. There are a number of programs designed to provide short-

term aid. If a person has a child, she can have a surprisingly high income and still get some types of aid. Wisconsin has many special programs to help families through hard times. The local county Social Services Office will have information about these programs.

Money can be a problem for any family. One of the best ways to share money responsibilities is for the caregiver to go over the family budget with the incarcerated parent. They must work on the budget together and talk with each other about budget concerns. Both must be honest about money problems and listen to each other's concerns. Figuring out the budget can help the caregiver plan and also help answer all the incarcerated parent's questions about money. Talking about these problems can help limit stress and frustrations so the caregiver can focus on herself, her family and the relationship.

Child Support

If an incarcerated parent in prison is paying child support, he may be able stop or reduce payments until he is released. Here are the steps he must take:

- Send a written request to the child support agency to review the support order. The request should state why the offender wants a review.
- The child support agency will look at the information provided to see if, based on the incarcerated parent's current income, changing the existing order would result in a significant change as defined in Wisconsin law. If the order meets the standard for agency review, the child support office will send the offender a packet of forms and instructions.
- The incarcerated parent must follow the instructions carefully. He must complete the forms and return them to the child support agency within the time limits.
- If the order does not meet the standard for agency review, the child support office will send the incarcerated parent a letter stating that they will not file a motion for change of the child support order and, if the incarcerated parent still wants a review, he can file a motion asking the court to change the support order.

On its website, www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/css/resource/state-by-state-how-to-change-a-child-support-order, the Office of Child Support Enforcement Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offers state by state information on how to change a child support order.

Health Insurance

As well as a paycheck, the family may also have lost health insurance when a member was sent to prison, or maybe they didn't previously have health insurance. If she does not have health insurance, she may be able to use one of Wisconsin's health care programs. Some individuals and families can get health care coverage through Wisconsin's public health care program, BadgerCare, while others will purchase it through the private market, their employer, or through the federal Health Insurance Marketplace. These insurance programs for low-income families and individuals are available through the Wisconsin Department of Health Services.

Returning Home

The family and incarcerated loved one may be anxiously waiting the time he returns home. Hopes that everything will be perfect are common with friends and family members. However, these hopes may not be realistic.

An incarcerated parent's re-entry into society and the life of their child affects the whole family. Even if the incarcerated parent had a short sentence, both partners will have experienced many changes since they were last together. The person on the outside had to become the sole head of the household. Her duties may have changed or expanded since a member of her family was absent. If she managed the home before the offender's arrest, she had to become more independent or start working outside the home. She might have had to use daycare for her children for the first time. If she was used to working before the incarceration, it may have been a change when she had to handle child and home care duties.

For the offender, the prison experience was a major change from his old life. Even the most humane prison environment is stressful. The prison environment is made up of very strict rules, and the incarcerated parent had to watch his behavior.

On the positive side, the incarcerated parent may have received treatment and education for problems that hurt his ability to get along in society. For example, if he had a substance abuse problem when arrested, he may have received treatment. Education is available for most offenders. The incarcerated parent may have grown both emotionally and intellectually as a result of attending these prison programs. Either way, the he has had many experiences that could change the way he acts in certain situations.

The children have probably grown up in a one-parent household. They may not remember a time when both parents lived together. The children may not be used to sharing the caregiver with someone else or obeying someone else.

With all of these changes, it may take a while after the release before the family settles back into a comfortable routine. Meeting the rules of supervised release, getting the family financially stable and dealing with mandatory treatment can be hard. Both may feel as though they are starting all over again. If they have problems dealing with some of these issues, they might want to seek some support or counseling to help them through this period.

Re-entry can be a challenging process. Parents might want to plan out the re-entry into the child's life before the incarcerated parent is released from prison. Here are some tips to ease the transition:

- Discuss how the incarcerated parent can gradually become part of their child's life in a way that works best for both parents.
- Communicate with the other parent on a regular basis. This process should begin before the incarcerated parent is released from prison.
- Children need time to adjust to the new family environment.
- Be patient with the change that may involve a new home, job and friends.
- Join a support group to talk to others in similar situations. This can ease the incarcerated parent's transition back into society.
- View this opportunity as a fresh start with your children. A gradual transition can strengthen their relationship rather than rushing back into your children's lives.

Some agencies have support groups to help the caregiver and the offender adjust to life outside of prison. Support can help a released parent avoid returning to prison and develop other skills necessary to “make it” in society. The groups also help the family of the incarcerated parent adjust when the offender returns home. If no groups are available in their area, you may want to speak with a counselor or a social worker for individual counseling. It helps to remember that starting over can mean a fresh start as well. You have the strength to make a better life for your family.

Fair Shake is a non-profit website loaded with free services to help offenders reenter the community. By using the Fair Shake materials, the recently released offender can build employability and computer skills, find local resources in his area and create his own reentry packet.

Although responsibility for successfully transitioning from prison to society is on the ex-offender, his success is improved when the entire community is involved. Formerly incarcerated individuals need employment, a place to live and a community that is willing to give them a second chance. Fair Shake has identified six major stakeholder groups: former offenders, families and friends, employers, landlords, communities and corrections – and assembled specific information for each group to help formerly incarcerated individuals achieve success. Check the Fair Shake listing in the next section of this handbook for more information on programs available to recently released parents and their families.

Help for Incarcerated Parents and Caregivers

Being a caregiver to children with an incarcerated parent can cause stress and problems that may seem too hard to handle. While they may often feel alone, there are programs for the parent within the institution and for the caregiver in the community that can help them manage their family’s life and find strength. They can find help with things like food, clothing, child care, housing, work, education, counseling, and mentorship programs.

Within the institution, parents may take programs that may help them move back to the community. The incarcerated parent should be urged to check into these kinds of programs:

- Parenting skills classes
- Parent support groups
- Chapel programs
- Volunteer groups
- Parent/child reading projects
- Re-entry programs

Many community and social service groups can provide support for caregivers. Here is information on some of these agencies:

Circles of Support

Circles of Support is a Goodwill Industries program that helps recently released prisoners with a support group of local volunteers (a Circle). The Circle provides advice and direction to the ex-offender in all areas of life: work, education, housing and social.

Community Circles of Support are groups of volunteers who meet with men and women being released from prison to help them in making a successful move from prison to the community. Circles build positive friendships and responsibilities and work together to help them become productive citizens.

Community Circles of Support:

- Create a feeling of acceptance for the person's return to the community
- Build positive friendships and responsibility
- Focus on the future rather than the past
- Focus on the person's strengths and struggles
- Plan for success
- Support and recognize personal successes

The Regional Community Circles of Support operate in the Fond du Lac, Fox Valley, Green Bay, Manitowoc, and Oshkosh communities. For more information or to join a Community Circle of Support in your region, visit www.circles-of-support.org, email Regional Director Anne Strauch at astrauch_gw@gwicc.org, or call 877-490-3120 or 920-968-6832.

Correctional Education Association-Wisconsin

The Correctional Education Association-Wisconsin has started some initiatives to help incarcerated parents to become more caring, concerned, and informed. The goal of these initiatives goal is to promote parenting programs in prisons and jails and provide services for the families in the community.

Among the CEA-Wisconsin's activities are:

- Creating a national network of parenting educators in prisons and jails
- Publishing a bi-monthly *Parenting Connection* newsletter which highlights programs for parents in correctional settings and families in the community
- Publishing this handbook: *Reaching Beyond Bars: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin and their Families*
- Publishing a directory for correctional educators: *Prison Parenting Programs: Resources for Parenting Instructors in Prisons and Jails*
- Presenting workshops for conferences and organizations
- Providing advice to staff and volunteers on developing parenting programs for incarcerated parents and caregivers

All of the *Parenting Connection* newsletters, handbooks and directories are posted on the www.ceawisconsin.org website. For more information about the services provided by CEA-Wisconsin, contact Jerry Bednarowski at jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com.

Fair Shake

Fair Shake is like a reentry Do-It-Yourself library/hardware store: it has tools, information and materials for returning citizens - and everyone - to build bridges of trust and understanding that support reentry success.

Fair Shake offers a huge website, packed with information and resources for a variety of stakeholders. The entire website is also available in a software format, which is updated every year. The software application is FREE for all prisons and jails.

Leaving prison and successfully returning to families and communities is just the first step in re-starting life. Most returning citizens are faced with huge challenges ranging from finding a job and housing, to paying restitution or fines, to restoring relationships. Central to all of that is finding and keeping self-confidence and a positive outlook.

Because most incarcerated people have limited or no access to computers while in prison, it is a difficult jump from prison into today's digital world. Fair Shake's website and software offer a free computer tutorial and a free office-in-the-cloud that provides email, data storage and a personal web page to use to apply for jobs or housing. The website is also loaded with information for all stakeholders: the currently and formerly incarcerated, families and friends, employers, property managers, communities and corrections.

Fair Shake offers:

- 24-hour access to the tools and resources available on the website
- Free email account and personal web page hosting for folks who have come home from prison.
- Local resources and National resources!
- A Quick and Easy (and FREE) Reentry Packet-builder!
- Self-empowering non-authoritative approach
- Presentations and conversations with the incarcerated in institutions

To find out more, please visit: www.fairshake.net or email Sue Kastensen, founder and director, at sue@fairshake.net.

Madison Urban Ministries

Madison Urban Ministries (MUM) has programs designed to address the unique needs of recently released offenders and children who have a parent in jail or prison or awaiting sentencing. The programs include:

- **The Journey Home** - The Journey Home works to reduce recidivism by focusing on the areas of housing, employment, support, treatment, transportation and education. Program staff assess the needs, possible barriers and strengths facing individuals newly released from prison. MUM's Resource Specialists provide one-to-one case management, Food Share eligibility screening, program, employability and life skills training, job placement assistance, and ongoing support to reduce recidivism. MUM's program staff conducts in-reach visits to area prisons to connect with individuals prior to their release and to build a more seamless return to the community.
- **Monthly Service Fairs** - Monthly Service Fairs serve as a one-stop shop to provide information about training, education, transportation, housing, treatment and support networks.

- **Micro-Loans** - A small micro-loan program is set up through private donations for active program participants to help them get help with security deposits, work clothes, school supplies, etc... A non-perishable emergency food pantry is also on site.
- **Circles of Support** - Circles of Support is a reentry program that matches formerly incarcerated individuals with volunteers in the community to provide the social support. Circles provide a safe place where the recently released offender can be heard, encouraged, and respected while they discuss the challenges they may be experiencing as they transition back into the community. The volunteers are able to provide them with alternative solutions to problems and mentoring as they work through the challenges.
- **Rent Smart and Ready to Rent** - MUM trains UW Law School students to offer housing classes in the Dane County Jail. The classes offer information on tenant rights, landlord rights, budgeting, understanding your credit history, responsibilities of a tenant, and how to effectively talk with your landlord.
- **Just Bakery** - Just Bakery is a 16-week educational and vocational training program that works with individuals who are experiencing significant barriers to employment (homelessness, criminal conviction history, lack of education, or a lack of work history or skills) and who have an interest in baking or culinary arts as a career pathway. In addition to their coursework, students also receive case management and assistance with getting and keeping a job, and job coaching.
- **Mentoring Connections** - Mentoring Connections is a community based mentoring program that matches youth impacted by parental incarceration with a caring, adult mentor. Mentor matches spend time with each other each week and develop a connection that can stick with both the youth and the volunteer for a lifetime.
- **Family Connections** - Family Connections keeps critical parent-child connections strong by taking children and caregivers to visit their moms in Taycheedah Correctional Institution.
- **Reading Connections** - Reading Connections offers parents whose children reside too far away for regular visits, an opportunity to bond with their child and encourage their reading. Reading Connections provides books for moms to choose and program volunteers to record the moms reading to their children. Then they mail a letter from mom, the book and the DVD to her children.

For more information: phone 608-256-0906 or visit MUM's website at www.emum.org.

National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated

The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (NRCCFI) has compiled a wealth of free resources for caregivers, children or family members of the incarcerated, and those offering services or making policies. The resources include:

- **Libraries** - The online Children of Prisoners Library focuses on resources for people working with the children of the incarcerated. The complete Children of Prisoners Library is also available in Spanish. The Incarcerated Fathers Library contains resources on fathers in prison.
- **Directory of Programs** - This Directory lists programs from around the country and the world that work with children and families of the incarcerated.
- **Fact Sheets** - NRCCFI has compiled the most relevant data regarding children and families of the incarcerated.
- **Books and Films** - NRCCFI has compiled a reading and viewing list of items of interest to children and families of the incarcerated and service providers.

For more information: email Ann Adalist-Estrin, Director at nrccfi@camden.rutgers.edu or visit the NRCCFI's website at www.nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/resources/library.

Prison Aftercare Network of Northeastern Wisconsin

Prison Aftercare Network of Northeastern Wisconsin is an umbrella organization, of Christian individuals, ministries, and organizations that provide resources and information for those in the process of re-entry. PAN works in connection with Probation and Parole, various state and local corrections agencies, and over 35 churches, ministries, and area organizations. PAN helps with the most pressing needs for anyone in re-entry: getting ID or licenses, housing, employment, transportation, drug or medical treatment support, and support group systems. PAN's programs include:

- **Pre-Release Prison Program** - Individuals can request an application for a pre-release connection with PAN from the chaplain at the institution or by writing the address below.
- **Post-Release Mentoring Program** - Coming home can be difficult for someone entering a world of freedom after spending years behind bars. Bridges of Hope, affiliated with PAN, offers the possibility of a mentor to those who apply.
- **Straight Street and Think Again** – These faith-based ex-offender aftercare support groups help those released re-enter the community.
- **Come Journey Family Support Group** - A support group for anyone who has a loved one in prison or jail, going in or being released.

For more information: Phone 920-712-4526 or 920-713-8900, write to 100 Primrose Lane, Green Bay, WI 54311 or visit PAN's website at www.tinyurl.com/PANetwork.

St. Rose Youth & Family Center

St. Rose's Family Reunification Program serves children with incarcerated parents and the families who support them. The Family Reunification Program helps the children cope with feelings of sadness, anger, shame, and confusion. The program helps them cope with the loneliness they experience, while building coping skills, protective behaviors, and family strength. St. Rose also provides help with the reentry of former inmates into the community, enhancing the chance of successful family reunification and decreasing the chance of future incarcerations – of both parent and child.

Working with children ranging in age from birth to older adolescence who are in foster or kinship care while their mothers are in prison, the program offers:

- Child-parent prison visits
- Support groups for children and incarcerated parents
- Specific programs for boys and girls
- Pre-release planning
- Community reentry support
- Help with individual and family counseling

While providing activities to unite families, the Family Reunification Program promotes of responsible behaviors, long-term family stability, and the safe reentry of formerly incarcerated people into the community.

For more information, go to St. Rose's website at www.ladlake.org/about-us/st_rose_center or phone 414-466-9450.

Sesame Workshop

Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit organization behind Sesame Street, believes “The incarceration of a loved one can be overwhelming for both children and caregivers. Because of the feeling of stigma, it takes special effort to start important conversations and answer kids’ questions. But parents can comfort children and guide them through difficult moments just by talking. With love and support, the family can cope with the challenges of incarceration together.”

Sesame Workshop has created the *Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* toolkit to help caregivers with young children (ages 3–8) face some of the challenges that a parent's incarceration can bring and help the children develop skills to deal with their situation.

The *Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* toolkit makes available activities, articles, printables, workshops and videos to help caregivers and children build closeness and confidence, make learning fun, and keep the child's world safe and secure.

***Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* is designed to:**

- Reduce worry, sadness, and confusion that young children may have during the incarceration of a parent
- Provide at-home caregivers with plans, tips, and plain words they can use to talk with their children about incarceration
- Tell incarcerated parents themselves that they can parent from anywhere, and provide them with simple parenting tips about the importance of communication

All of these resources are available at: <http://www.sesameworkshop.org/incarceration>.

Teach Inside

Jan Walker is a retired correctional teacher and author of *Unlocking Minds in Lockup: Prison Education Opens Doors*, *Parenting from a Distance: Your Rights and Responsibilities*, and several novels and memoirs based on the experiences of children affected by a parent’s incarceration. Recently, Jan has created a series of *Teach Inside Activities* that provide information to men and women who are inside prisons and jails. The lessons can be used as class or group activities or for individual study.

The *Teach Inside Activities* are:

- **Talking to Children About Prison or Jail** – This lesson explains how to tell children about your crime and incarceration at each stage of their development so they can understand.
- **Child Custody and Dependency** – Information about legal and social services that pertain to offenders’ families are discussed including federal and state programs that provide assistance for the children’s care, child custody, legal guardianship, dependency, foster care and termination of parental rights.
- **Reparent Yourself** – This lesson helps you set goals for choosing to change and reparent yourself by taking personal responsibility for your attitudes and rethinking your behaviors and choices.
- **Reuniting with Your Family and Community** – This lesson discusses the realities of transitioning back into your family and community. It includes suggestions for using a Contract for Forgiveness with each family member.

- **Reaching Out to Children and Family** – Staying in touch with family and friends during incarceration is considered the most important factor for a successful reentry. This lesson shows how you can write stories and poems to explain your absence in words children understand.
- **Visiting Inside: Keep it Positive** – Visiting inside jail or prison is stressful for everyone. This lesson helps you plan for a positive visit to make it less stressful for everyone.

The *Teach Inside Activities* plus 3 supplements: Think About It (critical thinking), Family History & Patterns and The Power of Story are downloadable and printable from Jan Walker’s websites: <https://teachinside.com/> or <https://www.janwalker-author.com>. Jan may also be contacted at janwalker@centurytel.net.

Youth.Gov

Youth.Gov is a U.S. government website that helps users create, maintain, and strengthen effective youth programs. Among the 27 categories of youth topics on the website is “Children of Incarcerated Parents.”

The tools, guides, and resources available on the website include “Tip Sheets” for each of these groups involved with supporting children who have and incarcerated parent: youth supporting fellow youth, caregivers, service providers, prison/jail staff and volunteers, mentors, teachers and incarcerated parents.

Also included on the website are toolkits or guides that give advice on:

- Working with children of incarcerated parents
- Emotions of children with incarcerated parents experience
- Effects of parental incarceration on children
- Antisocial behavior of children with incarcerated parents
- Children in the child welfare system or foster care
- Working with drug endangered children
- And many more topics

The Youth.Gov materials are available at www.Youth.gov/COIP.

Other Wisconsin Resources

Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Metro Milwaukee

Phone: 414-258-4778

Address: 788 North Jefferson Street, Suite 600, Milwaukee, WI 53202

Email: info@bbbsmilwaukee.org

Website: www.bbbsmilwaukee.org

Area Served: Waukesha and Milwaukee counties

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Milwaukee is the premier provider of youth mentoring services in Waukesha and Milwaukee counties. Their one-to-one mentoring program addresses the needs of children facing adversity by creating, fostering, and supporting strong one-to-one relationships between youth and caring volunteer adult mentors. Big Brothers Big Sisters has a special Mentoring Children of Prisoners program that matches children, ages 6-18, with adult volunteers in one-to-one relationships that help broaden their hopes on what they can achieve in life.

Community Re-Entry Program – Racine Vocational Ministries

Phone: 262-633-8660
Address: 214 Seventh Street, Racine, WI 53403
Website: www.rvmracine.org
Area Served: Racine

The Community Re-Entry Program builds a bridge from incarceration to community through support in employment, education, AODA counseling, family and social services and faith-based guidance.

The purpose of the Second Chance program is to create a community that will engage social practices to improve the successful outcomes of high and medium risk re-entrants into the city of Racine by providing:

- Re-Entry support & advocacy
- Necessary skills for community re-entry
- Additional support and guidance for family and other important relationships

Family Law Project – University of Wisconsin Law School

Phone: 608-262-2030
Address: 975 Bascom Mall, Madison, WI 53706
Email: Leslie Shear, Family Law Project Director, ldshear@wisc.edu
Website: <https://law.wisc.edu/fjr/flp/>
Area Served: Wisconsin

Law students work under experienced family law attorneys to provide information and represent prison inmates and caregivers in their family law matters including divorces, paternity, guardianship, child support, child placement, legal custody and visitation.

Kids Matter, Inc.

Phone: 414-344-1220
Address: 1850 N. Martin Luther King Drive, Suite 202, Milwaukee, WI 53212
Email: adam@kidsmatterinc.org
Website: www.kidsmatterinc.org
Area Served: Milwaukee

A team of social workers, family advocates and attorneys help caregivers deal with criminal justice and child welfare agencies. Kids Matter provides caregivers with knowledge and skills to help them meet the needs of the children they love.

The Wisconsin CARES Network, Inc.

Phone: 920-573-0166
Address: P.O. Box 154, Oshkosh, WI 54903
E-mail: Patti Bryant, wisconsincaresnetwork@gmail.com
Website: <https://thewisconsincaresnetwork.wordpress.com>
Area Served: Wisconsin

This is a developing resource network to assist children of incarcerated parents through support groups, resources and tools for success in life skills and education. The organization also intends to offer supports for caregivers and family of those incarcerated as well as formerly incarcerated with the process of reintegration.

Wisconsin Community Services, Inc.

Phone: 414-290-0400

Address: 3732 W. Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 200, Milwaukee, WI 53208

Email: Clarence Johnson, Executive Director, cjohnson@wiscs.org

Website: www.wiscs.org

Area Served: Southeast Wisconsin

The Community and Reintegration Services Division provides programs which work with participants to help them develop the skills they need to be positive and contributing members of the community. These include: family reunification support, counseling, and activities for parents and youth, gifts for children and support groups. The WCS Community and Reintegration Services Division also provides case management, counseling, family therapy, parent education, public information, re-entry support, information and referrals.

Other National Resources

Children of Re-Entry Series

Website: www.newamericamedia.org/special/children-of-reentry.php

New America Media has compiled a series of 8 videos that portray parents returning home from incarceration through the eyes of their children. Produced by young reporters at Richmond Pulse and Silicon Valley De-Bug, these videos tell the evolving stories of families adjusting to life changes.

Family Matters

Email: Linda G. Bell, Ph.D., Linda@familylegacies.net

David C. Bell, Ph.D., David@familylegacies.net

Website: www.familymatterscourse.com

The *Family Matters* course focuses on the family with its unique history, roles, rules, strengths, and challenges. The course teaches participants communication skills and how to manage conflict, change destructive behavior, and heal relationships. The *Family Matters* course is not copyrighted; material may be selected or adapted as needed.

National Fatherhood Initiative

Email: corrections@fatherhood.org.

Website: www.fatherhood.org

The National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) developed the 12-week InsideOut Dad program with 6 Optional Reentry Sessions for jails and short-term facilities which helps all types of fathers become better dads. Through these programs, inmate dads deal with their past in order to discover their futures. NFI's website also provides some free fatherhood skill-building tools to help fathers build skills and connect to their children and families. NFI's Fatherhood Program Locator helps you find organizations in your community that offer National Fatherhood Initiative programs.

Osborne Association of New York

Website: www.osborneny.org

Stronger Together is a series of three handbooks that focus on the experiences and needs of children with an incarcerated parent. Volume I describes the feelings and behaviors that are common when a parent is incarcerated and what parents and caregivers can do to support children and reduce negative responses. Volume II focuses on the importance of maintaining parent-child relationships, how to deal with the criminal justice system, and the power of communication – especially between a child and his

incarcerated parent. Volume III is for non-parent caregivers and provides important information for any caregiver caring for children with an incarcerated parent.

The Osborne Association has also published a *Tip Sheet for Incarcerated Parents: Planning for a Visit from Your Child/Children* which helps incarcerated moms and dads prepare for visits.

Parenting from Prison: A Co-Parenting Guide for Divorced and Separated Parents

Website: www.extension.missouri.edu/families

Posted and printable from the University of Missouri Extension website, this guide describes how divorce is stressful for families and one parent being incarcerated further complicates communication, custody, child support and relationships. Topics covered in the *Co-Parenting Guide* include:

- Effects of divorce on children, caregivers and incarcerated parents
- Co-parental communication
- How to answer children's questions How to explain prisons to children
- Visitation
- Tips for families with an incarcerated parent
- Creative and fun activities to help incarcerated parents with long-distance parenting
- Co-parenting tips for custodial parents
- Reuniting with children and re-entering society

Prison Parenting Programs: Resources for Parenting Instructors in Prisons and Jails

Website: www.ceawisconsin.org

Prison Parenting Programs: Resources for Parenting Instructors in Prisons and Jails is published by the Correctional Education Association-Wisconsin. This handbook was created to help individuals, correctional educators and community agencies access parenting resources in correctional facilities and the community. Details and contact information for over 120 programs, including those listed above, are contained in the handbook.