

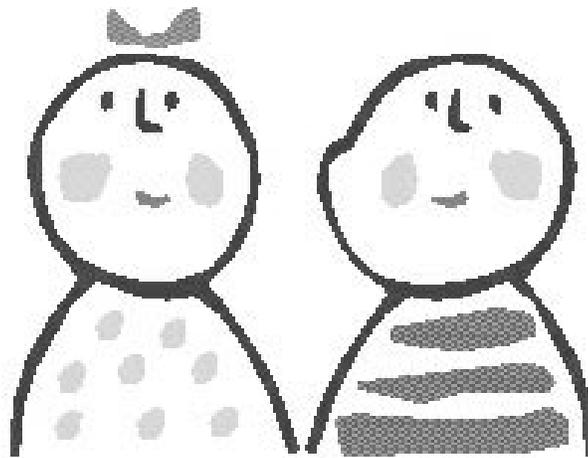
Oregon Department of Corrections

How to explain...

# Jails and Prisons

...to Children

**A Caregiver's Guide**



How to explain...

# Jails and Prisons

...to Children

## A Caregiver's Guide

by  
Elizabeth Sazie, MD, MPH  
Diane Ponder, LCSW  
Juanita Johnson

Oregon Department of Corrections  
Children of Incarcerated Parents Project

The mission of the  
Oregon Department of Corrections  
is to promote public safety by holding offenders  
accountable for their actions  
and reducing the risk of future  
criminal behavior.

© 2001, 2002, 2003 Oregon Department of Corrections

## What is this booklet about?

When parents are arrested or put in jail or prison, their children are often scared, confused, and upset. This is not a rare event. In 1999, one out of 50 children in the United States had a parent in state or federal prison.

Often, people don't talk about having a family member in prison because it is very personal information. Children, though, may have a lot of questions.

This booklet may help explain to children and families what it is like to have a mother, father, or other close family member who is incarcerated.

## Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is designed to help moms, dads and caregivers answer children's questions about jail and prison. When children and families receive accurate information, they can understand and cope with some of the stress they may experience when a relative goes to jail or prison.

Most children are curious about jails and prisons, and many adults don't know what these institutions are like. The Oregon Department of Corrections has put together some questions and answers to help explain the difference between myths and facts.

This booklet is written to reassure families of inmates. It promotes open and honest communication between children and adults. Ideally, even children old enough to read it on their own will read it with their caregiver. Children too young to comprehend it on their own can also benefit if an adult talks with them about the topics in this booklet. These young children need to be guided by adults through the experience of talking in an emotionally safe, comforting, and nurturing way.

## Definitions

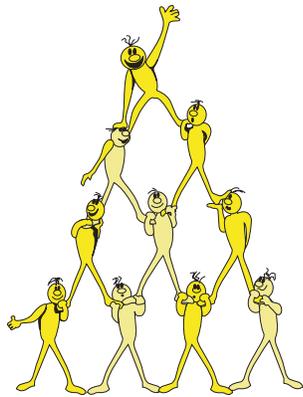
The words used in the criminal justice system are often confusing because they can mean different things in different places. Some definitions listed below may help the reader who is not used to the criminal justice system:

*Jails and Prisons* are places where people who have been accused or convicted of crimes are confined or *incarcerated*. Generally people stay in jail if they are sentenced for less than a year's time or if they are waiting for their trial. If they receive a sentence for more than a year, they go to prison. People who are incarcerated are often called *inmates*.

The court may order *supervision* instead of, or following, incarceration. This is called *probation* or *parole* or *post-prison supervision (PPS)*. The *offender* is supervised by a *probation or parole officer* in the community where he or she lives. "Supervised" means that the person must follow certain rules, called *conditions*. If these conditions are not followed, the person may have to go to jail or prison.

## About families

There are all kinds of families. Sometimes children live with their birth or adoptive mother and father. Sometimes they live with their mother or their father. Sometimes they live with step-parents or grandparents.



When a parent is incarcerated, the children may change homes to live:

- With the other parent.
- With another family member.
- In foster care provided by a family member.
- In foster care provided by someone they don't know.

A change with whom the child lives may mean moving to a different neighborhood, school, town, or even a different state. Sometimes brothers and sisters live with different people.

All of these changes can be very hard on children. It may help the child to write down where family members are at this time, using the outline at the end of this booklet.

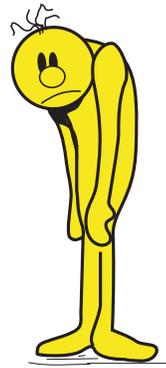
## Feelings and Emotions

When a family member, such as a mom or dad, goes to jail or prison, it may be very difficult for everyone involved. For some children the experience can be emotionally devastating, while for others it is less serious.

Sometimes it is a relief.

The child's age, understanding of the situation, and the reactions of others, particularly of family members, all play a part in the overall impact the experience will have on the child.

Children may have different feelings, and sometimes even several feelings at once, or one right after the other. Some children might feel sadness, fear, guilt, disbelief, anxiety, anger, and/or powerlessness. It is important to help children understand and work through their feelings.



## Common Questions

To help children work through some of their feelings, including curiosity, we've repeated some common questions we hear from families and our suggestions for helping caregivers to respond.

### ***Why did Mom or Dad go to jail or prison?***

People are sent to jail or prison because they did not obey the law. Laws are rules that tell us how people should and should not behave.

Children have rules of behavior, too. When some children break the rules, they may get a time out or lose privileges. Prison and jail are like long time outs for adults.

Sometimes even a child as young as 15 who breaks the law and commits a crime could go to jail or prison like some adults who break the law. They would have to commit a very bad crime such as seriously hurting another person. This does not happen very often.

Teenagers who break the law usually go to special prisons for young people.

### ***What will happen to me?***

Children may have a lot of change in their lives when a parent goes to jail or prison. No one likes to feel insecure. The following questions and answers can guide discussions to provide reassurance:

- How long will my parent be in jail or prison?
- Will I live in the same place?
- Will I have to move?
- Who will I live with?
- Will I be able to live with my parent when he or she gets out of jail or prison?

### ***Is it my fault?***

NO!

Many children feel guilty when their parent goes to jail or prison. They may believe that they caused it to happen.

It is very important to provide children with a non-judgmental, relaxed, unhurried, and safe place to express their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about why their parent was incarcerated. It is important to help children realize:

- There are negative consequences when a parent breaks the law.
- They are not responsible for either the parent's behavior or the consequences of that behavior.



### ***Will I go to jail or prison, too?***

Even if children are told they are the “spitting image” of the parent who went to jail or prison, this doesn't mean the child will travel down the same path.

Children need to understand that each person is responsible for his or her own choices in life.

### ***Where do people in jail or prison live?***

Sometimes people live in dorms, but most people share a room, called a cell, which has two bunks, a sink, a desk, and a toilet. The cells are usually very small and look alike.

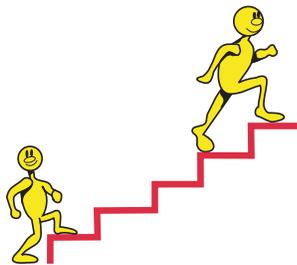
### ***What do people in jail or prison wear?***

Different facilities have different dress codes. In Oregon prisons most inmates wear jeans and a denim shirt or a navy T-shirt. When they go out to appointments, they may have to wear brightly colored jumpsuits and cuffs around their wrists and ankles. In other places, such as jail, they may wear clothes that look like a doctor's scrub suit. In some places, they wear their own clothes.

***Where do people in jail or prison eat, and what kind of food?***

Most people eat in a dining room that looks a lot like a school cafeteria. The food is served cafeteria-style, with inmates lining up with trays as they choose their food. In some prisons food on trays is brought to the people. There are usually some choices for people with special needs such as vegetarian meals, pork-free diets, or low-salt diets.

***Do people in jail or prison have a TV, library, bathroom/shower, and can they go outside?***



In some prisons people can buy their own TVs, but usually there are special TV rooms. The programs may change as different groups of people take turns choosing the channels that they like.

There are libraries in all facilities. Every jail and prison has a law library so that people can work on their own court cases.

Showers are shared by inmates in each housing unit, and there may be assigned showering times.

There is usually recreation time, or “yard time,” when groups of people can go outside for an hour or two. People can walk or jog around the yard, play sports or lift weights – different facilities have different activities available.

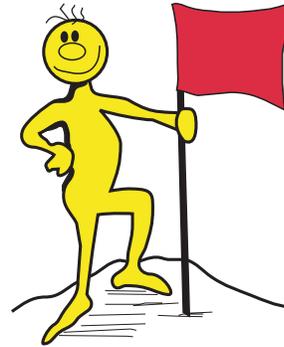
***Do people in jail or prison work?***

In Oregon, most people in prison are required by law to work. Some also attend school or special classes.

***How do people in jail or prison spend their time?***

People in prison are required to spend their time productively. They work or go to school or attend special programs such as alcohol and drug treatment or anger management classes.

Many also pursue hobbies, especially art, or they can read, write, watch TV, or exercise when they have spare time.



***Are people in jail or prison safe and healthy?***

Correctional officers work hard to keep the jail or prison safe. If people in jail or prison have a medical or dental problem, they may ask to be seen by a nurse, doctor, or dentist in the facility. Sometimes, people may need special health care outside of the prison or jail.

***Can I see or talk to Mom or Dad when they are in jail or prison? Do I have to?***

Many children can see or talk to their parent even while they are in jail or prison. Some children, however, may be so angry or hurt when a parent is incarcerated that they do not want anything to do with him or her; others may crave contact. Talking about and validating the child's feelings can be helpful.



Sometimes visiting may not be possible. For example, the child may prefer to avoid contact or distance may be a problem. Also, a restraining order or DOC rule may prevent the parent from having any type of contact with the child.

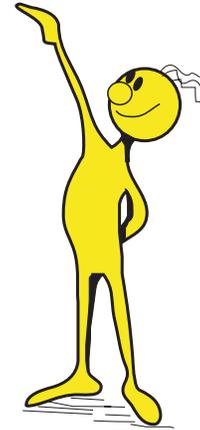
When visiting is an option it can usually be arranged, but requires some time and preparation. The *Visitor's Handbook* and administrative rule on visiting, available from the Department of Corrections or on the Internet at [www.doc.state.or.us](http://www.doc.state.or.us), can provide information on visiting and other forms of communication.

Children who want to maintain close contact with their incarcerated parent should be encouraged to write, draw pictures (with markers, not crayons), talk on the telephone, and visit as much as possible. Studies show that maintaining contact and allowing children to visit, if possible, helps the children.

### ***What do I tell other people?***

Many people are ashamed to talk about having someone close to them in jail or prison. It may reassure children to tell them that:

1. "Two of every 100 children have had a parent in jail or prison."
2. "YOU didn't do anything wrong. People should not try to make you feel guilty or ashamed."
3. "Sometimes, it is easier not to talk about a parent who is incarcerated, but you may never learn that there are plenty of other kids in the same situation. Talking about it with people you trust may help."
4. "It's OK to love your Mom or Dad who is in jail or prison, even if some people don't think you should."



In some communities there are groups of kids who have a parent in jail or prison, and they meet to talk about such issues. This is called a support group. It can be very helpful to have peers to share feelings and coping strategies. County community corrections and social services agencies should be able to help you find an appropriate support group.

### ***How can I learn when my parent will come home?***

People in jail or prison usually know the approximate date they will be released. People can also call the Department of Corrections at 503-945-9090 to find out release dates.

### ***Where can I get help?***

Sometimes adults don't talk about the incarcerated parent because they are afraid it will upset the child. However, when the child is upset or hurt or confused, it is better to express those feelings to others than to let the emotions stew inside.



Children are likely to worry, and believe things are worse than they really are if a parent "disappears" and no one talks about it or lets them talk about it.

Children should be encouraged to reach out to those they trust. They can be encouraged to make a list of people with whom they feel comfortable talking.

Sometimes, children and families need more help than family and friends can provide. County information and referral staff can help to find further resources, and most libraries have Internet access. Some places to get help or information include:

- County health and mental health departments
- Boys and Girls Clubs
- YMCA/YWCAs
- ALANON, ALATEEN
- NA/AA (Narcotics Anonymous/ Alcoholics Anonymous)
- CURE (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants)  
(503) 287-9258
- Oregon Department of Corrections (503) 945-9090 or  
<http://www.doc.state.or.us>
- Family and Corrections Network (804) 589-3036 or  
[www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org) (This site lists books for parents, caregivers, and professionals to read with children of prisoners.)

## Notes for Caregivers

Children may experience many mixed emotions from the time of the parent's arrest to well after his or her release. While these feelings may be expressed at any time, they are more likely to come to a head at certain stages: arrest, trial, sentencing, incarceration (and often most strongly during and following visiting), and at the time of release. Often, the most stressful time is in the weeks and months following release. It can be difficult for an absent parent to reconnect with a child who has grown accustomed to living without him or her.

### ***In summary, children of incarcerated parents need:***

- To know the parent's incarceration is not their fault.
- To know what is happening to their parent.
- To know if they can have contact with their parent, and if so, when and how.
- To know where and with whom they will be living and going to school.
- To know what will stay the same and what will change while their parent is incarcerated.
- To know it is OK to still love their parent, and it is OK to be angry sometimes, too.
- To be encouraged to express, in safe and healthy ways, their feelings about their parent and their parent's incarceration.
- To visit and maintain contact with the incarcerated parent as much as possible, when permitted and appropriate.
- To have stability and consistency in their living situations and daily routines.
- To feel safe.
- To have fun.
- To realize that people make choices in life that lead to different consequences.

## Notes for Children

### ***About my family:***

My name is \_\_\_\_\_

I live at \_\_\_\_\_

My Mom is \_\_\_\_\_

She lives at \_\_\_\_\_

My Dad is \_\_\_\_\_

He lives at \_\_\_\_\_

My brother(s) and sister(s) are \_\_\_\_\_

My brother(s) and sister(s) live at \_\_\_\_\_

### ***People to talk with:***

Someone in my family \_\_\_\_\_

Someone at my school \_\_\_\_\_

Someone at my place of worship \_\_\_\_\_

Another adult I know and trust \_\_\_\_\_

A close friend \_\_\_\_\_

# How do I feel today?

Caregivers may use this diagram to help children identify their feelings using pictures and/or words.

<p>Embarrassed Lonely Helpless</p>  <p>Confused Depressed Guilty</p> 	<p>Disgusted Scared Angry</p>  <p>Not sure Tired Let down</p> 
<p>Worried Scared Sad</p> 	<p>Unwanted Ashamed Rejected</p> 
 <p>Happy Satisfied Relieved</p>	 <p>Bored Surprised Brave</p>

## The Children of Incarcerated Parents Project

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Project is a multi-agency effort to provide targeted, effective programs that meet the diverse needs of children of incarcerated parents.

### ***Partners in the Children of Incarcerated Parents Project include:***

- Central Oregon Community College
- Children Made Visible, Inc.
- Children's Justice Alliance
- Community Action Head Start of Washington County
- Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon
- Girl Scouts Beyond Bars
- Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action, Inc.
- Next Door, Inc.
- Oregon Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE)
- Oregon Commission on Children & Families
- Oregon County Community Corrections Agencies
- Oregon Department of Corrections
- Oregon Department of Education/Head Start
- Oregon Department of Human Services
- Oregon Department of Justice
- Oregon Judicial Department
- Oregon Local Public Safety Coordinating Councils
- Oregon Sheriffs' Association
- Oregon Social Learning Center
- Oregon Youth Authority
- Oregon Youth Conservation Corps
- Portland State University Graduate School of Social Work
- Relief Nursery, Inc.

## **Questions?**

**Call 503-945-9056**

## **To Order Booklets:**

**Call 503-373-7604 ext. 244**

**or download an order form at:**

**[http://www.doc.state.or.us/  
transition\\_project/children/booklet.shtml](http://www.doc.state.or.us/transition_project/children/booklet.shtml)**



**Oregon Department of Corrections**

**2575 Center Street, NE**

**Salem, Oregon 97301-4667**

**<http://www.doc.state.or.us>**

92003.5k.oce

Printing donated by Oregon Corrections Enterprises  
Printed by inmates at Oregon State Correctional Institution  
(503) 373-0148