



Children of Incarcerated Parents

A PEATC
Do You Know
Factsheet for
Virginia's Parents

**"Parents
learn a lot
from their
children
about coping
with life"**

—Muriel Spark

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Do You Know How to Help Children Cope with an Incarcerated Parent?

Today's children are faced with many challenges in society. It is important to teach them appropriate coping skills at an early age. They will look to their parents and care takers for guidance and answers. This is extremely important when they need help coping with a parent who is away due to incarceration. A 2015 Child Trends study found that 1 out of every 14 American children has one parent who is currently, or has previously been incarcerated. (Murphey, D., Cooper, M. (2015). How do you explain where that person went or why they went away?)

Honesty is the Best Policy

The best thing you can do for your child during this difficult time is to remain honest.

- Ensure that the child understands that nothing that occurred was their fault.
- Explain to them that their parent broke a grown up rule, called a law, and that they have to be away for a while because of this.
- Explain to them that they will not be able to see or speak to them every day.
- Let them know that their parent is not a bad person; they just made a bad choice.

Pay Attention to Moods and Behaviors

Take note if your child is starting to display behaviors that are not typical. Some children may show signs of aggression, depression, sadness, regression, or they may become withdrawn.

- Talk to children about their feelings and let them know that you are always available if they need you.
- Develop techniques that will help children handle their emotions appropriately. Some examples include:
 - Practice deep breathing when strong emotions are present
 - Write or draw to express feelings
 - Help children find a quiet place to go to when they become overwhelmed
 - Allow children to cry if they need to

- Ensure that all care takers are aware that there has been a change in the family dynamic. This will ensure so that everyone is on the same page and will allow caretakers to help you look out for changes and encourage coping methods.

Stay in Touch

Nothing will ever replace a parent being physically present in their child's life on a daily basis, but children may still want a way to stay connected with their incarcerated parent. This may also be important for the parent who is away. Some suggestions for staying in touch include:

- Have a clear understanding of the facility's visitation and communication policies
- Have your child write letters, draw pictures, or send photographs
- Make a special container for the child to keep their letters they receive, so they can be reread

Parental Rights

If your child is receiving special education services, it is very important that you tell the school of any changes in guardianship or custody. It is important to know who is considered a "parent", according to the Virginia Special Education Regulations, and who is currently responsible for that child's educational decisions. If the incarcerated parent has not lost their parental rights through court determination, their consent is still required for evaluations and changes to their child's IEP. The Virginia regulations state:

"Parent" means: (§ 20-124.6 and § 22.1-213.1 of the Code of Virginia; 34 CFR 99.4 and 34 CFR 300.30)

1. Persons who meet the definition of "parent":

- A biological or adoptive parent of a child;
- A foster parent, even if the biological or adoptive parent's rights have not been terminated, but subject to subdivision 8 of this subsection;
- A guardian generally authorized to act as the child's parent, or authorized to make educational decisions for the child (but not a guardian ad litem, or the state if the child is a ward of the state);
- An individual acting in the place of a biological or adoptive parent (including a grandparent, stepparent, or other relative) with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child's welfare;
- If no party qualified under subdivisions 1a through 1d of this subsection can be identified, or those parties are unwilling to act as parent, a surrogate parent who has been appointed in accordance with requirements detailed under 8VAC20-81-220; or
- A minor who is emancipated under § 16.1-333 of the Code of Virginia.

Resources

Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration:

www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/incarceration

Assisting Families of Inmates: www.foi.org

Virginia Mentoring Partnership: www.vamentoring.org

Child Trends: Murphey, D., & Cooper, M. (2015). Parents Behind Bars: What Happens to Their Children? -

www.childtrends.org



The contents of this factsheet were developed under a grant from the US Department of Education, #H328M140013. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer, Julia Martin Eile.

