



STRATEGY BRIEF

STRONG FAMILIES

How can child protection agencies support **children spending time with their parents who are incarcerated?**

In the 2019-20 fiscal year, nearly [4.9 million children](#) in the United States had lived with a parent who served time in prison or jail at some point during their childhood, according to The Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center. In most cases, the reasons for incarceration do not negate the child's need or love for their parent, or their parent's love or commitment to their child. The importance of this parent-child connection is affirmed in a [Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights](#), which says: "I have the right to speak with, see, and touch my parent" and "I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent."¹ In some states, the inherent right of children to remain connected to their parent who is incarcerated also is affirmed in law.²

For children who come into contact with a child protection agency, staying close to an parent or primary caregiver who is incarcerated can be even more challenging, but no less important.



How can child protection agencies support children spending time with their parents who are incarcerated?

This strategy brief discusses considerations (and, in some jurisdictions, requirements) for determining whether and what type of family time is in the child's best interests, common barriers and strategies to support family time, and other ways (aside from formal visits) that parents can be encouraged and supported in communicating care for their children and remaining involved in their lives.^{3,4} Please see [What should child protection agencies consider when working with children whose parents are incarcerated?](#) for information on key issues child protection agencies should consider to better support children whose parent or primary caregiver is incarcerated.⁵

Discerning the child's best interests

Research suggests that for many children affected by parental incarceration, maintaining a strong relationship with their parent serves as a protective factor, and is sustained by spending quality time together. This time can occur in-person (with or without physical contact) or via telephone or video conferencing.⁶

Research supports in-person visits, when possible, to best help parents and children connect with and reassure one another.⁷ Video-conference visits should be used to supplement, but not replace, in-person time together. For children, benefits of time spent with their parent may include decreased anxiety about abandonment or the parent's well-being, increased attachment, healing of grief and loss, decreased feelings of isolation, and improved behavior at home and school.⁸ For parents, time with their child supports their well-being and can have benefits such

as reduced recidivism, increased positive behavior while incarcerated, and greater likelihood of family reunification upon release.⁹

Not all visits are equally beneficial for all children, however. Considerations include:

- **Prior relationship.** Some research shows that frequent visits with a parent who is incarcerated results in better behavior at home and in school for children *when the child and parent had a positive relationship prior to incarceration*.¹⁰ It is particularly important to consider whether the child lived with the parent prior to incarceration, and if not, how to continue to support realistic expectations for their relationship when the parent is released. For parents who did not live with their child prior to incarceration, or for whom that relationship was not yet established, exploring and encouraging contact even absent that prior relationship still may be beneficial. A child having a relationship with both parents can be important for identity development and a positive sense of self. Child protection agencies should provide youth with opportunities to assert their feelings about the type of contact and relationship they want to have with the parent who is incarcerated.
- **Frequency, consistency, and quality of contact.** Research suggests that parent-child connection can be a protective factor when visits are frequent, consistent, and predictable, and when parents are sensitive and responsive to children's needs.¹¹ Visits paired with a program tailored to children of parents

Some people are long-haul truck drivers, or they need chemotherapy or drug treatment. People are non-custodial parents all the time. Parents are away from their children for all sorts of reasons. There is a deep stigma that comes with incarceration, but if we're talking about the development and social-emotional well-being of children, the impact of parental absence due to incarceration is at least as profound as these other situations.

— D'ADRE CUNNINGHAM,
INCARCERATED PARENTS PROJECT

How can child protection agencies support children spending time with their parents who are incarcerated?

who are incarcerated, such as [Parenting Inside Out](#), can both improve the quality of parent-child interaction and yield greater benefits in terms of reducing children's anxiety, depression, and externalizing behavior.¹² Assessing and regularly reassessing the needs of each child and family is critical, as is identifying alternative forms of contact if the existing visiting arrangement is detrimental to the child. While most prison and jail visiting rooms and visitation processes are not child-friendly, visiting with the proper preparation and support has been found to be beneficial in most cases.¹³

- **Behavioral health.** Parental drug use and/or mental health concerns may have impacted the parent-child relationship prior to incarceration. However, it's important to consider that some parents receive needed substance use or mental health treatment while in prison that may make them more suited and available for connection than before they were incarcerated. These potential changes in circumstances should be considered.
- **Age.** The child's age is an important consideration when determining the type and frequency of contact that is most beneficial. In-person visits in facilities with strict security measures that are not tailored to children's needs (such as visits through glass barriers) may be too frightening for younger children. Adolescents may need support navigating the parent-child relationship as they assert greater independence and autonomy, and they may be concerned about the time that visits take away from other activities (such as sports, friendships, and other developmentally important interests).¹⁴ This can be an opportunity to explore video visits and provide options that allow the youth to have both: their activities and a relationship with the parent.
- **Safety.** In the small percentage of cases in which a parent is incarcerated due to a crime or violence against the child, their caregiver, or another family member, tremendous caution is warranted. This history should be noted in the child's file and each new caregiver or caseworker should be informed of any potential safety concerns. Even in these cases, the possibility of contact should not automatically be ruled out and can be explored therapeutically/clinically, and reassessed over time.

Barriers to family time

A number of barriers exist to maintaining contact between a child and a parent who is incarcerated:

- Caseworkers and foster parents may carry **conscious or unconscious biases** against parents who are incarcerated, or lack knowledge about how to arrange visits.
- Kinship caregivers may have **complicated or even harmful histories** with the parent who is incarcerated.
- Some parents, especially those serving time in state or federal prisons, may be **incarcerated far from their children**, making regular visits impractical or impossible. Most prisons are remote and not accessible by public transportation.¹⁵ Arranging and escorting children for prison visits is time consuming for caseworkers, foster parents, and kinship caregivers who may already feel stretched too thin.
- Many jails and prisons have **inconvenient visiting hours** (such as during the school day or weekday evenings, or weekends when caseworkers may not be available), and those hours can **change or be canceled without notice** for both individual (disciplinary) and institutional (staffing, lockdown) reasons.
- **Visiting procedures and spaces are rarely child friendly.** Children, especially of younger ages, may experience fear and anxiety from security procedures, their parent's appearance (weight gain or loss, different hair/beard, corrections jumpsuit), or enforced physical separation. In some places, those escorting children to visits must pass a background check and submit documentation. For these reasons, it is critical to prepare children in advance with as much information as possible about what to expect when they arrive.

In addition, parents who are incarcerated may not want their children to see them in that setting. Agencies should take account that some parents may wish to protect their child from security procedures and surroundings at the institution or spare them from feelings of sadness at having to part ways after a short visit.

How can child protection agencies support children spending time with their parents who are incarcerated?

Strategies to support family time

Barriers to family time between a child and a parent who is incarcerated can be overcome with planning and cooperation among child protection agencies, correctional facilities, other criminal justice departments (such as parole, probation, and the courts), and the child's existing caregiver.

Alternatives to incarceration allow eligible parents to complete all or part of their prison sentences at home — with their children — while under electronic monitoring surveillance. The state of Washington has [two such programs](#): 1) **Community Parenting Alternative**, which allows parents convicted of nonviolent and low-risk crimes to spend up to the last 12 months of their sentence at home, under the supervision of a community corrections officer, and 2) **Family and Offender Sentencing Alternative**, which permits judges to order community supervision and programming *in lieu* of a prison sentence for some parents of minor children. The state child welfare system is an [important partner](#) in these programs, training Department of Corrections staff about children's needs and protective factors that help families thrive.

Proximity laws allow parents who are incarcerated to remain in or transfer to the closest appropriate facility to their minor children, greatly increasing the likelihood and decreasing the burden of regular visits. In the state of New York, a law that went into effect in January 2022 allows parents who are incarcerated to request transfers closer to

their children. The minor child's family or caseworker is required to sign paperwork confirming the relationship and agreeing to facilitate visits. Child protection agencies in states where such policies exist can support families by informing them of their rights and helping facilitate the process if needed.

Support for the child's existing caregiver and their relationship with the parent who is incarcerated

can be critical factors in promoting frequent, quality family time between parent and child.¹⁶ Caregivers often bear the primary responsibility and cost of in-person visits and telephone calls, and may be reluctant to share a home phone number or assume the cost of collect calls that the parent places from prison. Caregivers may wind up playing a gatekeeping role or even undermining the child's emotional connection to their parent if their own relationship with the parent is strained, or if different permanency goals are desired. Child protection agencies may consider engaging caregivers in programs that provide support, address safety or co-parenting concerns, prepare them for any potential negative behavioral impacts of visits, and help them to nurture the child's healing. Such programs can help reduce conflict, improve cooperation, and increase the frequency and quality of parent-child time.¹⁷ Clarifying for caregivers what is required for institutional visits is important. Caregivers also may need support to cover costs related to transportation, phone calls, and care for other children during visits. If the caregiver is not emotionally supportive of the child's relationship with the parent, it may be better for the agency to find someone else to escort the child on visits.

I went to a prison further away, so I didn't get many visits. I did have access to materials I could mail to my daughter, so I sent a lot of mail. I used all the money from my prison job to make phone calls instead of buying snacks or toiletries. I wanted my child to know I loved her. That's what was important to me.

— EDDIE TORRES,
FATHER AND ADVOCATE

How can child protection agencies support children spending time with their parents who are incarcerated?

Caseworkers may need additional agency support

to work effectively with parents who are incarcerated and their children. Finding and engaging the parents and arranging visits for children require specialized knowledge and considerable time. Coordinating visits for multiple unrelated children at one time can reduce the burdens on staff, while also helping children feel less isolated by connecting them with peers who share the experience of having a parent who is incarcerated. Caseworkers also may need opportunities to process and express their own feelings, personal experiences, and concerns about engaging with parents who are incarcerated and the criminal justice system as a whole.

Child-friendly visiting procedures and spaces at prisons and jails go a long way toward making family time a positive experience for children of all ages. At minimum, caseworkers should learn as much as they can about visiting guidelines in advance and prepare children for what the visit will be like. At best, child-serving agencies, nonprofit organizations, and jails or prisons should work together to examine and adapt the entire experience, including physical spaces for family time, from a child's point of view.

In-facility parenting education programs have been shown to increase the quality of parent-child time together.¹⁸ Prison nurseries — programs that offer mothers who are incarcerated the opportunity to care for and bond with their newborn while receiving parent education and support — are the most intensive form of in-facility parenting program and have shown some benefits for both mothers and children.¹⁹

Beyond visits: Other ways to help parents and children stay connected

In addition to in-person visits, and in the rare circumstance when they are unsafe or impractical, it is important to encourage other ways for children to feel valued and loved by their parent. Child protection agencies can — and, under laws of the jurisdiction, may be required to — support connection by:

- Keeping parents who are incarcerated updated about children's progress and well-being.
- Engaging the parents in planning for the child's placement, health care, education, and permanency.
- Exploring how family members of the parent who is incarcerated can be a potential source of support or placement resource for the child.
- Encouraging the parent and child (ideally with the existing caregiver's support) to exchange letters, drawings, and photographs (if allowed).

Jurisdictional examples

New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) Children of Incarcerated Parents Program (CHIPP)

CHIPP provides support and information to caseworkers of children with a parent who is incarcerated, and assists with the logistical challenges of parent-child visits. The program began in 2000 to recognize that collaboration between ACS and the city's

An in-prison visit might be the only opportunity for a child to see their parent on proper mental health medications or sober. Even if that parent has a 25-year sentence and reunification is not possible, that still might be an important connection for the child. They still might need a photo from a visit. Those photos are important when you're making children's Lifebooks, for example, so kids can see where they come from.

— JAMI HAGEMER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, YOUTH LAW CENTER (IOWA)

How can child protection agencies support children spending time with their parents who are incarcerated?

corrections agency was key to supporting relationships between children and their parent who is incarcerated. Both agencies changed or issued [policies](#) to better support parent-child connections. City jails dedicated a separate day for visits from children and youth with open child welfare cases (preventive or foster care), adapting visitation processes to include child-centered security procedures, longer visits, snacks, and Polaroid photos of child and parent during the visit. ACS provided transportation and staffing support for visits to any city jail. The program continues to support case planners in locating parents who are incarcerated, arranging parent-child visits when possible, providing transportation, and arranging meetings or video calls to engage the parents in permanency planning, Child Safety and Family Team Conferences, service plan reviews, and other meetings concerning their children.

Incarcerated Parent Representation Program, Drake University Law School (Iowa)

District Associate Judge Brent Pattison and Iowa Children's Justice started the [Incarcerated Parent Representation Program](#) at Drake Law School to address administrative, policy, and other logistical barriers that attorneys encounter when trying to maintain contact between mothers who are incarcerated and their newborns — including biased perceptions among child protection agency staff. The program has held several multidisciplinary “Partnering for Lasting Change” trainings that incorporate a re-entry simulation (created by the U.S. Department of Justice) designed to build empathy and compassion for children and parents experiencing separation due to incarceration. Participants have included judges, probation and parole officers, attorneys, child protection agency staff, and other court personnel. Program staff also have conducted numerous attorney and community trainings across Iowa, in addition to

a specialized training of the state's Department of Human Services staff. Working with both the child welfare and correctional systems, the program has helped create a process to expedite background checks for visitation escorts so that children involved with the child welfare system can see their parents more quickly. They also created visitation guides for existing caregivers to inform them about facility rules and help them prepare children for visits.

Halden Prison: Norwegian Correctional Service

One compelling example of a strategy to maintain the bonds between children and parents who are incarcerated hails from across the Atlantic Ocean. The Norwegian Correctional Service recognizes a special responsibility to children of prisoners.²⁰ Since 2014, all prisons in Norway have been required to employ staff members responsible for child welfare. In Halden Prison, a modern, high-security facility, every staff person is expected to have a child-focused perspective and to help family visits be a positive experience. Upon arrival, young children are greeted with a small toy and the image of an illustrated frog character that welcomes them to the facility and reappears in various settings throughout their visit. The prison's visiting room is decorated in a child-friendly manner and offers various activities, both indoor and outdoor, including a room with video games. Before visits, children can learn about the prison and prison visits through a website tailored to a youth audience. Families for whom long-distance visits pose a financial hardship can apply for assistance. Some U.S. correctional facilities also have made efforts to make waiting areas and visiting rooms more welcoming and child-friendly by painting colorful murals and supplying toys, books, and play materials.²¹

How can child protection agencies support children spending time with their parents who are incarcerated?

- 1 San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Project. (2005). A Bill of Rights. https://sfoonline.barnard.edu/children/SFCIPP_Bill_of_Rights.pdf
- 2 As of July 2021, statutes in at least seven states note exceptions to termination of parental rights requirements in cases of incarceration. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/groundtermin.pdf>
- 3 This brief is informed by interviews with D'Adre Cunningham, Washington Incarcerated Parents Project, on January 27, 2022; Ryan Shanahan, Vera Institute of Justice, on January 13, 2022; Tanya Krupat, Vice President, Policy & Advocacy, and Allison Hollihan, Senior Policy Manager,, Osborne Association, on February 15, 2022; Jami Hagemeyer, Youth Law Center, on August 12, 2022; Ann Adalist-Estrin, Rutgers National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, on February 15, 2022, and Eddie Torres, Father and Advocate, on June 17, 2022.
- 4 Content of this brief was developed with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Team during meetings in 2022 on February 17, March 29, and June 24. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience in the child welfare system, and who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Team members who contributed to this brief include Dee Bonnick, Robert Brown, Jessica Cardenas, Amanda Cruce, and Aliyah Zeien.
- 5 The companion Casey Family Programs issue brief provides historical context for racial disparities in incarceration rates, explores the rights of parents who are incarcerated and their children, and includes questions for leaders to consider about their agency's policies and practices in this arena.
- 6 McCormick, M., Sarfo, B., and Brennan, E. (2021). *Promising practices for strengthening families affected by parental incarceration: A review of the literature*. OPRE Report 2021-25. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- 7 Tasca, M., Mulvey, P., and Rodriguez, N. (2016). Families coming together in prison: An examination of visitation encounters. *Punishment and Society*, 18(4).
- 8 Cramer, L., Goff, M., Peterson, B., and Sandstrom, H. (2017). *Parent-child visiting practices in prisons and jails: A synthesis of research and practice*. Urban institute.
- 9 National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections. (2013). *Working with incarcerated parents and their children to achieve positive outcomes*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nccwe.org/BPR/webinars/2013-6-4/Working%20with%20Incarcerated%20Parents%20and%20their%20Children%20to%20Achieve%20Positive%20Outcomes.pdf>
- 10 Martin, E. (2016, September/October). The changing nature of correctional visitation: Can video visitation provide the same benefits as in-person visits? *Corrections Today*.
- 11 McCormick, M., Sarfo, B., and Brennan, E. (2021). *Promising practices for strengthening families affected by parental incarceration: A review of the literature*. OPRE Report 2021-25. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- 12 Eddy, J. M., Martinez, C. R., Burraston, B. (2013). A randomized controlled trial of a parent management training program for incarcerated parents: Proximal impacts. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 78(3):75-93.
- 13 For additional research and a list of recommendations for contract between children and incarcerated parents within a developmental ecological model integrated with attachment theory, see: Poehlman, J., Dallaire, D., Booker Loper, A., and Shear, L. (2010). Children's contact with their incarcerated parents. *American Psychology*. Sept 65(6): 575-98. Doi: 10.1037/a0020279.
- 14 Cramer, L., Goff, M., Peterson, B., and Sandstrom, H. (2017). *Parent-child visiting practices in prisons and jails: A synthesis of research and practice*. Washington DC: The Urban institute.
- 15 National Resource Center on Children & Families of the Incarcerated, Rutgers University. (2014). *Children and families of the incarcerated fact sheet*. Retrieved from: <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/nrccfi-fact-sheet-2014.pdf>
- 16 Hairston, C. F. (2009). Kinship care when parents are incarcerated: What we know, what we can do. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED507722.pdf>
- 17 Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2010, April). Parenting from prison: Innovative programs to support incarcerated and reentering fathers. The national evaluation of the responsible fatherhood, marriage and family strengthening grants for incarcerated and reentering fathers and their partners. ASPE Research Brief.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Barnas, J. (2021). Prison nursery programs. MOST Policy Initiative. <https://mostpolicyinitiative.org/science-note/prison-nursery-programs/>
- 20 *Halden Prison: Punishment that Works - Change that Lasts!* https://issuu.com/omdocs/docs/magasin_halden_prison_issu
- 21 Cramer, L., Goff, M., Peterson, B., and Sandstrom, H. (2017). *Parent-child visiting practices in prisons and jails: A synthesis of research and practice*. Washington, DC: The Urban institute.

P 800.228.3559

P 206.282.7300

F 206.282.3555

casey.org | KMResources@casey.org

