

LITTLE **children**  
BIG **challenges: incarceration**





## LITTLE children BIG challenges:incarceration

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# Introduction

If your loved one is incarcerated, the many changes may feel overwhelming. But you are strong. Know that you are already helping your family feel cared for and secure.

Sesame Street created this Guide for Parents and Caregivers to help you

- use everyday routines to help your child,
- encourage your child (ages 3–8) to express his feelings,
- talk with your child about incarceration, and
- connect with your child's incarcerated parent.



Download our **FREE** app on the **App Store**® or **Google Play**™ for more information and resources.



**This section will help you**

- comfort your child with everyday activities, and
- guide her through tough moments.

# You make a difference every day

**Help your child feel secure.** During big changes, your child may feel worried and unsafe. Reassure her by surrounding her with reliable people and daily activities.

Begin the day by letting your little one know what to expect. You can tell her

- who will take her to school,
- who will pick her up from school, and
- one activity that she will do today.

Make a list or draw pictures to show your child things that will stay the same no matter what. Hang it on the refrigerator and refer to it whenever she needs a little comfort.





## Help your child work through everyday challenges.

If your child is acting out or getting upset when things don't go her way, try these strategies:

Use a **“Breathe, Think, Do”** approach.

- **Breathe:** Ask her to stop what she is doing, put her hands on her tummy, and slowly take three deep breaths.
- **Think:** Help her identify the problem, as well as her thoughts and feelings (“What is wrong?”, “What are you feeling?”), and look for solutions (“What can we do to help you feel better?”).
- **Do:** Together, try out your best solution. If it doesn't work out, try another.

Sometimes when children act out they may be feeling confused. Help calm her by giving her a choice.

- For example, if she is having trouble playing with someone, you might say, “You can play nicely, or you can take a break from playing.”

**Everyday routines such as brushing her teeth, eating breakfast, and sharing a bedtime story help your child feel secure.**

**This section will help you**

- understand what your child is feeling, and
- encourage your child to share his feelings with you.

# Your child's feelings come in all shapes and sizes





**Look for signs of big feelings.** Children of an incarcerated parent feel many things: stress, fear, shame, anger, sadness, and frustration. You know your child best. As you spend time with him each day, look for slight changes in how he acts. These are clues to watch for:

- sudden yelling or crying
- difficulty sleeping
- unusual clinging
- hitting
- eating more or less than usual
- smiling or laughing less often
- having new fears
- bed wetting

**Your comfort and attention will reassure your child that, despite his strong feelings, he can still count on you, no matter what.**



## Help your child share his feelings.

### Talk with and listen to your child.

- Mention things you notice about the way he acts (“You seem to be feeling [angry, bothered, worried] because...”).
- Ask questions to get at his feelings (“How are you feeling today?”, “Did anything happen today that made you feel happy or sad?”).
- Be patient as he shares with you. It may take him time to find the right words. He can draw pictures of how he feels if he doesn’t yet have the words.
- As you talk with your child, hold him close or give him a hug. A simple touch can let him know you’re there for him.

### Let your child know that

- his feelings are OK, and
- he can talk to you about what’s on his mind, even if it’s scary or hard to say.

### Set an example for your child by

- using “feeling words” as you talk about your day (“I felt really happy today because I ate lunch with a friend.”);
- being aware of your own feelings. Your child responds to and learns from your reactions. Coping with your feelings is a powerful way to help your child.





**This section will help you**

- talk with your child about her parent's incarceration, and
- answer some of her questions.

# The simple truth matters

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





**Let her know it's not her fault.** Not knowing why her parent is gone may cause your child great worry. She may believe her parent's disappearance is her fault. Creating a reason ("Mommy is [on vacation, at the doctor's, at school].") will only make her wonder why her parent doesn't return.

**You might not want your child to share some details with others. Gently let her know that these are things you are only going to talk about at home or with family.**

Consider giving these possible answers:

**Question:**

“Where is Daddy?”

**Answer:**

**If the parent has been convicted:** “Daddy is in a place called *prison* for a while. Grown-ups sometimes go to prison when they break a rule called a law. He is not there because of anything you did. This is not your fault.”

**If the parent is not yet convicted:** “Daddy is in a place called jail. He’s there because he may have broken an important grown-up rule called a *law*. Right now people are trying to figure out what happened.”

**Question:**

“When will Mommy be home?”

**Answer:**

“Mommy won’t be home for a while. We are waiting for more information. I will let you know as soon as I find out.”

**Question:**

“Will I get to see Daddy?”

**Answer:**

**If your child can visit:** “You can visit Daddy in prison once in a while. I’ll let you know when. Between visits you can write him letters, draw him pictures, and talk to him on the phone.”

**If your child will not be able to visit:** “We won’t be able to visit, but you can draw pictures and write letters to each other whenever you want.” If there are legal reasons why contact is not allowed, it is important to follow that advice.



**When a military parent is incarcerated it can be particularly challenging. Your child may feel confused when she sees her parent go from being a hero to being incarcerated. Assure her that the good things her parent has done for the country will never be erased. Remind her that her parent will care for her no matter what.**

**This section will help you**

- keep your child connected to his incarcerated parent, and
- find ways to keep your child's spirits up during this difficult time.

# You can connect

**Visits, phone calls, and letters.** When you involve the incarcerated parent in your child's life, you show your child that he will always be cared for.





## Visits

**Your child might act out or refuse to speak to his parent. Let your child know that you understand it can be hard.**

Here are some ways to prepare for the visit:

- Let your child know
  - how you will get to the jail or prison,
  - any special things he might have to do (wait in a line, be looked over by guards, etc.),
  - what his parent will look like (he may be wearing a special uniform, etc.),
  - about his time with the parent (no-touching rules, etc.), and
  - that 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.

## Phone Calls

Here are some tips for keeping in touch by phone:

- Let the incarcerated parent know the best times to reach your child.
- Help your child to think of things he'd like to tell his parent.
- Give your child a picture of his parent to look at as he talks.



The incarcerated parent might not always answer your child's letters. Tell your child that even though he did not get a letter in return, his parent is still thinking about him.

## Letters

Try these writing tips with your child:

- Keep paper and pens handy.
- Ask your child questions to help him think of things he'd like to say.
- If your child is not yet able to write, have him tell you what to put in his letter. Encourage him to draw a picture to go with the words.
- Include copies of your child's artwork or report card.

## Televisits

Preparing for a televisit:

- While there is no substitute for seeing a parent in person, televisiting can be helpful. Seeing a parent's face can ease fears about the parent's well-being.
- It may take a few televisits for a young child to realize that the person they see is their parent. Try video chatting with family to help your child get used to it.

**Though a parent's incarceration can bring about big transitions and emotions, it is a chance to show your child how much you love him, and that he will always be cared for.**

