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How to Make Prison Visits a Success

By Ellie Anderson

Imagine you are a young child, maybe 9 years old. Your father was just arrested and sentenced to 3 years in prison. You don't know what that means other than the fact that Dad doesn't come to your games, pick you up from school, or tuck you in at night anymore. Your mom says you get to visit Dad for the first time tomorrow. You are excited but uncertain about what it will be like.

The next day, when you arrive at the prison, you are intimidated by the unfamiliar faces and large metal machines you have to walk through. You and your mom are waiting in line for what feels like a very long time. You finally walk through big, gated doors that lead to a large open room with beige walls and circle tables. Your dad enters the room through a large metal door opposite the one you came through. His hair is different and he's wearing funny clothes, but it's still your dad. You wish you could play with him, but there's nothing to play with in the big, boring room.

Before you know it, your dad says goodbye and retreats through the large metal door he came in through. You and your mom also go back through the metal gates and machines you entered through. As you walk back to the car, you are left to wonder when you will see your dad again.

Now, imagine what a difference it would make if you were told beforehand about the unfamiliar faces you would see and the machines you would walk through or the fact that your dad might be wearing different clothes and you might not be able to hug him. Would you feel less anxious about the impending visit? How would your experience be different if the room you met your dad in was colorful and filled with blocks, toys, and games? Hopefully, you realize how much more positive this experience could be for a child with a few simple steps and intentional changes.

Why Visitation Matters

Although having an incarcerated parent can be a major source of stress in a child's life, visiting the parent in prison can



help reduce the child's stress level and nullify some of the negative developmental outcomes that occur in children with an incarcerated parent. Children that have regular and positive visitation experiences are likely to have better attachment with parental figures, higher self-esteem, and decreased behavior problems. Prison visitation is a mechanism to facilitate [child adjustment](#) to parental incarceration.¹ These visits, if successful, can be the difference between a child having a prosperous and productive future or the same fate as their parent.

Preparation for a Visit

Prepping a child for a prison visit can go a long way. This experience, especially the first visit, is filled with many unknowns and unfamiliar procedures. Things as simple as what the inmate is wearing or what their hair looks like can catch the child off guard. In-person visits have the potential to be [beneficial for parent-child relationships](#) as well as having positive developmental outcomes for the child, so it is crucial to make their success a priority. Visiting an incarcerated parent for the first time is an emotional rollercoaster, but it can be made less extreme by a bit of preparation initiated by the caregiver.



Here are a few things you can do to help a child prepare for a visit:

- Let the child know about the visit in advance. Tell them the [specific date and time](#) that it will take place.²
- Have the child [practice](#) what they want to talk to their parent about so that they don't leave the visit feeling upset that they forgot to tell their parent something.³
- Go over what they can expect regarding entering the prison and any [rules](#) that may apply during the visit such as no physical touch.⁴
- Explain to them that they will have to say goodbye at the

end of the visit, but let them know there are other ways to stay in contact between in-person visits.

1. Arditti, J. A. (2016). A family stress-proximal process model for understanding the effects of parental incarceration on children and their families. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 5(2), 65–88. <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/cfp0000058>

Child-Friendly Environments Within Prisons

Whether you are a parent, guardian, case worker, or social worker, prepping a child for a prison visit can go a long way because another set of challenges begins once the child and caregiver are inside the prison walls. Visitation procedures in prisons can be intimidating, especially for a young child; they often include metal detectors, pat-downs, and searches. To make matters worse, correctional facilities rarely modify these procedures for minors. Children often have to [wait in the prison](#) for great lengths of time with no toys, books, or food to keep them happy and entertained.⁵

Another challenge regarding prison visitation protocols is that they vary between facilities, so experiences differ greatly between families across the United States, which makes it difficult to diagnose and address the main issues with these protocols. This can also lead to miscommunications regarding visitation rules that may result in a [visit being denied](#) or visitation rights being revoked.⁶ Advocating for uniform visitation protocols—for adults and minors—in prisons across the country will help alleviate some of the stresses and misunderstandings that are common during prison visitations.

The final aspect of prisons that can make or break a child's visitation experience is the set-up and design of the actual meeting room. It can be difficult for a child to feel comfortable interacting with their parent if the room they are meeting in is not what the research deems as "[child-friendly](#)."⁷ Legislative action led by parents, guardians, case workers, or social workers is the best bet for any real change to these visitation rooms.

The following is a list of ways in which these rooms can be altered to improve parent-child visits in prisons:

- Have materials such as books, crafts supplies, and toys readily accessible, should the parent and child want an activity to do.⁸
- Incorporate colors and patterns into the design of the room to promote play and creativity.
- If the building allows, designate smaller rooms for family visitation. Large, open rooms can often feel impersonal and awkward if they are being used by multiple families at once.⁹

Justice for All, Including the Family

Having a parent in prison is incredibly difficult. It comes with several unique challenges that, if not properly dealt with, can have long-term, negative effects on a child. Prison visitation is one of those challenges, but if executed well, it can counteract some of the negative effects that parental incarceration creates. While it is appropriate for people to face the consequences of the crimes they have committed, it is unreasonable to

make their children suffer by making visitation an uncomfortable and arduous process. Children should not be punished for their parent's wrongdoings, and for that reason, we must make visitation as positive and painless as possible. These changes will not happen overnight, but the sooner even the smallest action is taken to improve prison visitation, the more children and families we will save from the bleak visitation experience that is common today.

Endnotes

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