

Caring for grandchildren when a family member goes to prison: Part 1

**0508
PILLARS**

(0508 7 45 527)

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"Positive Futures for
Children of Prisoners"
Breaking Cycles of Crime



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When a family member goes to prison it can feel as though your world has turned upside down. You may feel a range of emotions including shock, guilt, anger, shame and worry. These feelings can be even harder to deal with if you suddenly find yourself caring for their children full time. It may be that you had the children to stay a lot anyway or that they were already in your care. However it may feel different now that you know it is going to be more of a long term arrangement.

We recognise that the concept of family / whanau is different to different people. In this case we use the term 'grandparent' to refer to anyone who has taken on the care of another child or children in the later years of life.

Emotional impacts

It is normal to feel a range of emotions:

- **Guilt:** *I didn't do such a good job with my own kids, how will I go second time round?*
- **Isolation:** *None of my friends will understand; I can't talk to anyone about this*
- **Grief and loss:** *Loss of your child to prison; loss of the hopes and dreams you had for your later years; loss of the relationship you had with your grandchildren where you were not the main disciplinarian*
- **Confusion:** *Kids and schools are so different these days it can be hard to keep up with where they're at and what's expected of you; the prison has so many rules*

As well as your own emotions you may find taking the children in puts strain on relationships with other family members / whanau who don't think you should have the kids. They may feel jealous if you no longer have as much time for them. This might occur even if you feel pressure to take the children and as though you have no choice.

Children and trauma

Having a parent incarcerated can be very traumatic for children. This trauma may have started before the incarceration if their lives were affected by parental drug and alcohol use, abuse or neglect. Witnessing a parent's arrest can be another trauma for children as they see their parent taken away, possibly in handcuffs.

It's important to acknowledge the child's feelings of shock and to assure them it is not their fault. Remove any ideas the child may have of prison that they have seen on movies or TV. Reassure them that mum or dad will have a bed to sleep in, be given meals and be able to move around during the day.

Common impacts of trauma include bedwetting, nightmares, anxiety and anger. You may find younger children become quite clingy. It's very important to let the children know their parent is safe, when they can expect to see them next and how they will be in contact. Children need a safe place to express how they are feeling and they may struggle to find the words to describe these feelings depending on their age. See also *What to Tell the Children When a Family Member Goes to Prison*.



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As much as possible children need routine and clear and consistent boundaries. There will be times when their behaviour is challenging. This is common after visits to the prison or as their parent's release date approaches. It is okay to be clear about behaviour that is unacceptable but try to remember that sometimes they are struggling to make sense of a very complex situation and not always trying to test or aggravate you. Try to acknowledge good behaviour as this can encourage more of it and help children develop a sense of self worth.

Who can help?

Pillars - Pillars has a range of services including a free and confidential helpline for anyone who is affected by the imprisonment of a family member or friend. Phone 0508 PILLARS (0508 7 45 527) or visit www.pillars.org.nz

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren – Support and information for families/whānau where children are not being raised by their parents. Phone 0800 472 637 www.raisinggrandchildren.org.nz

Department of Corrections - Information for friends and families of people in prison. www.corrections.govt.nz

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