

# Caring for grandchildren when a family member goes to prison: Part 2

## Practical impacts

If you have taken on the care of children informally, that is without intervention by a government department, it can be helpful for the person in prison to sign a letter saying the children are currently in your care. This can be very useful when dealing with the school or if you ever have to take the children to hospital.

You may find dealing with school overwhelming, especially if they have high expectations of your involvement. It's understandable that you may wish to keep your family business private but speaking to someone about your child's situation is very important. See *What to Tell the School When a Family Member Goes to Prison* for more information.

It may be that there is another family member or older student who is able to help the children with homework or computer work. Other families may be able to help out with transport to sporting or after school activities. Not everyone needs to know your situation but it doesn't mean you should try to do everything yourself. If you do you may find yourself soon feeling worn out and exhausted.

## Keeping in contact

Research shows that keeping in contact with the parent in prison can be beneficial for the prisoner and the child. It can help both of them prepare for eventual release and the parents return to the community. You may have concerns however about whether there should be contact and in some cases it may not be in their best interest.

No matter what your relationship with the person in prison, children should be allowed the opportunity to maintain a relationship with their parent if it is not harmful to them. If you do not wish to visit the prison a family member or friend may be able to take the children in for you. See also *Visiting Prison* and *Keeping in Contact*.

You may find children tend to act up or behave badly after a visit. This can be due to the huge emotional impact of seeing their parent in prison and having to say goodbye. This is a time when they need the most understanding and care. Try to plan something light or relaxing after a visit for them.

## Preparing for release

As the time for release of the person in prison approaches you may find yourself experiencing a range of emotions again. It's not unusual to feel happy or relieved and also nervous at the same time. You may feel anxiety about the parents return and unsure if things will be any better this time round. You may feel that you have done a lot of work to keep things steady in the children's lives and fear that this may come undone.

The person in prison may have assumptions about where they will live when they get out. You may feel pressured to provide this housing, especially if not doing so means you will lose the children. Try to talk about expectations before the person

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is released. It can be very hard to have these conversations or ask someone to leave your home once they are there. Talking to someone at Pillars can be helpful in sorting out what you want to say and how you might say it.

### Looking after yourself

When you are a carer you need to make sure that you are looking after yourself as much as possible. This is no easy task when you have children in your care and are possibly supporting their incarcerated parent too.

There are resources and support groups in the community for grandparents who care for grandchildren. You may like to meet face to face with other people in your situation or talk on the phone to someone who understands. There are also resources available that you can read online or in book form. Not everyone will be affected by incarceration but there are likely to be themes you can relate to such as the effects of drug and alcohol abuse, trauma and negotiating boundaries with the children's parents.

Try to take time out where possible, even if only when the children are in bed or napping. It can be tempting to use this time to do housework but make sure you have some time to yourself each day where you are not caring for someone else. Caring for others is a big job and taking even ten minutes a day to relax can help your emotional wellbeing. See also *Looking After Yourself When a Family Member Goes to Prison*.

### 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](http://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](http://www.raisinggrandchildren.org.nz)

Department of Corrections - Information for friends and families of people in prison. [www.corrections.govt.nz](http://www.corrections.govt.nz)

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