



Caring for children when someone goes to prison

Having a family member go to prison can bring big changes to the family or whānau.

One of the most important decisions to be made when someone goes to prison will be about who will care for any children left behind.

Depending on your situation you may be taking on more responsibility for the children. It's a big task to be strong for the children, and for the person in prison. You may find you need support during these challenging times.

How imprisonment affects children

The impact on each child will differ, depending on their age, home situation, and how much they know about their parent's situation. Knowing less won't necessarily make things easier.

Children may have a lot of unanswered questions. It is important for them to have a place where they feel safe and included in decisions made about them.

Many children describe themselves as trying to be strong and positive about the future and are seen to be supportive of their non-imprisoned parent or caregiver.

It often appears that children who remain in contact with their imprisoned parent maintain a more positive approach to the situation. It's important you are as open and honest with children as you can be so they feel they have an adult in their life they can trust.

What helps?

Talking

It's important though to let children express their feelings in healthy ways. They need to know it's okay to feel the way they do and that they are not expected to 'get over it' or 'move on'. Talk about the person in prison and let children share their feelings. This will be very important and they may need some extra care and support to cope.

There may be times when they ask you questions that you have to answer honestly with 'I don't know'. It is more important to listen than to have all the answers or be able to fix everything.

Counselling can be a very useful tool for children. Allowing them the chance to talk to someone outside the family where they don't have to worry about feeling bad or hurting anyone is highly recommended. It may be that a school counsellor can assist in this situation. Don't force it though. Children don't need extra pressure to talk if they don't feel ready.

Telling others

Not everyone needs to know your situation but speaking to someone about your child's situation is very important. If you try to do everything yourself you may find you soon feel worn out and exhausted.

If you have taken on the care of children informally, 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.



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



Routine

Try to keep life as normal as possible. Children need routine and this can make them feel safe in uncertain times. Include the children in everyday home life and let them help out with chores, but remember that play time is an important part of coping with emotions and change. A calming bedtime routine can be helpful at all ages.

Time together

Some children will not want to talk about what's going on but will feel supported if you spend time with them doing activities they enjoy. It may be helpful for children to link up with a mentor. Pillars has mentoring support for children with a parent in prison.

Reaching out

How your child expresses their feelings may vary a lot but what matters most is that your child feels that someone else understands what they are feeling. It is normal for your child to have a change in appetite, sleep patterns, interest in school or friends or hobbies, especially after shock and loss.

If you are concerned, it is a good idea to talk to your doctor or a family support worker. It doesn't make you a bad parent if you are not sure how to help your child. It shows that you are trying to do the best for them during a challenging time.

If you are a grandparent caring for children of someone in prison, you may like to meet with other people in your situation or talk on the phone to someone who understands. Resources are available that you can read online or in book form.

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

Justus - A website for young people and families who know someone in prison www.justus.org.nz

Kidsline – Telephone counselling service for young people aged 13 or younger. Phone 0800 54 37 54 www.kidsline.org.nz

Youthline – Telephone counselling service for young people 14 or older. Phone 0800 37 66 33 www.youthline.co.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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