



What to tell children when a family member goes to prison

When a family member goes to prison you will need to decide how much to tell the children.



Being honest

While it can be tempting to hide the truth from children it is likely that even if you don't tell them, they will find out elsewhere.

You can't change the fact that mum or dad is in prison but you can help children cope. They may adapt more easily than you think.

How do I tell them?

The questions kids ask can tell you how much they need to know.

- » Younger children may not need to know all the details and may be satisfied with you telling them "Dad hurt someone" or "Mum stole something." Older children may have more questions.
- » Try to keep any negative feelings you have about the parent or what they have done out of the conversation. It's important to allow children to talk about how they are feeling. They may not have the words to express what they feel. Reassure them that it is not their fault.
- » 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. This may be especially important if they have seen their parent taken away in handcuffs.
- » Be honest about how long the person will be away from home. If the person is not going to be home for four years it can be helpful to say they will be away for four birthdays.
- » Talk about how you will keep in touch while the person is in prison. This may include visiting, writing letters and receiving phone calls. This can reassure children that it is still okay to talk about their mum or dad and focus on their next contact.
- » Find someone outside the family to talk to about their feelings. This could be a school counsellor or a trusted adult that you feel comfortable with them talking to.

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

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

Overleaf - 'What to tell the school when a family member goes to prison'

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Ka Pou Whakahou





Telling the school when a family member goes to prison

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



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Ka Pou Whakahou



Why tell the school?

If you have children in your care it can be helpful for a trusted teacher or the school principal to know you have a family member in prison so they can help support the child.

If a teacher or principal sees changes in your child during this time it will be helpful if they have some insight into the possible reasons behind these changes.

Your privacy

Let them know how sensitive this information is to you. You don't need to tell the school the nature of the offence if you don't feel it is relevant. It may be that they have had other students in a similar situation.

If this is the first time they have known of a student having a parent in prison show them a copy of this information sheet.

Coping at school

When children feel worried, afraid, angry or upset it can affect learning and their sense of engagement with school. Some children may be bullied or bully others. They may not want to go to school.

One way some children cope is to pull away from people and become withdrawn. Having a teacher treat these issues with understanding can help the child feel supported and connected to their school.

Changing schools

Some families may move while their family member is in prison. Children may also move a few times to be cared for by different family members. Changing schools can be upsetting for children at the best of times.

If you move, find out if the new school has a buddy system where another student can support your child while they settle in.

Who can they talk to?

Most schools will have a school counsellor who your child can talk to confidentially. Introduce your child to them so they know how to access them if they need to.

Try not to ask your child what they talked about if they do see the counsellor. Allow them a private space where they can talk openly about their feelings.