What do I do now?

A Book of Questions and Answers for Children of Incarcerated Parents

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Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is designed for children who have a mom or dad in jail or prison. To create it we used the questions and ideas of more than 50 children living in Northern Arizona who talked to us about what it is like to have a parent locked up somewhere. These children, like you, feel lots of different things about what is happening to them but they thought sharing their stories might help other children. We thought so too. So we created this booklet for any child who might be helped by it.

How do I use this booklet?

This booklet is written for you. So it is easy to understand. We start by explaining the big words that people use when talking about your mom or dad. Then we ask questions that many children in our study asked in their talks with us. We also have some pages that talk about thoughts these children said they have and how they handle them. Finally we put in pages where you can put your own thoughts or ideas about you.

We are all unique so the stories here may not be exactly like your story. That is okay. You are even allowed to disagree with the ideas here and to have your own ideas.
ARREST…A person is arrested when the police believe the person has broken a law. Being arrested does not mean you are guilty of anything. That will be decided later on. When someone is arrested the police usually hook their hands behind their back in metal rings called handcuffs and then put them in a police car. An arrest can be scary if there is a lot of yelling or fighting when it happens. If you saw your mom or dad arrested and it scared you, consider talking to someone you trust about it.

COURT…is a place where people meet to talk about what your mom or dad might have done. At court you will see a judge and lawyers who make arguments to the judge about what should happen next.

JUDGE…a judge is someone who listens to why your mom or dad was arrested and makes decisions about what should happen next. Sometimes a group of people called a jury will help make the decisions.

PLEA BARGAIN…is what happens when the lawyers and your mom or dad agree what should happen next. This agreement is a plea bargain.
Sentence…when a judge or a jury decides what happens to someone who has broken the law that decision is called a sentence. Sometimes people are sentenced to live at a jail or prison for a period of time.

Jail…a jail is a building where people stay when they have been arrested. It has locked doors, and you can’t visit someone there except at special times with permission. Sometimes people living in a jail have to stay until a judge or jury decides what will happen to them next. Other people live in jail because a judge has decided they need to stay there.

Prison…a prison is a locked building where people stay for usually a year or more because a judge or jury has decided they have broken a law. There are fewer prisons than jails so sometimes a prison will be further from where you live than a jail.

Incarceration…This is the big word that means someone is in jail or in prison. Children who have a mom or dad living in a jail or prison are sometimes called CIPs or children of incarcerated parents.
Definition Game

Arrest, CIP, Court, Incarceration, Jail, Judge, Plea Bargain, Prison, Sentence
Why is my mom or dad in jail/prison?

You mom or dad is in jail/prison because a judge decided they have broken a law. This does not mean they are a bad person. People break the law for lots of reasons. It does mean that they are being punished, and that a judge has decided that going to jail/prison is something your mom or dad must do. Your mom or dad does not have any choice about it. They have to do what the judge says.

It is important to know that what your mom or dad did is not your fault. Each of us makes our own decisions, and your parent is responsible for their choices, not you. It is okay for you to have questions about what happened and to ask someone you trust.

Remember that just because your mom or dad is locked up does not mean that you will grow up and go to jail or prison. Each of us gets to make our own decisions and choices.

Are there more children like me?

In Arizona there are about 175,000 children with a mom or dad in jail or prison so you are not alone!

“We are at risk. It’s a cycle. A lot of my family did drugs and were in the system. That inspired me. I’ve never been arrested for anything. I tried to avoid all that.” —(22 year old girl)
In jail or prison, people live in little locked rooms called cells, sometimes by themselves or with a roommate. Cells might have bars on the front or big solid locked doors with a little window. Other times they live in big rooms with bunk beds with lots of other prisoners.

What they wear in jail or prison is different in each facility. Usually they wear one piece outfits like jumpsuits or sometimes shirts and pants that look a little like what nurses wear at the hospital. Usually everyone living in a jail or prison wears the same outfit, so that they are easy to recognize.

Prisoners usually eat in cafeterias or in the big rooms in which they live. Sometimes they go through a food line like you have at school or sometimes they have food trays handed to them.

If your mom or dad lives in jail they might spend their time reading a book, writing letters, playing cards or watching television with other prisoners. In a prison, some prisoners have jobs or other activities they go to during the day. In both places, there are times when your mom or dad gets to go outside inside a fenced area and times when they get to have visitors.

“I’d really like to find somebody that has a story like mine… ” (10 year old girl)
Can I write or get letters?

All prisoners in jails or prisons can get and send mail but there are rules about what kind of mail. Sometimes you can only write on little postcards and sometimes you can send letters in an envelope. In Arizona, you cannot write in crayon or send pictures with glitter, stickers or glue on them.

You can also send pictures to mom or dad in most cases and they can send you drawings.

If you want to write your mom or dad, ask someone you trust to look up the rules at their facility so there are no problems.

Practice filling out the envelope...
Most jails and prisons let prisoners talk to people on the phone. But, your mom or dad has to call you. You cannot call them. You, can usually talk on the phone for 15 minutes at a time and then the phone hangs up automatically. Many children told us they made lists of the things they wanted to say so that they could remember quickly when the phone rang.

In order to have your mom or dad call you, a grown up has to do things to make it possible and all these things cost money. Sometimes a family doesn’t have enough money to let a prisoner call very often or even at all.

If it is possible for your mom or dad to call, you have the right to decide whether you want to talk. Sometimes talking on the phone might make you feel sad. If it is possible for your parent to call, talk with someone you trust about how you feel about talking to your mom or dad on the phone.

“I remember sitting down and talking to her about school and how everything was going and she told us what she was doing down there.” (19 year old girl)
In jails you must arrange visits ahead of time, and you have to visit with a grown up if you are under 18. In prisons, your caregiver must send in an application so you and they can visit. This sometimes takes a while and might mean you can’t go visit right away.

In jails and prisons, there are rules about what you can wear and take in with you during visits. You can have your caregiver go to our website to see a list of policies for the place where your mom or dad lives. If you don’t follow these rules you will not be allowed into the facility so pay close attention.

If you are visiting someone in jail, you will not be allowed to touch or hug them. There will be a piece of clear hard plastic separating you and your parent and you will talk to each other on a telephone. If you are visiting a prison, you will probably be able to hug them and might even get to share a meal together. Ask your caregiver to help you understand what the visit will be like so you will not be surprised.

If your mom or dad is living in a facility in a different city, it can cost a lot of money to go visit them. Your caregiver will have to pay for gas, food and sometimes a place to stay overnight if the trip is long. Some families cannot afford to visit very often or even at all.
You have a right to decide who you want to know about your mom or dad. The children we talked with sometimes worried other people would make fun of them or that they would say mean things about their mom or dad. They usually chose to only tell one or two special friends or people they trusted. Other children chose to tell lots of people. There is no wrong or right decision. You get to decide. But it is probably a good idea to ask someone you trust for help in thinking through your choices.

Some children we talked to found it was helpful for grown ups at school to know so there was someone to talk with. Children who have a mom or dad locked up sometimes have a hard time at school, and having people there who know and can support you might be helpful.

“It was important to have someone to tell because there was someone who knew what I was going through so they weren’t like ‘come on, do this’ when I didn’t want to. They knew what I was feeling.” (14 year old girl)

“Whenever someone asks me I try to change the subject, and I’d really like to have a friend but I’m scared if I tell them my story they’re going to judge me.” (10 year old girl)
Almost all the children who talked with us said there are times when they really missed their mom or dad.

It is normal to feel sad or even cry about someone you love not being with you. What is important is that when you feel these feelings you don't keep them locked up inside of you. It is okay to find a quiet, safe place to cry or to do something else to help you feel better.

Some children listen to music or draw pictures or get busy with an activity or sport that makes them happy. Any of these things are good ways of dealing with your sadness. You might also write your parent a letter or draw them a picture.

“I get really sad on the bus on the way to school. I look out the window sometimes and cry.” – (9 year old boy)

“When I’m sad I have a secret place in my closet where I go and cry to myself.” – (10 year old boy)
It might be hard to say out loud, but you might be mad at your mom or dad for being away. Sometimes children, especially older children, are angry at their mom or dad for doing things that got them in trouble.

This might be especially true if your mom or dad has been in jail or prison more than once. Sometimes parents come home and try to make a fresh start by telling their kids things will be different and they will never go away again. But then something happens and mom or dad is incarcerated again.

Feeling angry at your mom or dad is a natural thing. Sometimes your anger might make you not even want to see or talk to them so they will feel the same hurt that you feel from them not being home with you.

While these feelings are normal, it is not healthy for you to keep your anger locked up inside of you. Try to talk to someone about what you are feeling.

“When my mom got out I was happy and I was scared. She was still hanging around with the same people...and that made me so angry. When she went back to jail she’d call and I’d answer the phone and when I knew it was her I didn’t talk to her. It made her sad. I know it did. I wanted to hurt her. To give her some of that hurt that she gave us.”

– (19 year old girl)
Lots of children have mixed feelings about the people who arrested their mom or dad. While it is a police officer’s job to arrest someone they believe might have broken the law, sometimes watching it can be scary. Individual police officers may have seemed mean to your mom or dad or to other members of your family. Because of this experience you may find you don’t like police officers or are scared of them. These feelings are okay for you to have, but you should talk to someone about them if they bother you.

It is also important to understand that not all police officers are the same. Most are there to help people like you and your family so while it is okay to be angry or sad about bad things that might have happened to you, you have to be careful not to judge all police officers the same way.

“When I was little police were never called if something good happened. The police were called when something bad would happen and they were there to take someone away...if they were called someone was leaving.”

-(19 year old girl)

“They asked me where my dad was and when I said I didn’t know, they said I was lying to them. Whenever I’m around cops I am nervous cause how they talk and stand and dress. I start shaking and try not to look at them or anything.”

-(9 year old girl)
It might be hard to admit, but when someone is gone from us for a long time…even years…we sometimes forget what they look like or things about them.

Some of the children we talked to said sometimes they went through a whole day without thinking about their mom or dad, especially when they were busy with school or activities. Other children who didn’t get to visit their mom or dad very often said they sometimes couldn’t remember what they looked like or what their voice sounded like.

Forgetting made these children feel bad inside, as if they were doing something wrong. Remember that forgetting is normal and does not mean you don’t love your mom or dad. If you get busy and forget for a while, you will probably remember later. When you do, you might write down something that happened that day that you want to remember to share with your mom or dad. It also okay to ask a grown up for a picture of your mom or dad. They can help you decide if this is a good way for you to remember.
Use this page to write or draw your private thoughts about what is happening in your life. You can use it to begin talking to someone about your experience.
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Questions & Answers for Children of Incarcerated Parents

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