THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Explaining Changing Circumstances by Age

Co-Parenting & Communication · Difficult Conversations

How much detail is appropriate for younger children, teens, and young adults.

IN THIS GUIDE

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A free guide from My Fairy GodParents — for youth impacted by parental incarceration, justice-impacted youth, and the caregivers and families who support them.
myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint

Print, write on it, and share it with the people helping your family.

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THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

Families affected by incarceration go through changes that are hard to explain even to other adults: a transfer to a different facility, a new charge, a changed release date, a shift in custody or living arrangements. Children notice the tension around these changes long before anyone tells them what happened.

Left with silence, children do not conclude that nothing is wrong. They build their own explanation, usually worse than the truth and often centered on themselves — that they caused it, that it is being hidden because it is unbearable, or that no one trusts them enough to say.

There is no single script that fits every age, but there is a reliable approach: give the child the amount of truth they can use, in language sized to how they think, and keep what different adults say to that child consistent with each other.

YOUNGER CHILDREN: SIMPLE, CONCRETE, AND ABOUT SAFETY

Children roughly under eight think concretely and personally. Abstract explanations about legal processes mean little to them; what they need to know is who is taking care of them, where they will sleep, and whether today and tomorrow are safe.

Keep the explanation short and factual, without detail they cannot use: "Dad has to stay at a different place for a while now. You're still going to live here with me, go to your same school, and we're still going to visit him." Repeat the reassurance about who cares for them even when the child does not ask for it directly.

Expect the same question more than once. Young children process information by returning to it, not by absorbing it in one sitting, and repeating the answer patiently is normal rather than a sign it did not land.

TEENS: MORE TRUTH THAN ADULTS EXPECT, LESS MANAGEMENT THAN ADULTS OFFER

By adolescence, most young people already have more information than the adults around them assume — from overheard conversations, from social media, from other family members, sometimes from the parent directly. Managing what a teen hears rarely works and often reads as a lack of respect.

Teens generally respond better to a direct account with the reasoning included: what changed, what is known, what is still unknown, and why the adult is telling them now rather than earlier. They are also more likely to ask about consequences for themselves specifically — visits, holidays, moving, money — and those questions deserve straight answers, including "I don't know yet" where that is true.

Resist managing a teen's reaction. Anger, withdrawal, or apparent indifference are all common responses and do not necessarily mean the conversation went badly.

+ YOUNG ADULTS: LOGISTICS ALONGSIDE FEELINGS

Older children and young adults are often absorbing the change on two tracks at once: an emotional one and a practical one involving school, work, housing, or their own children. Conversations with this age group generally go better when they address both.

It is reasonable to ask a young adult directly what they need to know in order to plan — a court date, a transfer location, whether a visit is still possible around their work schedule — rather than assuming they mainly need emotional support. Many will ask for logistics as their way of processing.

Young adults are also frequently the ones other family members lean on to explain things to younger siblings. If that is happening in your family, have an explicit conversation about what they are and are not responsible for passing along.

+ KEEPING ADULTS CONSISTENT

Different adults in a child's life — caregiver, incarcerated parent, other relatives, sometimes a caseworker — often learn about a change at different times and describe it differently once they do. A child who hears two versions usually trusts neither.

Before a conversation with the child, it is worth a short call or message between the adults to agree on the core facts and the language you will each use, even if you disagree privately about other things. The disagreement can stay between the adults; the child needs one consistent account.

If you do not yet have agreement, it is fine to tell the child that: "I'm still talking with your dad about exactly how to explain this, and I want to get it right before I tell you more." That is more trustworthy than a version that will need correcting later.

+ ONE CHANGE, THREE CONVERSATIONS

When a father's release date moved back several months after a disciplinary infraction, a caregiver had to explain the change to three children of very different ages in one week. With her seven-year-old, she kept it to: "Dad has to stay a bit longer than we thought. That doesn't change anything about us — you're still going to see him."

With her fourteen-year-old, she was direct about what happened and why, including that his father had made a mistake that had consequences, and she answered his question about whether visits would still happen on schedule with a plain "yes, that part isn't changing."

Her twenty-year-old, who managed the family's visit calendar, needed the actual new date more than reassurance, and used it to rearrange a work schedule. All three conversations described the same true event. None of them used the same words.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

Younger child: a facility or living change

“Dad has to stay at a different place for a while. You're still going to live here with me, go to your same school, and see him. If you think of a question later, you can always ask me.”

Teen: a direct account

“I want to tell you something and I'm not going to soften it. [State what changed.] Here's what I know for sure, and here's what I don't know yet. I'd rather you hear it from me than piece it together.”

Young adult: asking what they need to plan

“I know this affects your plans too. What do you need to know from me right now to figure out school, work, or visits? Ask me anything, and if I don't know, I'll say so.”

Getting adults aligned before talking to a child

Message or call to the other parent or a relative.

“Before either of us talks to the kids about this, can we agree on the basic facts and the words we'll each use? I don't need us to agree on everything, but I want them to hear the same story from both of us.”

+ BEFORE EXPLAINING A CHANGE

- [ ] Decide the core facts you can state with confidence versus what is still unknown.
- [ ] Check in with other involved adults so the account is consistent.
- [ ] For younger children, lead with who cares for them and what stays the same.
- [ ] For teens, give a direct account and expect them to already know more than you think.
- [ ] For young adults, ask what they need to know to plan, not only how they feel.
- [ ] Prepare to repeat the explanation more than once without treating that as failure.
- [ ] Say "I don't know yet" plainly wherever it is true, for any age.
- [ ] Follow up a few days later to ask if any new questions have come up.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

What has this child already heard from someone other than me?

Am I sizing this explanation to how they think, or to how I wish they thought?

Have the adults in this child's life agreed on the same basic account?

What logistics, not just feelings, does this child or young adult need addressed?

+ YOUR NEXT STEP

Write two sentences you could say if the topic comes up tonight.

+ WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Written by My Fairy GodParents — reviewed August 2026.

This is general information and practice guidance — not legal advice, mental-health treatment, or a statement of any court, agency, or facility's rules. Policies differ by state, county, facility, school, and program, so always confirm details with the office involved.

For decisions with legal, medical, financial, or clinical consequences, work with a licensed professional or the organizations listed with each resource.

You do not have to do this alone.

More free guides, scripts, and checklists:
myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint