THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Preparing a Child for a Visit

Legal & Policy Literacy · Staying Connected During Incarceration

What to explain before, what to expect during, and what to do after.

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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

A visit to see an incarcerated parent can be meaningful for a child, but it is also unfamiliar, procedural, and sometimes frightening if nobody has explained what will happen. Metal detectors, uniformed staff, locked doors, and a parent who looks and sounds different than the child remembers are all things an adult can absorb with context that a child does not automatically have.

Children do best with visits when a trusted adult has told them, in age-appropriate language, what to expect before they arrive — not to make it sound easy, but to make it familiar enough that the unfamiliar parts of the building do not become the story the child remembers.

This lesson focuses on the preparation conversation and the logistics that support a child's experience of a visit. It assumes the visit itself has already been arranged and approved by the facility.

WHAT TO EXPLAIN BEFORE YOU LEAVE THE HOUSE

Tell the child, in advance, what kind of building they are going to and what will happen physically: there may be a metal detector, a pat-down or wanding, a wait in a lobby, and rules about what they can bring in. Naming these ahead of time turns a potentially alarming moment into something the child was told to expect.

Explain what the visit itself will look like: whether they will sit at a table, whether they can hug at the start and end, whether there is a glass barrier, and roughly how long the visit will last. Facilities differ sharply here, so describe the specific facility's setup rather than a general idea of what visits look like.

Prepare the child for how their parent may look or sound different — a different haircut, a uniform, being more tired or more emotional than usual. Frame this plainly: their parent is still their parent, and the building and the clothes do not change that.

AGE-APPROPRIATE FRAMING

Young children generally need short, concrete explanations close to the day of the visit rather than a long lead time that gives anxiety room to grow: what the room looks like, that mom or dad will be there, and what they can do together, like drawing or playing a game if allowed.

School-age children can handle more detail about the process and often want to know the rules directly, including why they exist. Answering honestly, without overexplaining the legal situation, tends to reduce anxiety more than vague reassurance does.

Teenagers may resist going, feel embarrassed, or have strong opinions about the situation. Give them real choice where possible rather than requiring attendance, and make space for them to ask hard questions without the adult reacting defensively.

+ DURING AND AFTER THE VISIT

Let the child lead some of the interaction rather than filling every silence for them; children often need a few minutes to warm up in an unfamiliar setting, and that is normal rather than a sign the visit is going badly.

If the child becomes upset during the visit, a brief, calm acknowledgment usually helps more than trying to fix the feeling on the spot — the goal is to get through the visit, not to make it perfect.

After the visit, especially the drive or ride home, give the child room to talk or not talk. Some children process out loud immediately; others need a day or two before they say anything about it. Both are normal.

+ LOGISTICS THAT REDUCE THE CHANCE OF A BAD DAY

Confirm the facility's dress code and entry rules in advance and lay out the child's clothes the night before — many facilities turn away visitors, including children, for clothing that does not meet their rules, and this is one of the more preventable disappointments.

Bring only what is allowed inside; ask ahead what a child can carry, since even a favorite small toy can be disallowed at some facilities.

Plan the day so the child is not rushed, hungry, or overtired going in — a visit is easier for a child to handle emotionally when the basic physical needs are already covered.

+ THE FIVE MINUTES THAT MATTERED MOST

A father prepared his eight-year-old for a first visit by walking through, step by step, what would happen: the metal detector, the wait, the table where they would sit, and that he would be able to hug his mother at the start and the end but not in between.

In the lobby, when the metal detector went off for another visitor ahead of them and a guard raised his voice, the boy did not startle the way he might have if this had all been unfamiliar. He turned to his father and said, matter-of-factly, "That's the machine you told me about."

The visit itself went well. The father's assessment afterward was that the five minutes of preparation at the kitchen table had done more for his son's experience than anything that happened once they were inside.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

Explaining a visit to a young child

"We're going to visit Mom on Saturday. There will be a special machine we walk through, kind of like at the airport, and then we'll go into a room and sit at a table with her. You can hug her when we get there and when we leave. She might look a little different, but she's still Mom."

Explaining the process to a school-age child

"Before we can go in, we'll go through security, which means a metal detector and sometimes a pat-down — that's just their rule for everyone, not because we did anything wrong. We'll sit at a table with Dad for about an hour. You can ask him anything you want."

Offering a teenager a real choice

"I'd like you to come Saturday, but I want this to be your choice, not something I'm making you do. If you're not ready, that's okay, and it doesn't mean anything about how you feel about him. Let me know by Thursday so I can plan around it either way."

Checking in after the visit

"That was a lot today. You don't have to talk about it right now if you don't want to — I'm here whenever you do, even if that's tomorrow or next week."

+ PREPARING A CHILD FOR A VISIT

- [ ] Confirm the facility's dress code and entry rules before the day of the visit.
- [ ] Explain the physical process — security, waiting, seating — in age-appropriate detail.
- [ ] Prepare the child for how the parent may look or sound different.
- [ ] Explain hugging rules and what physical contact will be allowed.
- [ ] Ask ahead what a child can bring inside, including small comfort items.
- [ ] For teenagers, offer a genuine choice about whether to attend.
- [ ] Plan timing so the child is fed, rested, and not rushed beforehand.
- [ ] Leave space after the visit for the child to talk or not talk, on their own timeline.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

Have I explained the physical process of the visit in enough concrete detail?

Am I giving this child's age and temperament the right amount of information — not too little, not too much?

Have I confirmed this facility's specific dress code and entry rules recently?

How will I check in with the child after the visit without pressuring them to talk before they are ready?

+ YOUR NEXT STEP

Call the facility and write down the current visitation rules before the next visit.

+ WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Written by My Fairy GodParents — reviewed August 2026.
Official reference: Federal Bureau of Prisons — Visiting — linked for the official rules and forms, which MFGP does not set.
https://www.bop.gov/inmates/visiting.jsp
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For decisions with legal, medical, financial, or clinical consequences, work with a licensed professional or the organizations listed with each resource.
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You do not have to do this alone.

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