THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Talking About Disappointment Without Making New Promises

Co-Parenting & Communication · Difficult Conversations

Language for missed dates, changed plans, and uncertain timelines.

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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> *Language for missed dates, changed plans, and uncertain timelines.*

THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

A missed call, a canceled visit, a release date that moves — these happen inside incarceration on a schedule nobody in the family controls. What breaks trust is not usually the disappointment itself. It is a promise that was made to soften the moment and then could not be kept.

Children remember broken promises longer and more specifically than they remember honest uncertainty. "I don't know yet" told plainly costs almost nothing. "I promise" followed by silence costs a great deal, and it costs it slowly, in a child's willingness to believe the next thing an adult tells them.

This lesson is about a habit of language, not a script for one hard day. Once you stop promising outcomes and start naming feelings and facts, the difficult conversations get shorter and the child's trust holds up better across the ones that follow.

NAME THE FEELING BEFORE THE REASON

When a visit falls through or a call does not come, the instinct is to explain immediately — the facility was on lockdown, the phone line was down, the schedule changed. Explanation first tends to read to a child as an adult defending themselves rather than caring about what the child feels.

Naming the feeling first does something different. "You were really looking forward to today, and this is a big letdown" tells the child their reaction is correct and expected. Only after that lands does the reason matter, and by then the child can actually hear it instead of just hearing an excuse.

This order is not about being slow to explain. It can happen in the same sentence. It is about which part carries the weight.

SAY WHAT YOU CONTROL AND WHAT YOU DO NOT

Children, especially younger ones, often assume the caregiver or the incarcerated parent chose the disappointment. Naming the limits of anyone's control corrects that assumption without turning into a lecture on the justice system.

"I can't control when the phones are working there. What I can do is call the moment they're back on"

separates the disappointment from blame and gives the child something concrete you are actually doing.

Be equally honest about your own limits as a caregiver. "I don't have any more information than you do right now" is a legitimate and useful thing to say, and it is more trustworthy than guessing out loud to fill the silence.

+ TRADE DATES FOR DIRECTION

Specific dates are the most common source of broken promises, because so much inside a facility is outside anyone's ability to guarantee — visitation schedules, phone access, transfer timing, release processing. A caregiver who says "he'll call Sunday" is making a promise about something they cannot control.

Describe direction instead of dates: what you are working toward, who you are checking with, and when you will next have an update, rather than when the thing itself will happen. "We're trying for a visit next month, and I'll know more after I call the facility on Tuesday" is honest and still gives the child something to hold.

If a child pushes for a firm date, it is fine to say plainly that you are not going to promise one, and why: "I'm not going to give you a date, because last time I did and it changed, and that wasn't fair to you." Most children respect that reasoning more than they resist it.

+ THE REPAIR HAPPENS ON THE NEXT CALL

A single disappointment rarely does lasting damage on its own. What damages trust is a pattern of the adult moving on without acknowledging what happened. The repair is small and specific: bringing it up again yourself.

"I know last week's call didn't happen, and I know that was hard" — said before the child has to raise it — tells them the disappointment was tracked and mattered, not brushed past. That single sentence, repeated as a habit, is what rebuilds the trust that a broken promise costs.

This is true for the incarcerated parent as well as the caregiver. Coach a parent, where you can, to open a delayed call the same way: naming the miss before moving forward.

+ THE VISIT THAT DID NOT HAPPEN

A caregiver had told her nine-year-old that his father would see him "this Saturday, for sure," after two prior visits had already fallen through for reasons outside her control. When Saturday's visit was also canceled, over a facility lockdown neither of them had any way to predict, he stopped believing anything she said about his father for weeks afterward.

On the advice of a family support counselor, she changed her language going forward. Instead of a promised date, she began saying: "We're trying for a visit. I'll call Thursday and find out where things stand, and I'll tell you exactly what they say, good or bad." She kept that pattern for two months before offering another specific date.

The next actual visit, when it came, meant more precisely because nothing had been oversold beforehand. He told her afterward that he liked knowing she would tell him "the real thing," even when the real thing was

that she didn't know yet.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

When a call or visit is missed

Say as soon as you know, rather than waiting to be asked.

“I know you were counting on that call, and it didn't happen. That's a real letdown and I'm not going to pretend it isn't. I don't know exactly why yet, but I'll find out and tell you what I learn.”

Replacing a promise with a direction

Use instead of naming a specific date you cannot guarantee.

“I'm not going to promise a date, because I can't control that part. What I can tell you is we're working toward a visit, and I'll call [day] to get an update. I'll tell you as soon as I know more.”

Opening a delayed call as the incarcerated parent

For the parent to use, coached by the caregiver ahead of time.

“I know I said I'd call last week and it didn't happen. I hated that. It wasn't in my control, but I know that doesn't make it less disappointing for you. Tell me what that week was like.”

When a child stops believing you

After a pattern of broken dates, not just one.

“I think I've said 'for sure' about some things that weren't actually for sure, and that's on me. Going forward I'm going to tell you what we're hoping for and what I actually know, and I won't say 'for sure' unless it is.”

+ BEFORE THE NEXT HARD CONVERSATION

- [ ] Name the feeling before you explain the reason.
- [ ] Say clearly what you control and what you do not.
- [ ] Replace any date you cannot guarantee with a direction and a next check-in time.
- [ ] Avoid the words "I promise" unless you are certain.
- [ ] Bring up a missed call or visit yourself, before the child has to.
- [ ] Coach the incarcerated parent to open delayed calls the same honest way.
- [ ] Keep a running note of what you have told the child, so your story stays consistent.
- [ ] Follow up on the specific day you said you would have news, even if the news is "still nothing."

REFLECT AND WRITE

What is the last promise I made that I could not fully guarantee?

Do I tend to explain before I acknowledge the feeling, or the other way around?

Is there a missed call or visit I have not circled back to?

What is one honest sentence I could use instead of a firm date this week?

YOUR NEXT STEP

> Choose one honest sentence to use instead of a promise.

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.

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