THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Talking About Dates You Cannot Promise

Co-Parenting & Communication · Difficult Conversations

Language for release dates, hearings, and plans that may change.

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 release dates, hearings, and plans that may change.*

THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

Uncertainty is a permanent condition in families affected by incarceration, not a temporary problem to be solved before life can feel normal again. Court dates move, transfer timing is opaque, release dates carry conditions, and even routine phone or visitation access can change without warning. Children live inside that uncertainty whether or not adults name it.

The natural response is to want to give a child something solid to hold onto, and that instinct is exactly what leads to promises that later cannot be kept. The harder, more sustainable skill is learning to sit with a child in not-knowing without either lying to comfort them or handing them the full weight of adult worry.

This lesson is about building that skill as an ongoing practice rather than a one-time conversation, because the uncertainty itself is ongoing.

UNCERTAINTY IS NOT THE SAME AS DISHONESTY

Many caregivers feel that saying "I don't know" to a child is a failure of the adult's job to have answers. It is not. Children can tolerate genuine uncertainty far better than they can tolerate discovering later that an answer they were given was invented to make them feel better in the moment.

"I don't know" is a complete and honest answer when it is true. It becomes more useful, not less, when it is paired with what you are doing to find out and when you expect to know more.

Distinguish between what you genuinely do not know and what you are choosing not to share yet because the child is not ready for it or it is not settled enough to be useful. Both are legitimate, but they call for different language, and conflating them tends to erode trust once a child figures out the difference.

GIVING A CHILD SOMETHING TO HOLD WITHOUT A GUARANTEE

Children need some sense of stability even inside uncertainty, and that stability can come from things other than a promised outcome. What stays the same — routines, who is caring for them, the fact that calls will keep happening in some form — can be stated with confidence even when the details cannot.

Ritual helps here: a set day for writing letters, a consistent time for calls when they are available, a habit of

checking a calendar together. These give a child something reliably theirs regardless of what the court or the facility does next.

It also helps to give uncertainty a shape a child can track rather than leaving it formless. "We'll know more after the hearing on the 14th" turns an open-ended wait into a bounded one, even though the outcome of the 14th is still unknown.

+ HOW MUCH UNCERTAINTY TO SHARE, BY AGE

Younger children generally do better absorbing uncertainty in small, repeated doses tied to concrete near-term events — the next visit, the next call — rather than long-range unknowns like a release date that is still months or years out.

Teens and young adults can usually handle more of the actual uncertainty stated directly, including the fact that a process is unpredictable and that adults are frustrated by it too. Shielding older children from the real uncertainty they can already sense tends to read as condescension rather than protection.

Across ages, the useful move is separating the uncertainty of the outcome from the certainty of the relationship: "I don't know when the hearing will actually happen. I do know we'll keep visiting and calling no matter what it decides."

+ MANAGING YOUR OWN UNCERTAINTY IN FRONT OF A CHILD

Caregivers often try to project total calm to protect a child from adult stress, and children generally see through it, which can be more unsettling than visible, controlled worry. A caregiver who says "I'm a little anxious about this too, and I'm handling it" models something a child can use for the rest of their life.

What a child needs is not a caregiver with no feelings about the uncertainty, but a caregiver who is not destabilized by it. If you are genuinely struggling with the not-knowing, that is worth taking to your own support — a group, a counselor, a trusted friend — rather than working it out loud in front of the child.

Notice your own urge to promise something as a way of ending your own discomfort with the child's disappointment, rather than because the promise is actually justified. That urge is common and understandable, and naming it to yourself is often enough to stop the sentence before it becomes a promise you cannot keep.

+ THE HEARING THAT KEPT MOVING

A father's release-related hearing was postponed three times over five months, and each time his teenage daughter had been told a date she then watched pass. By the third postponement she had stopped asking altogether and told her caregiver she "didn't care anymore," which the caregiver recognized as protection rather than truth.

The caregiver changed her approach: instead of relaying dates as they came in, she began saying only, "There's a hearing scheduled, and I'll tell you the outcome once it happens — I'm not going to tell you the date anymore, since it keeps moving and I don't want you counting on it." She paired that with something

certain: their weekly call would happen regardless of what the hearing decided.

The daughter's guardedness did not disappear immediately, but she began asking again within a few weeks, this time asking "has anything happened yet" instead of "what's the date," a small shift that reflected she had recalibrated what was actually safe to expect.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

A true, complete "I don't know"

“I honestly don't know the answer to that yet. Here's what I'm doing to find out, and here's when I expect to know more.”

Separating outcome uncertainty from relationship certainty

“I don't know how the hearing is going to go, and I'm not going to guess. What I do know is we're going to keep visiting and calling no matter what it decides.”

Naming your own uncertainty without unloading it

“I'll be honest, I'm a little anxious about this too. I'm still handling it, and I wanted you to know it's okay to feel unsettled — I do sometimes too.”

Turning open-ended waiting into a bounded wait

“We won't know anything new until [date/event]. Until then, there isn't more to say, and that's okay — we don't have to keep checking every day.”

+ LIVING WITH ONGOING UNCERTAINTY

- [ ] Say "I don't know" plainly when it is true, rather than filling the gap with a guess.
- [ ] Separate what you genuinely don't know from what you're choosing to withhold for now.
- [ ] Give the child something certain — a routine, a call schedule — even when outcomes are unknown.
- [ ] Turn open-ended waits into bounded ones tied to a specific next event.
- [ ] Adjust how much raw uncertainty you share based on the child's age.
- [ ] Watch for your own urge to promise something just to end a hard moment.
- [ ] Name your own uncertainty briefly, without asking the child to manage it.
- [ ] Take your own worry about the unknown to your own support, not to the child.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

What is one thing I have promised recently that I cannot actually guarantee?

Where could I offer a bounded wait instead of an open-ended one?

Am I hiding my own uncertainty completely, or sharing it in a way the child can use?

What stays certain for this child, regardless of how the uncertain part resolves?

+ YOUR NEXT STEP

Write the sentence you will use the next time a date changes.

+ 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.

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You do not have to do this alone.

More free guides, scripts, and checklists:
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