THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Staying Connected: Calls, Video, Mail, and Visits

Legal & Policy Literacy · Staying Connected During Incarceration

How contact generally works, and why every rule must be confirmed with the specific facility.

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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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How contact generally works, and why every rule must be confirmed with the specific facility.

THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

Every family new to incarceration eventually learns the same lesson the hard way: what worked for a friend's facility, or what a website says in general terms, does not necessarily apply to the specific place your loved one is held. Calls, video visits, mail, and in-person visits are each governed by rules set at the facility level, and those rules can differ from one building to another even within the same state system.

This creates real cost when families guess instead of ask. A drive across the state only to be turned away because a visitor was never added to an approved list, a package returned because of a paper stock or photo type the facility does not allow, a phone call that never connects because the account was never funded through the right vendor — these are common, avoidable, and expensive in time and money the family did not have to spare.

This lesson is not a substitute for facility policy. It is a map of the usual categories of rules so you know what questions to ask, and who to ask them of, before you plan around an assumption.

THE FOUR CHANNELS, AND WHY EACH HAS ITS OWN RULEBOOK

Phone calls are usually run through a contracted vendor, not the facility itself, and that vendor sets the account setup, funding method, and per-minute cost. The facility sets which numbers can be called and how many minutes or calls are allowed per day or week.

Video visits, where offered, are frequently run by the same vendor as phone calls but function as a separate service with its own scheduling system, equipment requirements, and time limits. Not every facility offers video visitation, and where it exists it is often a supplement to, not a replacement for, in-person visits.

Mail rules cover what can be sent (letters, photos, books, money) and what cannot (certain paper types, staples, stickers, perfume, some drawings from children). Many facilities now scan or copy incoming mail rather than delivering the original, which changes what is worth sending.

In-person visits require the facility to have approved the visitor in advance in most systems, along with rules about how many visitors can come at once, what children need to bring or be accompanied by, dress codes, and what property can be carried in.

+ THE APPROVED-CONTACT LIST IS THE HINGE EVERYONE FORGETS

Most facilities require that anyone who wants to call, visit, or in some cases correspond be added to an approved list first — sometimes called an approved visitor list, an approved caller list, or a phone contact list, depending on the system. This step is frequently the reason a first attempt at contact fails, not because the family did anything wrong but because the paperwork step is invisible until you hit it.

The application to be added to an approved list is usually submitted by the incarcerated person from inside, though some facilities allow a family member to request the paperwork directly. It can take days to several weeks to process, so if you know contact is coming, ask early rather than after arrival.

Children usually need to be listed as visitors even if they will be accompanied by an approved adult, and some facilities require documentation such as a birth certificate or a notarized letter from a non-custodial parent. Ask specifically about children's requirements rather than assuming the adult's approval covers them.

+ CONFIRM, DON'T INFER, FROM THESE SOURCES

The facility's own website or visitation page is the first stop, but treat it as a starting point rather than the final word — pages go out of date, especially after a policy change or staffing shortage that suspends visits temporarily.

The facility's visitation or records office, reachable by phone in most systems, can confirm current hours, the approved-contact process, dress code, and any current suspensions. Write down the name of who you spoke with and the date, because policy answers sometimes vary by staff member and having a record helps if there is a dispute later.

The incarcerated person is often the fastest source of current, facility-specific information, since they experience the rules daily and can request forms be mailed out. Coordinate with them on what to ask for and when.

+ PLAN FOR CHANGE, NOT JUST FOR THE CURRENT RULE

Facility policy shifts with staffing, security incidents, weather, and public health conditions, sometimes with no advance notice to families. A visit that was confirmed a week ago can be cancelled the day of.

Build a habit of calling to confirm the day before or the morning of any planned visit, especially one involving travel or a child. It costs a few minutes and prevents the worst version of this problem: a child in the car, dressed and ready, learning at the gate that visits are suspended.

+ A FOUR-HOUR DRIVE AND A WASTED TRIP

A grandmother drove her two grandchildren four hours to a state facility for a Saturday visit, based on the visiting hours listed on a page she had found months earlier. At the entrance she was told the younger grandchild was not on the approved visitor list and could not enter.

She had assumed that being the legal guardian was enough, and that whatever paperwork existed had been handled when her son was first incarcerated. It had not — the list requires each visitor be individually approved, and children must be added by name.

After that trip she called the visitation office before every subsequent visit, confirmed both the current hours and that all three of them remained on the list, and never had another turned-away trip. The rule had not been unusual. She simply had not known to check it.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

Asking the facility about the approved-contact process

Call the visitation or records office.

"I'm calling about visiting [name], who is currently held there. Can you tell me the process for being added to the approved visitor list, and whether children need to be added separately? How long does approval usually take, and is there a form I can request?"

Confirming a visit the day before

"I have a visit scheduled tomorrow for [name] with [visitor names]. I wanted to confirm visiting hours are still in effect and that there are no current suspensions or changes to the dress code or entry requirements."

Asking the incarcerated person to request paperwork

In a call or letter.

"Can you request the visitor application form for [child's name] and mail it to me? Also let me know if there's anything specific the facility wants for a child visitor, like a birth certificate copy."

Asking about mail restrictions before sending something specific

"I'd like to send [item — photo, drawing, book] to [name]. Can you tell me if there are restrictions on that type of item, and whether original mail is delivered or only a scanned copy?"

+ BEFORE YOU PLAN AROUND ANY CONTACT METHOD

- [ ] Identify which vendor, if any, runs phone and video service for this facility.
- [ ] Call the facility directly rather than relying only on a website.
- [ ] Ask specifically about the approved-contact or approved-visitor process and timeline.
- [ ] Confirm whether children need to be added separately and what documents they need.

- [ ] Ask about current mail restrictions before sending photos, books, or children's drawings.
- [ ] Write down who you spoke with and the date for any policy answer you receive.
- [ ] Confirm a scheduled visit again the day before or morning of.
- [ ] Ask the incarcerated person what they are currently experiencing, since it may be more current than the website.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

Which contact method does our family rely on most, and have we confirmed its current rules directly with the facility?

Is everyone who needs to be on the approved list actually on it, including children?

What is our plan if a scheduled visit is cancelled the day of?

Who is our go-to contact at the facility, and do we have their information saved?

+ YOUR NEXT STEP

> Write down the facility's current policy for the one contact method you use most.

+ WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Source: Federal Bureau of Prisons — Visiting — verified August 2026. Curated and summarized by MFGP.
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.

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