THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Age-Appropriate Conversations About Incarceration

Caregiver Wellness & Support · Supporting the Child

How to answer a child's questions honestly without handing them adult weight.

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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> *How to answer a child's questions honestly without handing them adult weight.*

THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

Children almost always know more than the adults around them think. They overhear phone calls, notice who stopped coming, see the look on a grandmother's face, and read the room long before anyone explains anything. What they do not have is accurate information, so they fill the gap themselves — usually with a version in which they are somehow at fault.

Silence does not protect a child. It teaches them that this subject is dangerous, that asking makes adults upset, and that they are alone with whatever they have concluded. Honest, age-appropriate information does the opposite: it gives them something true to hold and an adult who is willing to talk about it.

This is not a single conversation. It is a door you open and keep open, and it will be walked through at unpredictable moments — in the car, at bedtime, three months later at a birthday party.

THE THREE THINGS EVERY VERSION NEEDS

It is true. You can leave things out, but do not say things that are false. A child who later learns they were lied to will discount everything else you told them, including the reassurance.

It is not their fault. Say it directly, more than once, even if they have not asked. Children are developmentally inclined to place themselves at the center of events, and a child who has silently concluded they caused this will not volunteer that belief.

They are cared for. Name who is taking care of them, where they will sleep, and what stays the same. Practical certainty does more for a frightened child than emotional reassurance does.

MATCHING THE WORDS TO THE AGE

Younger children need short, concrete facts: where the parent is, that they are safe, that they still love them, and who is looking after the child now. Abstract explanations about the legal system do not land and are not needed.

School-age children start asking why, and they ask about fairness. Answer the question they asked, honestly and briefly, and then stop. If they want more they will ask more — and if they do not, that is information too.

Teenagers usually already know the details, sometimes from the internet or from other people. What they need is not information but an adult who does not flinch: someone who will hear anger, shame, or defense of the parent without correcting it.

+ HANDLING QUESTIONS YOU CANNOT ANSWER

"When is he coming home?" is the question caregivers dread. The honest answer is often "I don't know yet," and that answer is survivable when you pair it with something certain: "I don't know yet. What I do know is that I'll tell you as soon as I do, and you'll be here with me until then."

Do not invent a timeline to soothe a child in the moment. A date that does not happen is a second loss, and it costs you credibility you will need later.

"Did he do it?" deserves an honest but bounded answer. You can say what is publicly known, say what you do not know, and say that the person is still their parent regardless of what they did. You are not required to render a verdict for a child.

+ CHOOSING THE MOMENT AND THE SHAPE

Side-by-side conversations are easier than face-to-face ones. Driving, walking, cooking, or folding laundry gives a child somewhere to put their eyes and a natural way to end the conversation, which makes them more likely to start one.

Do not open a hard conversation right before school, right before bed, or in front of an audience. Leave time afterward to simply be together.

Expect the reaction to be nothing. Many children absorb the information, say "okay," and go back to a game. That is not indifference; it is processing at their own speed. The real conversation often shows up days later.

+ KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN

Say out loud, more than once, that they can ask you anything about this and you will not be upset. Then hold to it, including on the day the question comes at a terrible moment.

Check in with an invitation rather than an interrogation: "Anything about your dad you've been wondering about lately?" beats "How are you feeling about your dad?"

Give them control over who else knows. A child who is told what to say about their family loses one of the few pieces of the situation they can still own.

+ THE QUESTION IN THE CAR

A nine-year-old asked, out of nowhere on the way to soccer, "Is Dad in jail because of me?" His grandmother pulled over. She had rehearsed a lot of conversations, but not this one.

She told him the truth: no, and that nothing a kid does can send a grown-up to jail. She told him what he was

allowed to know about why his father was there, in one plain sentence. Then she said the thing she had never said out loud: "You can ask me anything about your dad, any time, and I will never be mad at you for asking."

He said "okay" and asked whether they were going to be late. Four days later, at bedtime, he asked what the visiting room looked like. The door she opened in the car was the reason the second question came at all.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

The first explanation for a school-age child

Short, true, and repeatable.

“Your dad broke a rule that grown-ups have to follow, and now he has to stay at a place called a correctional facility for a while. He is safe there, and he still loves you very much. None of this is because of anything you did. You're going to keep living here with me, and I'll always tell you the truth about it.”

When you don't know the timeline

Never invent a date.

“I don't know yet when he's coming home — that hasn't been decided in a way I can tell you. Here's what I do know: the second I find out, you'll find out. And nothing about where you live or who takes care of you changes while we wait.”

When a child asks whether their parent did it

“That's a fair question. Here's what I know for sure: [what is publicly known]. Here's what I don't know: [what you don't]. What I'm certain about is that he's still your dad, you're allowed to love him, and you're allowed to be angry at him too. Both of those can be true at once.”

Opening the door again later

An invitation, not a check-up.

“Hey — anything about your mom you've been wondering about lately? You don't have to talk about it. I just want you to know the question is always allowed.”

+ BEFORE AND AFTER THE CONVERSATION

- ☐ Decide what is true and age-appropriate to share before you start.
- ☐ Choose a side-by-side moment, not bedtime or right before school.
- ☐ Say plainly that it is not their fault.

- [ ] Name who is caring for them and what stays the same.
- [ ] Answer the question that was actually asked, then stop.
- [ ] Say "I don't know" instead of inventing a timeline.
- [ ] Say the door is always open, and say it more than once.
- [ ] Let the child decide who else they tell.
- [ ] Tell one other trusted adult — a teacher or counselor — what the child knows.
- [ ] Expect the real conversation to come days later.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

What does my child already know or suspect that we have never spoken about?

What am I avoiding saying, and is that protecting them or protecting me?

What is my honest answer to "when is he coming home?"

Who else in my child's life should know what they've been told?

+ YOUR NEXT STEP

> Decide which trusted adult the child can also go to with questions.

+ 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