THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Telling a Young Child Where Their Parent Is

Caregiver Wellness & Support · Supporting the Child

Age-appropriate, honest language for children roughly ages 3–10.

IN THIS GUIDE

- A sentence a young child can carry
- Expect repetition, not resolution
- Behavior is the message
- Books, drawings, and other side doors
- Telling the people around them
- Try it: a real example
- Scripts you can use

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.

Telling a Young Child Where Their Parent Is

> *Age-appropriate, honest language for children roughly ages 3–10.*

THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

Young children — roughly ages three to ten — think in concrete terms. They want to know where a person is, whether that person is safe, whether the person still loves them, and who is going to feed them tonight. Adult framing about charges, sentences, and courts does not answer any of those questions.

Caregivers often reach for a cover story at this age: he's away for work, she's at school, he's on a trip. It comes from love. It also tends to unravel, and when it does the child learns that the adults will lie about important things.

There is a middle path — honest, simple, and repeatable — that gives a young child something true and small enough to hold.

A SENTENCE A YOUNG CHILD CAN CARRY

The workable formula is: where + why (simply) + safe + love + who cares for you. Five short pieces, in that order, in plain words.

For example: "Your mom is at a place called a jail. Grown-ups go there when they break a big rule. She's safe there. She loves you. And you live here with me." That is a complete answer for a five-year-old.

Use the real word — jail or prison — rather than a euphemism. Children hear the real word eventually, often from another child, and it is far better if the first time they hear it is from you with your arm around them.

EXPECT REPETITION, NOT RESOLUTION

Young children process by re-asking. You may answer the same question a dozen times over a month. Each time, give the same answer in the same calm tone. Consistency is what makes it feel safe; a new version each time makes it feel unstable.

They may also seem to forget entirely and then bring it up in an unrelated moment, sometimes cheerfully. That is normal and does not mean they did not understand.

Play is a young child's processing tool. Do not be alarmed by jail themes in play or drawings. Follow their lead, stay nearby, and let it be.

BEHAVIOR IS THE MESSAGE

At this age, distress usually shows up in the body and in behavior rather than in words: sleep changes, bedwetting after being dry, stomachaches, clinginess, tantrums, regression to younger behaviors, or being suddenly very good.

Read those as communication, not misbehavior. "You've been having a lot of tummy aches this week. Sometimes tummies hurt when we're worried about something" gives them language they do not yet have.

Keep routines tight. Bedtime, meals, and pickup happening exactly as expected does more to settle a young child than any conversation will.

BOOKS, DRAWINGS, AND OTHER SIDE DOORS

Children's books about a parent in prison exist and work well at this age, because the story does the talking and the child can respond to a character. Ask your librarian or school counselor.

Drawing a picture to mail is one of the best tools you have. It gives a young child a concrete action inside a situation where they otherwise have none, and it keeps the relationship physical and ongoing.

A photograph of the parent where the child can see and hold it matters more than adults expect. Young children lose their internal picture of a person quickly.

TELLING THE PEOPLE AROUND THEM

Tell the child's teacher or childcare provider, at minimum, that a parent is incarcerated and what the child has been told. You do not have to give details. What you are buying is an adult who reads the tantrum correctly.

Agree with the child on what to say to other kids if they ask, and practice it. Something as simple as "My dad's away right now" is a complete answer that keeps the child in control of their own information.

"AWAY FOR WORK" FOR EIGHT MONTHS

A four-year-old was told her father was away for work. For eight months she asked when the job would be over. Her grandmother did not know how to end the story she had started.

At a birthday party a cousin said, in front of her, that her dad was in jail. She did not cry. She asked her grandmother, in the car, whether the work story had been a lie.

Her grandmother said yes, that she had told it because she thought it would hurt less, and that it was her mistake. Then she gave the plain version: he's at a jail, grown-ups go there when they break a big rule, he's safe, he loves you, you live with me. The child asked for it again at bedtime for a week, then less. The hardest part was not the truth. It was undoing the story.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

The first telling (ages 3-6)

“I want to tell you where your dad is. He's at a place called a jail. Grown-ups go there when they break a big rule. He is safe there, he thinks about you every day, and he loves you. You're going to keep living right here with me, and I'll always tell you the truth when you ask.”

The first telling (ages 7-10)

“Your mom is at a prison. That's where grown-ups go when a judge decides they broke a serious law. I'll tell you what I can about it, and if I don't know something I'll say so. She's safe. She loves you and that hasn't changed. You live here with me and that isn't changing either. You can ask me about this any time and I will never be upset that you asked.”

Correcting a cover story

Own it plainly; children forgive honesty faster than adults expect.

“I told you he was away for work, and that wasn't true. I said it because I thought it would hurt you less, and that was my mistake. Here's the real answer, and I won't change it: [plain version]. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner.”

Naming what the body is saying

“You've had a lot of tummy aches this week. Sometimes our tummies hurt when our hearts are worried about something. Is there anything you've been thinking about that feels heavy? You don't have to answer right now.”

Practicing what to tell other kids

“If someone asks about your dad, you get to decide what to say. You could just say "He's away right now." That's true and it's enough. You never have to tell anybody more than you want to. Want to practice it with me?”

+ TELLING A YOUNG CHILD

- [ ] Use the real word: jail or prison.
- [ ] Keep it to five pieces: where, why simply, safe, loves you, who cares for you.
- [ ] Say it in the same words every time they re-ask.
- [ ] Never invent a homecoming date.

- [ ] Correct any cover story you've already told, and own it.
- [ ] Hold routines tight: bedtime, meals, pickup.
- [ ] Read behavior changes as communication, not misbehavior.
- [ ] Keep a photo of the parent where the child can hold it.
- [ ] Draw or mail something to the parent together this week.
- [ ] Tell the teacher or childcare provider what the child has been told.
- [ ] Practice with the child what they'll say to other kids.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

What exactly have I told my child so far, and is any of it something I'll need to correct?

What five-piece sentence will I use, in my own words?

What behavior changes have I seen in the last month?

Which adult in my child's daily life needs to know?

+ YOUR NEXT STEP

> Decide which words you will use, and say them the same way each time.

+ WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Source: Sesame Workshop — verified August 2026. Curated and summarized by MFGP.
https://sesameworkshop.org/
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