THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

When a Child Is Angry at the Parent Inside

Co-Parenting & Communication · Difficult Conversations

How to respond when a child refuses a call, goes quiet, or says something that stings.

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 respond when a child refuses a call, goes quiet, or says something that stings.*

THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

Anger is one of the most common and most misread reactions children have to a parent's incarceration. It can show up as defiance at school, sudden rage at the caregiver, refusal to go to a visit, or open hostility toward the incarcerated parent on a call. Adults frequently take it personally, when it is rarely about the person on the receiving end.

A child's anger is usually about the situation, not the target. The caregiver gets it because the caregiver is present. The parent gets it because the parent is safe to be angry at, or because the child associates them directly with the loss. Understanding this does not make the anger comfortable, but it changes how you respond to it.

Handled well, a child's anger becomes information you can act on. Handled by punishment or by matching it, it usually becomes something the child learns to hide, which does not make it go away — it just moves it somewhere you cannot see.

WHAT THE ANGER IS USUALLY ABOUT

Underneath most of a child's anger connected to incarceration is some combination of loss, embarrassment, fear, and a sense of unfairness that has no clear person to direct it at. A parent's absence cannot be argued with or fixed by the child, and anger is often the only response available that feels like doing something.

Anger at the caregiver frequently means "you are the safe person, so you get this." Anger at the incarcerated parent frequently means either direct hurt about the separation or, in older children, real anger about whatever the parent did that led to it — and both can be true at once.

Anger can also be a stand-in for other things a child does not yet have words for, particularly shame about how other kids or adults at school might see the family, or fear about what happens next.

IN THE MOMENT: HOLD THE BOUNDARY, STAY CURIOUS ABOUT THE CAUSE

A child can be both angry and required to behave respectfully; those are not in conflict. "You're allowed to be angry. You're not allowed to throw things" sets a boundary without denying the feeling.

Resist responding to anger with anger. A caregiver's escalation confirms to the child that the situation is as unsafe as it feels, which tends to increase the behavior rather than end it. A steady, unhurried response is more effective and also more sustainable for you over time.

Get curious rather than corrective in the moment when you can: "Something set this off — do you know what it was, or is it more of a general feeling today?" Sometimes the child can name it. Often they cannot yet, and that is fine; naming comes later, once the moment has passed.

+ AFTER THE MOMENT: FIND THE PATTERN

Track when the anger tends to show up — after calls, before visits, around anniversaries, near school events involving families. A pattern usually points to the actual trigger more clearly than any single incident does.

Ask directly, once things are calm, rather than assuming. "I noticed you got really angry right after the call with your mom yesterday. Was it something about the call, or was it already there before?" Children, especially older ones, are often more willing to explain themselves after the fact than in the moment.

If anger is severe, frequent, or paired with signs of depression, self-harm, or a sharp drop in functioning at school, that is a signal to bring in a counselor or therapist rather than to keep managing it alone. A school counselor is a reasonable first call for a referral.

+ ANGER DIRECTED AT THE INCARCERATED PARENT

When the anger surfaces on a call or during a visit, the incarcerated parent's instinct is often to defend themselves or to shut the conversation down. Neither works well. Coach the parent, where you have that relationship, to let the anger be said without immediately arguing against it.

A parent who can say "I understand why you're angry with me" without adding a defense tends to get further with a child than one who explains their side first. The explanation, if it needs to happen, goes better after the anger has been acknowledged.

It is also fair for a child to be told that some anger belongs with the parent's own choices and consequences, not with the caregiver or anyone else standing in. A child does not need to be protected from that distinction as they get older; they need it stated plainly and without either parent-blaming or excusing.

+ THE SUNDAY PATTERN

A caregiver noticed her eleven-year-old grandson became explosive nearly every Sunday evening, slamming doors and snapping at his younger sister, and for months she treated each incident as a separate discipline problem. It was only when a counselor asked her to track the timing that she realized Sundays were the day scheduled calls with his mother happened.

Once she named the pattern to him directly — "I've noticed Sunday nights are hard, right around when you talk to Mom. Is that connected?" — he admitted the calls left him wound up and he did not know what to do with the feeling afterward. He had never connected the two himself.

They built a plan for after each call: fifteen minutes of a physical activity he chose, before any homework or

chores. The Sunday explosions did not vanish immediately, but they dropped sharply within a month, and his sister stopped being the one absorbing them.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

Holding the boundary in the moment

"You're allowed to be angry right now. You're not allowed to [throw things / yell at your sister / hit the wall]. I'm going to stay right here until this passes."

Asking about the cause, calmly, after the fact

"I noticed you got really angry [after the call / before the visit / this afternoon]. I'm not upset about it — I just want to understand. Do you know what set it off?"

Coaching the incarcerated parent to receive anger

Say to the parent ahead of a call, if you have that relationship.

"If they come at you angry on this call, try not to defend yourself right away. Just let them say it, and tell them you understand why they're angry. The explaining can come after, if it needs to at all."

Naming a pattern to the child directly

"I've noticed [this tends to happen after calls / before visits / around this time of year]. I think there might be a connection. What do you think?"

+ WHEN ANGER BECOMES A PATTERN

- [ ] Separate the boundary from the feeling: the anger is allowed, the behavior has limits.
- [ ] Avoid matching the child's escalation with your own.
- [ ] Get curious about the trigger in the moment if the child can access it; otherwise wait.
- [ ] Track timing over a few weeks to find a pattern.
- [ ] Ask the child directly, once calm, what the anger connects to.
- [ ] Coach the incarcerated parent to acknowledge anger before defending themselves.
- [ ] Name the distinction between the parent's choices and the child's or caregiver's fault, when age-appropriate.
- [ ] Bring in a school counselor or therapist if the anger is frequent, severe, or paired with other warning signs.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

Who is actually on the receiving end of this anger, and is that who it is really about?

Is there a pattern in when the anger shows up that I have not named yet?

Am I responding to the anger by escalating, matching, or staying steady?

Does this need more than what I can handle at home right now?

+ YOUR NEXT STEP

> Agree between adults on what happens the next time a call is refused.

+ 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