PRINT-FRIENDLY EDITION

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Sending money and staying in touch with an incarcerated parent

Money and contact are the two things families ask about first, and they are connected: most facility phone and message systems draw from an account someone on the outside funds. Here is how the pieces fit, and how to keep a child's connection steady without wrecking your budget.

Publication snapshot: This print edition reflects information published by My Fairy GodParents as of November 22, 2026. Programs, laws, facility rules, benefits, and outside links can change. Verify time-sensitive requirements with the cited agency, facility, court, school, or provider. The live guide at https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/guides/staying-in-touch-with-an-incarcerated-parent is the current version.

IMPORTANT NOTE

Vendors, fees, and limits differ by facility and change often. Confirm the approved vendor and current fees with the facility before sending anything.

WHO THIS GUIDE CAN HELP

- **For youth**
  Mail is the cheapest and most lasting way to stay connected. Number your letters so you both know the relationship is still counting.
- **For professionals**
  Help families set a monthly contact budget before they open an account; phone and messaging costs escalate quickly.
- **For supporters**
  Phone and messaging costs are one of the hidden burdens families face. This guide helps them keep contact steady without overspending.

WAYS TO SEND MONEY — AND WHAT TO CHECK FIRST

Facilities contract with a specific vendor and refuse anything sent another way. Ask the facility three questions: which vendor, what the fee is, and what the deposit limit is.

- **Vendor website or app**
  Fastest and most common. Fees are charged per transaction, so one larger deposit usually costs less

than several small ones.

- **Phone deposit**
  Same vendor, higher fee in most cases. Useful if you do not have a card on file.
- **Kiosk in the lobby**
  Available at many jails, sometimes cash-only. Handy on a visit day.
- **Money order by mail**
  Slowest but often the cheapest. Must follow the facility's exact addressing and ID-number format or it is returned.
- **Third-party sites you found in a search**
  Verify against the facility's own website first. Look-alike sites and 'bail' or 'release fee' requests by phone are common scams.

WHAT THE MONEY IS ACTUALLY USED FOR

- **Commissary**
  Food, hygiene items, stamps, thermal clothing, and sometimes over-the-counter medicine. Facilities issue basics, but commissary covers most day-to-day comfort.
- **Phone and messaging**
  Calls are usually billed per minute, and electronic messages per message or per attachment. Some states have moved to free calls — ask, do not assume.
- **Tablet media**
  Where tablets exist, music, games, and video visits may be billed separately from calls.
- **Medical co-pays**
  Many facilities charge a small co-pay for medical visits, deducted from the account.

KEEP CONTACT STEADY WITHOUT BLOWING THE BUDGET

- **1. Set a monthly number before you start**
  Decide what your household can send each month and treat it as fixed. Contact costs escalate quietly, and caregivers frequently go without to keep an account funded.
- **2. Ask about free and reduced-cost options**
  Ask the facility directly whether free calls, free video visits, free tablet messaging windows, or reduced rates exist. Rules have changed in many states and staff do not always volunteer the information.
- **3. Use mail as the backbone**
  Letters and drawings cost the price of a stamp, can be reread by a child, and do not compete with a per-minute clock.
- **4. Make contact predictable, not long**
  A ten-minute call every Sunday helps a child far more than an unpredictable hour. Put it on the family calendar so the child knows when their turn is.

- **5. Give the child a job**
  A drawing to mail, a question to ask, a report card to share. Children who arrive with something to give feel less helpless.
- **6. Protect the child from disappointment**
  Calls get canceled by lockdowns and transfers. Tell children ahead of time that this happens, that it is not about them, and what the backup plan is.

MAIL THAT WILL NOT GET REJECTED

- Write the full legal name and ID number exactly as the facility lists it — missing ID numbers are the top reason mail is returned.
- Skip glitter, stickers, tape, crayon on some units, perfume, and lipstick marks. All are common contraband triggers.
- Check the photo policy before sending pictures; many facilities limit size, quantity, or content.
- Many facilities now scan mail off-site and deliver copies — send copies, never originals of anything irreplaceable.
- Assume everything is read. Keep legal matters with the attorney.
- Number the letters. A child who sees 'Letter 14' understands the relationship is still counting.

QUESTIONS FAMILIES ASK

- **How do I send money to someone in jail or prison?**
  Use the vendor the facility contracts with — typically a website or app, a phone deposit line, a lobby kiosk, or a mailed money order. Start on the facility's own website to find the approved vendor and current fees, because deposits sent another way are refused, and look-alike payment sites are a known scam.
- **Why do inmate phone calls cost so much?**
  Calls are handled by contracted telecom vendors that bill per minute or per call, sometimes plus deposit fees. Costs vary widely by facility and state, and several states have moved toward free calls. Ask the facility which vendor it uses, whether prepaid or collect is cheaper for your situation, and whether free or reduced-rate options exist.
- **How much money should I send?**
  Set a fixed monthly amount your household can sustain before you open an account. Fewer, larger deposits usually cost less in fees than frequent small ones. Caregivers commonly overextend here, and a stable home matters more to a child than a fully stocked commissary.
- **What is the best way for a child to stay connected?**
  Predictability beats volume. A short scheduled call or video visit each week, plus mailed drawings and letters, gives a child a rhythm they can count on. Warn them in advance that lockdowns and transfers sometimes cancel contact so a missed call is not experienced as rejection.

+ KEEP GOING

- **Visiting a parent in prison**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/guides/visiting-a-parent-in-prison
- **Family Guide: Navigating Incarceration**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/navigating-incarceration
- **The #FKLM Family Blueprint**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint

More guides and family resources: myfairygodparents.org/resources

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