PRINT-FRIENDLY EDITION

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How to tell a child their parent is in jail, age by age

Adults usually delay this conversation to protect the child. Children almost always already know something is wrong — and what fills the silence is worse than the truth. This guide gives you words to use, by age, and a plan for what comes after.

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WHO THIS GUIDE CAN HELP

- **For professionals**
  The age-by-age language and the 'what not to say' list work well as a handout in family sessions, school counseling, and reentry programs.
- **For supporters**
  Children of incarcerated parents most often carry shame from adult silence, not from the incarceration itself. Normalizing honest language is a low-cost, high-impact contribution.

FOUR RULES THAT HOLD AT EVERY AGE

- **Tell the truth, in small pieces**
  Say where the parent is and that they are safe. You do not owe a child every detail of the charge — you owe them accuracy in what you do say.
- **Say it is not their fault**
  Children of every age privately look for the thing they did that caused it. Say the sentence out loud, more than once, over weeks.
- **Say who is taking care of them**
  The child's first real question is almost never about the parent. It is: what happens to me? Name the adult, the bed, the school, and the routine.
- **Leave the door open**
  End with 'you can ask me anything about this, any time.' Then stay steady when they take you up on it at bedtime three weeks later.

WHAT TO SAY, BY AGE

Use the child's own vocabulary and their pace. Repeat rather than expand — children process this in return visits, not in one conversation.

- **Under 6**
  'Daddy is in a place called jail. He has to stay there for a while because he broke a grown-up rule. He is safe, he loves you, and he did not leave because of anything you did. I am taking care of you and you are staying right here with me.' Expect the same question repeatedly; answer it the same way each time.
- **6 to 10**
  'Mom is in jail. She broke a law, and a judge decided she has to stay there for a while. She is safe. It is not a secret and it is not your fault. We can write letters and I will tell you when we know more.' This age wants fairness explained — be honest that adults make mistakes and still love their children.
- **11 to 14**
  'Here is what I know, and here is what I don't know yet.' Give facts, admit uncertainty, and be direct about the charge if they ask. This age reads faces and fills gaps with worse stories. They also start managing what to tell friends — practice a short answer with them.
- **15 and up**
  Talk to them as a near-adult: the charge, the timeline, what the family is doing, and how they can help without becoming the parent. Watch for the older-child trap of taking on adult responsibility — name it, thank them, and give it back.

WHAT NOT TO SAY

- 'They are away at work / at school / on a trip.' Cover stories collapse, and the child then learns you will lie to them about big things.
- 'Don't tell anyone.' Secrecy teaches shame. Choosing who to tell is different from hiding.
- 'They don't care about you.' Even when a parent is absent or unsafe, editorializing gives the child a wound rather than information.
- 'Be strong for me.' It hands your grief to the child.
- 'They will be home soon,' unless you know it is true. A broken date is remembered for years.
- Nothing at all. Silence is the answer most children report as the hardest part.

THE WEEKS AFTER

- **1. Tell one trusted adult at school**
  A counselor or teacher who knows can meet a sudden mood change or missed homework with support instead of discipline. You can ask them to keep it confidential.
- **2. Keep routines almost boringly steady**
  Same wake-up, same meals, same bedtime. Predictability does more for a grieving child than any

conversation.

- **3. Make contact with the parent predictable**
  Short and regular beats rare and long. Letters, drawings, and recorded stories work when calls or visits are not possible yet.
- **4. Give the child a role**
  Mailing the letter, choosing the photo, picking the story to tell. Agency reduces helplessness.
- **5. Watch for the signs that need more help**
  Ongoing sleep trouble, school refusal, aggression, withdrawal, self-harm, or regression in a younger child. Ask the school counselor or pediatrician for a referral — this is common and treatable.
- **6. Take care of the adult in the room**
  You are grieving too, often while carrying a new financial and logistical load. Children track your steadiness, and steadiness needs support behind it.

QUESTIONS FAMILIES ASK

- **How do you tell a child their parent is in jail?**
  Tell the truth in age-appropriate pieces: where the parent is, that they are safe, that the child is not to blame, and who is taking care of the child now. Keep the first conversation short, invite questions, and expect to repeat the same answers over several weeks.
- **Should you tell a young child the truth about jail?**
  Yes. Children as young as three can hold a simple, honest version — a parent broke a grown-up rule and has to stay somewhere for a while. Cover stories eventually collapse, and children who learn the truth later often lose trust in the adult who told them the story.
- **What should you not say to a child whose parent is incarcerated?**
  Avoid cover stories, instructions to keep it secret, promises about release dates you cannot guarantee, statements that the parent does not care, and asking the child to be strong for you. Silence is also a message — say something honest rather than nothing.
- **How do I help a child handle questions at school?**
  Practice one short answer they are comfortable saying, such as 'my dad is away right now and I don't want to talk about it.' Let the child decide who to tell. Separately, tell one trusted staff member so behavior changes are met with support, not discipline.

KEEP GOING

- **Sending money and staying in touch**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/guides/staying-in-touch-with-an-incarcerated-parent
- **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

- **Co-parenting & communication**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint/co-parenting-communication

More guides and family resources: myfairygodparents.org/resources

Questions or corrections: donate@MyFairyGodParents.org | +1 (949) 919-0765