Visiting a parent in prison: a caregiver's preparation guide

The first visit is usually the hardest — for the adult driving and for the child in the back seat. Facilities differ, but the shape of a visit is remarkably consistent. Knowing what happens removes most of the fear.

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IMPORTANT NOTE

Every facility sets its own rules, and they change. Always confirm visiting hours, the approved-visitor process, and the dress code with the specific facility the same week you plan to go.

WHO THIS GUIDE CAN HELP

- **For youth**
  If you are a teen reading this, the 'ride home' section matters most — feelings usually hit after the visit, not during.
- **For professionals**
  Print the dress-code and 'before you go' sections for families; facility rules change and families are often turned away.
- **For supporters**
  Transportation and visiting costs are a major barrier. This guide explains why the first visit is hardest and what families need to know.

BEFORE YOU GO

- **1. Get on the approved visitor list**
  Most facilities require every visitor — including children — to be approved in advance. The incarcerated person usually starts the request; you then complete a form and, for adults, a background check. Approval can take days or weeks, so start early.

- **2. Confirm hours and visit type the same week**
  Visiting days are often assigned by housing unit or last name, and can be canceled with no notice. Call or check the facility website within a few days of the visit, and ask whether it is contact, non-contact, or video.
- **3. Read the dress code out loud to everyone going**
  Dress codes are the single most common reason families are turned away at the door. Commonly prohibited: anything sheer, tight, low-cut, or above the knee; sleeveless tops; hoodies; clothing resembling inmate or staff uniforms (often khaki, orange, denim, or gray); underwire bras; open-toe shoes; and excessive jewelry. Choose plain, loose, mid-tone clothes and bring a backup outfit in the car.
- **4. Bring only what is allowed**
  Usually a photo ID, car key, clear bag, and coins or a small card for lockers and vending. Phones, bags, food, and gifts almost always stay in the car. For infants, ask ahead about the allowed number of diapers, wipes, and a clear bottle.
- **5. Tell the child what will happen, step by step**
  Describe the parking lot wait, the ID check, the metal detector or pat-down search, the door that locks behind you, the room, and the rules about hugging. Children handle a strange environment far better when nothing surprises them.

DURING THE VISIT

- **Let the child set the pace**
  Some children run to their parent; others freeze, get silly, or refuse to speak. All of it is normal. Do not force a hug, an apology, or a performance of happiness.
- **Give them something to do**
  Bring a topic, not a script — a drawing they made, a report card, a story about a game. Structured sharing gives a nervous child a job and takes pressure off the parent.
- **Remember you are being observed**
  Visits, calls, and mail are monitored and often recorded. Keep case and legal talk with the attorney, not in the visiting room.
- **Watch the clock kindly**
  Endings are abrupt. Five minutes before time, start the goodbye — say what happens next, when the next call or visit is, and let the child choose how to say goodbye.

THE RIDE HOME MATTERS MOST

- Feelings usually arrive after the visit, not during it. Plan a calm hour with no errands afterward.
- Lead with an open question — 'What was that like?' — instead of 'Did you have fun?'
- Let anger, embarrassment, and love all be allowed answers. Do not correct their feelings.
- Expect a hard night or two: clinginess, sleep trouble, or a short temper are common and pass.

- Tell the child clearly when the next contact will be, and keep that promise if you can.
- If a child says they do not want to go again, take it seriously and revisit it later rather than making it permanent in one conversation.

IF AN IN-PERSON VISIT IS NOT POSSIBLE

Distance, cost, and safety concerns are real. Connection does not require a visiting room.

- **Video visits**
  Most facilities now offer scheduled video visits through a vendor. They are shorter and often cheaper than driving, and easier for young children.
- **Letters and drawings**
  Mail is the most durable form of contact — a child can reread it. Check mail rules first; glitter, stickers, tape, and some photos are frequently rejected.
- **Recorded routines**
  A parent reading the same bedtime story by phone, or a monthly photo of the same tree, gives a child a ritual instead of a wait.
- **When contact is not safe**
  If there is a protective order or a history of harm, do not arrange contact on your own. Talk with the child's counselor, caseworker, or attorney first.

QUESTIONS FAMILIES ASK

- **What is the typical dress code for a prison visit?**
  Most facilities require modest, non-revealing clothing and prohibit anything resembling inmate or staff uniforms — often khaki, orange, denim, or gray. Sheer, tight, sleeveless, low-cut, or above-the-knee clothing, hoodies, open-toe shoes, underwire bras, and heavy jewelry are commonly refused. Confirm the exact list with the facility and bring a backup outfit in the car.
- **Can children visit a parent in prison?**
  Generally yes, though children almost always must be pre-approved as visitors and must be accompanied by an approved adult, usually the legal guardian or someone with written permission. Some facilities limit the number of visitors or require a birth certificate for minors. Ask the facility exactly which documents to bring.
- **How do I get on the approved visitor list?**
  The incarcerated person usually submits your name, then you complete a visitor application. Adults typically undergo a background check. Processing can take from a few days to several weeks, so apply well before the date you hope to visit.
- **Should I take a young child to a first visit?**
  Many families do, and children often benefit from seeing that their parent is alive and okay. What matters most is preparation and choice: describe every step in advance, let the child ask questions, and make clear they may change their mind. If a child is strongly resistant, try a video visit or letters first.

KEEP GOING

- **Family Guide: Navigating Incarceration**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/navigating-incarceration
- **Staying in touch with an incarcerated parent**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/guides/staying-in-touch-with-an-incarcerated-parent
- **The #FKLM Family Blueprint**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint

More guides and family resources: myfairygodparents.org/resources

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