

FREE GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

Navigating incarceration: a practical guide for families

When someone you love is arrested or sentenced, everything urgent arrives at once — and no one hands you instructions. This guide walks through the first week, visits and calls, supporting children, and where to find help. It is written for youth ages 12–24 (Opportunity Youth / Transition-Age Youth) and the caregivers holding families together.

This guide is general information, not legal advice. If you are in crisis, call or text 988 for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

The first week: six steps in order

You do not have to do all of this today. Work down the list in order — each step makes the next one easier.

1. Locate your loved one

Check the county jail roster first, then the state corrections locator, then bop.gov for federal cases. Write down the facility name, ID number, and mailing address — nearly every step after this requires them.

2. Learn how contact works there

Every facility has its own rules for calls, video visits, mail, and approved visitor lists. Ask which phone vendor is used, how to get on the visitor list, and what mail is accepted (many facilities reject photos, glitter, or stickers).

3. Get the legal basics in writing

Note the charges, next court date, and whether there is a public defender or private attorney. Ask the attorney's office for the case number and the best way to reach them, and keep one folder or phone note with everything.

4. Tell the children the truth, simply

Use plain words appropriate to their age, say clearly that it is not their fault, and name who is caring for them. Let them ask questions later — one conversation is rarely enough.

5. Stabilize the household

List income lost, bills due, and who can help this month. Ask about SNAP, WIC, utility assistance, kinship-caregiver support, and school meal programs before falling behind.

6. Loop in one trusted adult at school

A counselor or teacher who knows what happened can watch for changes, excuse absences on visit days, and connect your child to support without the whole school knowing.

Visits, calls, and staying connected

Before you go

Confirm visiting hours the same week, check the dress code, bring photo ID, and know what you may carry in — many facilities allow only a clear bag, ID, and coins for lockers.

With children

Tell them ahead what the room, guards, and searches will look like. Give them one thing to look forward to sharing, and plan a calm hour afterward — the ride home is often when feelings arrive.

Protecting privacy

Calls, video visits, and mail are usually monitored or recorded. Avoid discussing case details, and let your attorney handle anything legal.

Keeping the bond

Short, regular contact beats rare and long. Shared routines help: a bedtime story recorded by phone, drawings mailed each month, or a photo of the same tree in every season.

Supporting children and young people

- Name feelings out loud — anger, embarrassment, relief, and love can all be true at once.
- Keep routines steady; predictability is the fastest way to lower a child's anxiety.
- Watch for stomachaches, sleep changes, slipping grades, or sudden perfectionism — all common stress signals.
- Decide together who else gets to know, so your child is never surprised by a conversation.
- Find one peer space — a youth program, group, or mentor — where they are not the only one with a parent inside.

Common questions

How do I find out where my family member is being held?

Start with the arresting agency's county jail roster, then check the state corrections department's inmate locator. For federal cases, use the Federal Bureau of Prisons inmate locator at bop.gov. You will usually need full legal name and date of birth, and sometimes an ID number assigned after booking.

Should I tell my child their parent is incarcerated?

In most cases, yes — in age-appropriate language. Children usually sense something is wrong, and secrecy tends to increase shame and anxiety. Use simple, honest words, make clear it is not the child's fault, and tell them who will care for them and what stays the same.

How much do phone calls and video visits cost?

Costs vary by facility and vendor, and several states have moved toward free calls. Ask the facility which vendor it uses, whether prepaid or collect is cheaper, and whether free or reduced-cost calls are available. Set a weekly limit before opening an account so calling does not destabilize your household budget.

What support exists for the family left at home?

Look for local reentry and family-support nonprofits, school counselors, faith communities, kinship-caregiver programs, and youth programs built for children of incarcerated parents. MFGP connects families to vetted organizations and offers caregiver and youth resources directly.

Where MFGP can help**Free and low-cost support from MFGP**

We are a nonprofit built by and for families impacted by incarceration. Caregiver guides & toolkits, the Youth Storytelling Toolkit, Empower Justice workshops and mentorship, and a directory of featured organizations serving families are all available at myfairygodparents.org/resources.

Create a free account at myfairygodparents.org/auth to unlock the full Youth Storytelling Toolkit (master edition plus three section PDFs), workshop materials, and new resources as they are released.

Questions about your situation? Email donate@MyFairyGodparents.org or call (949) 919-0765.