

### **Children Visiting Incarcerated Parents (adapted from materials in Colorado Procedure Manual)**

Just like other parents in the child welfare system, parents who are incarcerated continue to have the right to be involved in their children's lives, whatever the crime the parent has committed and as long as parental rights have not been terminated. Children maintain their right to have a relationship with their parent, despite the parent's incarceration. These families have special challenges and issues that can be addressed so both parents and children can continue relationships that will be of value to both of them.

When working with a parent who is incarcerated it is important to remember that improving relationships with children and feeling more competent in the parenting role can support a parent's desire to create a safe and stable home and thus to work on problems that necessitated the incarceration.

### **Maintaining Communication between Parents Who Are Incarcerated and Children**

Communication between parents who are incarcerated and their children is both challenging and important to the well-being of the child and the parent. Maintaining communication will likely require extra work, patience, and creativity in cases involving parents who are incarcerated, but the benefits are worth the efforts.

#### **In-Person Visitation**

One way of maintaining communication is through visitation. It is perhaps the most important mechanism for maintaining a positive parent/child relationship. Visits can dispel fears, support attachment, support dealing with reality, and can even provide the opportunity for improving relationships. Face-to-face visits are especially important for children under the age of eight due to their developmental level.

Visitation issues should be addressed in the case plan and service agreement, including information about why the decision to visit or not was made and why the parent would have a non-contact visit. Make an extra effort regarding detailed information about the visitation, especially how barriers to visitation will be addressed. A parent's ability to maintain contact with the child through letters, phone calls, or visits, could be seen as a measure of compliance with the service agreement. The visitation arrangements should be shared with the incarcerated parent's prison.

When deciding whether to encourage visitation between a parent who is incarcerated and a child, consider the following:

- **Safety concerns.** Be cognizant and aware of safety issues both for the person who is escorting the child and for the child.
- **Parent's commitment to the service agreement before the incarceration occurred.** If the parent was not complying with the service agreement, visitation may not be indicated despite the

importance of visitation to the child's well-being. That said, a parent's motivation may change when he or she is incarcerated and visitation may be the motivator.

- **Child's desire or lack of to see the parent.** Recognize that the child may express an unwillingness to see the parent, but this may just be part of his or her way of dealing with the situation and the child may really want to see the parent.

- **Prior relationship between the child and the incarcerated parent.**

- **Physical contact versus no physical contact with parent.** Depending on the situation physical contact may be preferred, while at other times no physical contact may be more appropriate

- **The nature and history of the alleged abuse and neglect by the parent.** For example, if a child has been physically or sexually abused by the parent, perhaps visitation is not indicated. Note, in cases of severe physical or sexual abuse, visitation may not be indicated whether the parent is incarcerated or not.

- **Do an individualized assessment of the visitation needs of this child in this family.**

Clearly there are obstacles that work against visitation, despite its importance. These include the following:

- **Distance** –Incarceration of a parent usually means considerable distance from the child, since prisons are located throughout Oregon. Visits may require one or more days for travel, reducing the frequency of visits.

- **Hours and scheduling** – The hours during which visits are allowed may pose problems. In addition, scheduling procedures may be cumbersome. Even when visits are carefully arranged, there may have been some disruption or security concern at the prison that results in the cancellation of all visits that day. When siblings are living with different caregivers, coordinating transportation can also be difficult. And on occasion, the court may allow visits with one child but not another.

- **Accommodations** – Even approaching a prison may be intimidating if security mechanisms, such as wire fencing and guard towers, are visible. The atmosphere inside is often inhospitable to children. Visits might be confined to areas that lack privacy, or contact may be allowed only through glass or wire mesh barriers. In any case, a prison setting is rarely conducive to the expression of real emotions, either positive or negative, or the discussion of important personal issues .

- **Procedures and requirements** – Prisons will have procedures and requirements, often connected with security that may be uncomfortable or even humiliating. A prolonged process of clearing may precede visits that last less than one-half hour. Some security precautions may be in place to prevent contraband from coming into the prison through visitation. If the caseworker has concerns about the impact certain security procedures might have on children, contact the person in charge of visiting at the prison to discuss those concerns. Be aware that prisons have strict dress codes, even for children, and also have rules around what people can take into the prison with them.

- **Appearance and behavior of parent** – Sometimes the appearance and behavior of the parent may seem strange and frightening to the child, particularly during the first visit. The parent may be in prison garb or other clothing the child does not recognize. At higher security prisons, the parent may also be handcuffed or shackled. The caseworker should find out ahead of time if the parent must remain in handcuffs or shackles during the visit and prepare the child accordingly. The parent may look different due to hairstyle, makeup

or may exhibit different behavior. The different appearance and behavior introduce a strangeness into the situation that may create distance in the parent/child relationship.

- **Jails** – Jails pose their own pros and cons related to visitation. While they are generally closer to home than prisons, they may be less child-friendly. Visits will vary from county to county so call the jail in the county to learn about the visiting conditions. Even if a jail has no-contact visitation, alternative visitation may be arranged, especially when children are visiting, by contacting the jail personnel.

### **Practical Tips for Visits**

Visitation can be successful, especially when all the issues surrounding it are addressed. A caseworker can help make visitation between children and their parents who are incarcerated more productive with the following actions:

- **Prepare the caregivers for working with a child effectively before and after a visit.** While the visit is important for supporting the parent-child relationship, it also may be frightening to the child. Similar to other children, they may have ongoing reactions to the visit, not just immediately following the visit. The child welfare caseworker needs to help the caregiver know how to prepare the child for the visit, giving the child some idea of what to expect about the security procedures and a description of the facility and assuring the child that it is all right to talk about his or her reactions. Then the caregiver needs to know how to understand the child's post-visit behavior, help the child express the thoughts and emotions behind the behavior, and help the child talk about all the positive aspects of the visit.

- **Educate the caregivers regarding the importance and dynamics of visitation.** Though they may want to protect the child from the parent and from the prison environment—citing the child's behavior and mood before, during, and after visits as reason for discontinuing visits—caregivers need to understand as with other placements that the importance to the child of supporting the parent/child relationship overrides those concerns.

- **Facilitate visits.** Figure out how to arrange visits. Know the visiting procedures and restrictions of the institution and prepare the child and caregiver for what it will be like to visit the prison. If possible, the caseworker should conduct a pre-visit tour to understand what will happen and better respond to the child's questions. Supervised visitation resources may be available from the county or community. The distance many families will have to travel to visit the parent who is incarcerated may be great and the availability or cost of transportation an issue. Provide and/or help them find in their communities assistance with transportation to the prison. Possibilities may include programs within the faith community or other community supports such as, relatives, family friends, or neighbors. Options may be identified at a Family Decision Meeting.

- **Make visits comfortable.** Trips for visitations are often long and there may be long waits to see the parent, so bring food and activities to help keep the child busy. Food, however, may not be allowed past the waiting area and there may not be storage lockers to store items that are not allowed in the visiting area, so be sure to be familiar with allowable items. Ask teachers for homework in advance, bring along games so children can be occupied while waiting. Many visiting areas have vending machines so bring change to purchase this food.

- **Obtain the security procedures in advance.** Go over them with the child so they know what to expect. Obtain lists of contraband and ensure that no one visiting is carrying any. Many facilities have specific and enforced dress codes, even for children. Know what it is in advance and follow it.
- **Obtain the visiting schedule and learn how to set up a visit.** Caseworkers should be familiar with the visiting schedule for the specific prison they will be visiting because they can vary from facility to facility. Caseworkers also will need to understand how to go about setting up a visit. Caseworkers will also need to know the process by which people get approved to visit.
- **Help the parent use visits productively.** Talk with the parent before the visit to help him or her focus on the purpose of the visit and how they can best meet the needs of the child while also meeting his or her own needs.
- **Prepare the child for the visit.** If you are taking the child to the institution, coach and counsel the child before and after the visit about what to expect, what he or she would like to see happen during the visit and possible scenarios for what may happen. As important as visitation is, it's not easy.
- **Reconvene to assess visitation.** The caseworker and the child should reconvene at a later date to assess how visitation is going and determine whether different decisions or adjustments need to be made.

### **Practical Tips for Caregivers**

- **Prepare caregivers for problems the child may experience.** While the caseworker does not want to create negative expectations about the child, the reality is that the child will have thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the parent's crime and incarceration, and these will be expressed behaviorally. The caregiver needs to know how children may react at certain ages, how to help the child themselves, and when to seek additional help.
- **Help caregivers understand the possible need for further treatment for the child.** Explain as necessary any special needs the child may have for treatment. In addition, it may be helpful at some point for them to be involved with the child in treatment so they can better provide the positive family environment the child needs. This is especially relevant if the child is staying with a relative caregiver.
- **Help caregivers locate and access treatment for the child.** Help them learn about any community programs and services geared specifically toward helping children with parents who are incarcerated. If no specialized services are available, help service providers understand the child's special needs and circumstances so they may treat the child more effectively.
- **Provide information to caregivers.** They need to know about the special needs of children with parents who are incarcerated, the importance of maintaining parent/child contact despite the obstacles, and how to negotiate the prison/parole and child welfare systems.

## **Other Forms of Communication**

While face-to-face visitation is the primary and preferred means for maintaining contact and positive relationships between parents who are incarcerated and their children, the difficulties associated with visitation may make it important to supplement visits with other forms of communication, such as telephone calls and letters. There may be obstacles associated with these methods as well. Potential communication methods, obstacles, and strategies for addressing them follow.

- **Telephone** – Prisoners do not have free and unfettered access to telephones. In order to use a telephone at the facility, prisoners must have money in their prison account to pay for the phone call or they have to call collect.

- **Letters** – Mail can be a good option, depending upon both the parent’s and child’s literacy levels. Outgoing letters, however, may have been stamped that they are from a correctional facility, and the child or caregiver may find this offensive. All incoming and outgoing letters can be opened by the Department of Corrections and read. If caseworkers are sending in materials that the prisoner is entitled to confidentially, the outside of the letter must be clearly marked “confidential.” Even letters marked confidential can be opened but not read (in the presence of the prisoner) to check for contraband.

Ideas for facilitating letter-writing include:

- Give the parent a self-addressed stamped envelope addressed to the child welfare caseworker assigned to the case to write to the child
- If caseworkers would like to supervise written communication, letters should be sent to the children in care of the caseworker.
- Younger children usually do not write letters without a supportive adult so it may be a good idea for the caregiver or child welfare caseworker to help the child write a letter to his or her parent who is incarcerated during a home visit.

- **Tape recordings** – A parent may tape record messages or readings from a child’s favorite books. Check with the facility regarding permission to create tape messages.

- **Pictures** – The caregivers might send pictures of the child enjoying everyday activities.

- **School Report Cards** – The caregivers might also send school report cards and updates on the child’s activities so the parent can stay tuned to the child’s current activities.