

**How to explain...**

# **Jails and Prisons**

**...to Children**

## **A Caregiver's Guide**

by

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The mission of the  
Oregon Department of Corrections  
is to promote public safety by holding offenders  
accountable for their actions  
and reducing the risk of future  
criminal behavior.

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## Common Questions

To help children work through some of their feelings, including curiosity, we've repeated some common questions we hear from families and our suggestions for helping caregivers to respond.

### *Why did Mom or Dad go to jail or prison?*

People are sent to jail or prison because they did not obey the law. Laws are rules that tell us how people should and should not behave.

Children have rules of behavior, too. When some children break the rules, they may get a time out or lose privileges. Prison and jail are like long time outs for adults.

Sometimes even a child as young as 15 who breaks the law and commits a crime could go to jail or prison like some adults who break the law. They would have to commit a very bad crime such as seriously hurting another person. This does not happen very often.

Teenagers who break the law usually go to special prisons for young people.

### *What will happen to me?*

Children may have a lot of change in their lives when a parent goes to jail or prison. No one likes to feel insecure. The following questions can guide discussion, and even answers, to provide reassurance:

- How long will my parent be in jail or prison?
- Will I live in the same place?
- Will I have to move?
- Who will I live with?
- Will I be able to live with my parent when he or she gets out of jail or prison?

## *Is it my fault?*

**NO!**

Many children feel guilty when their parent goes to jail or prison. They may believe that they caused it to happen.

It is very important to provide children with a non-judgmental, relaxed, unhurried, and safe place to express their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about why their parent was incarcerated. It is important to help children realize:

- There are negative consequences when a parent breaks the law.
- They are not responsible for either the parent's behavior or the consequences of that behavior.



## *Will I go to jail or prison, too?*

Even if children are told they are the "spitting image" of the parent who went to jail or prison, this doesn't mean the child will travel down the same path.

Children need to understand that each person is responsible for his or her own choices in life.

## *Where do people in jail or prison live?*

Sometimes, people live in dorms, but most people share a room, called a cell, which has two bunks, a sink, a desk, and a toilet. The cells are usually very small and look alike.

## *What do people in jail or prison wear?*

Different facilities have different dress codes. In Oregon prisons most inmates wear jeans and a denim shirt or a navy T-shirt. When they go out to appointments, they may have to wear brightly colored jumpsuits and cuffs around their wrists and ankles. In other places, such as jail, they may wear clothes that look like a doctor's scrub suit. In some places, they wear their own clothes.

## ***Where do people in jail or prison eat, and what kind of food?***

Most people eat in a dining room that looks a lot like a school cafeteria. The food is served cafeteria-style, with inmates lining up with trays as they choose their food. In some prisons food on trays is brought to the people. There are usually some choices for people with special needs such as vegetarian meals, pork-free diets, or low-salt diets.

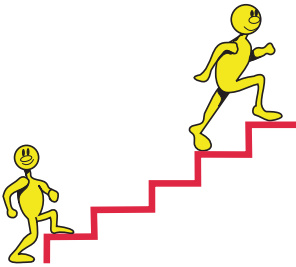
## ***Do people in jail or prison have a TV, library, bathroom/shower, and can they go outside?***

In some prisons people can buy their own TV's, but usually there are special TV rooms. The programs may change as different groups of people take turns choosing the channels that they like.

There are libraries in all facilities. Every jail and prison has a law library so that people can work on their own court cases.

Showers are shared by inmates in each housing unit, and there may be assigned showering times.

There is usually recreation time, or "yard time," when groups of people can go outside for an hour or two. People can walk or jog around the yard, play sports or lift weights – different facilities have different activities available.



### ***Do people in jail or prison work?***

In Oregon, most people in prison are required by law to work. Some also attend school or special classes.

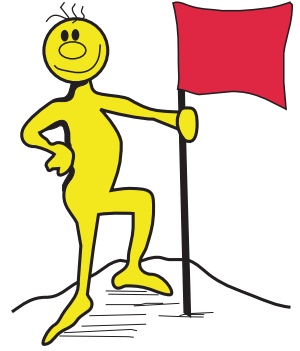
### ***How do people in jail or prison spend their time?***

People in prison are required to spend their time productively. They work or go to school or attend special programs such as alcohol and drug treatment or anger management classes.

Many also pursue hobbies, especially art, or they can read, write, watch TV, or exercise when they have spare time.

### ***Are people in jail or prison safe and healthy?***

Correctional officers work hard to keep the jail or prison safe. If people in jail or prison have a medical or dental problem, they may ask to be seen by a nurse, doctor, or dentist in the facility. Sometimes, people may need special health care outside of the prison or jail.



## Can I see or talk to Mom or Dad when they are in jail or prison? Do I have to?

Many children can see or talk to their parent even while they are in jail or prison. Some children, however, may be so angry



or hurt when a parent is incarcerated that they do not want anything to do with him or her; others may crave contact. Talking about and validating the child's feelings can be helpful.

Sometimes visiting may not be possible. For example, the child may prefer to avoid contact or distance may be a problem. Also, a restraining order or DOC rule may prevent the parent from having any type of contact with the child.

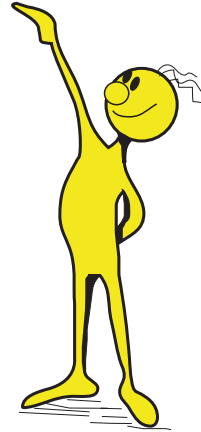
When visiting is an option it can usually be arranged, but requires some time and preparation. The *Visitor's Handbook* and administrative rule on visiting, available from the Department of Corrections or on the Internet at [www.doc.state.or.us](http://www.doc.state.or.us), can provide information on visiting and other forms of communication.

Children who want to maintain close contact with their incarcerated parent should be encouraged to write, draw pictures (with markers, not crayons), talk on the telephone, and visit as much as possible. Studies show that maintaining contact and allowing children to visit, if possible, helps the children.

### **What do I tell other people?**

Many people are ashamed to talk about having someone close to them in jail or prison. It may reassure children to tell them that:

1. "Two of every 100 children have had a parent in jail or prison."
2. "YOU didn't do anything wrong. People should not try to make you feel guilty or ashamed."
3. "Sometimes, it is easier not to talk about a parent who is incarcerated, but you may never learn that there are plenty of other kids in the same situation. Talking about it with people you trust may help."
4. "It's OK to love your Mom or Dad who is in jail or prison, even if some people don't think you should."



In some communities there are groups of kids who have a parent in jail or prison, and they meet to talk about such issues. This is called a support group. It can be very helpful to have peers to share feelings and coping strategies. County community corrections and social services agencies should be able to help you find an appropriate support group.

### **How can I learn when my parent will come home?**

People in jail or prison usually know the approximate date they will be released. People can look on the Internet ([www.doc.state.or.us](http://www.doc.state.or.us)) or call the Department of Corrections to find out the release date, which is public information.

## Notes for Caregivers

Children may experience many mixed emotions from the time of the parent's arrest to well after his or her release. While these feelings may be expressed at any time, they are more likely to come to a head at certain stages: arrest, trial, sentencing, incarceration (and often most strongly during and following visiting), and at the time of release. Often, the most stressful time is in the weeks and months following release. It can be difficult for an absent parent to reconnect with a child who has grown accustomed to living without him or her.

### *In summary, children of incarcerated parents need:*

- To know the parent's incarceration is not their fault.
- To know what is happening to their parent.
- To know if they can have contact with their parent, and if so, when and how.
- To know where and with whom they will be living and going to school.
- To know what will stay the same and what will change while their parent is incarcerated.
- To know it is OK to still love their parent, and it is OK to be angry sometimes, too.
- To be encouraged to express, in safe and healthy ways, their feelings about their parent and their parent's incarceration.
- To visit and maintain contact with the incarcerated parent as much as possible, when permitted and appropriate.
- To have stability and consistency in their living situations and daily routines.
- To feel safe.
- To have fun.
- To realize that people make choices in life that lead to different consequences.