

Tips for Parents



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Supporting your children when a parent goes to prison

Bringing up a child alone isn't easy; the pressures are even greater if you are a parent trying to raise a family while your partner is in prison.

One of the biggest challenges a parent will face when someone is imprisoned is what to tell the children. Adults play a big part in helping children recognise their feelings and work out the best way to understand them. They may experience many different emotions at the thought of a parent going to prison and they will need help to manage these.



What to tell the children?

It's your decision but generally children cope better when you are honest about what has happened. A sudden unexplained disappearance may leave a child confused and scared as they can often sense when something is wrong.

- **Finding the right time** – Telling a child that their parent is in prison will raise lots of tough questions. Make sure you can give them time and your full attention.
- **Don't wait too long** – Information can travel quickly via social media, so it's possible your child may find out from other people. Try to tell them as early as possible; it will be more reassuring coming from somebody they trust.
- **What to say** – Try to keep it simple and appropriate for your child's age and understanding. You could reassure them that the absent family member still loves and cares for them. They could also be told how they can keep in touch with them such as letters, telephone calls and visits.
- **Visiting** – It might be helpful for children to visit a parent to help them cope with separation. You may want to make the first visit yourself so that, when you take them, they will feel re-assured that you are confident with the process. You might want to find out what the child can take, if there is a play area and how long the visit will be. You might want to explain there will be officers in uniform, doors will be locked and that it could be noisy.
- **Coping with the loss** – Families can still have a positive effect on each other even with one being in prison. The parent at home can share stories and reassure the imprisoned parent that they are doing well; the absent parent can reassure their family they are coping. This can ensure that family links are still being made and that the absence isn't as distressing.

How will my child react?

Coping with such a major change could have a significant impact on your child and how they behave. They may revert to behaviours they had grown out of or that are challenging:

- **Being fearful and anxious** – They may have nightmares and be concerned that more people are going to leave them. They may not want to leave the safety of their home, visit friends or familiar places or go to school or nursery. Older children may worry that people know more about the situation than they do or what they may say. It may be helpful to inform the school or nursery so they can be ready for any changes in your child's behaviour and their need for extra support.
- **Anger and aggression** – Feeling angry is a normal emotion to a big change. They may be angry towards people such as police or teachers or towards the imprisoned parent for leaving them. It's important they know they can talk about how they're feeling.
- **Tantrums** – They may start to lose control, cry or get angry if they don't get their way. This could be as a result of the change in the family or normal behaviour for their age. Shouting will only make the situation worse. Do not smack or physically punish. This is illegal in Wales.
- **Bed wetting** – Anxiety can cause a child who used to be dry at night to wet the bed again. Finding the cause of the anxiety and making the child feel safe and reassured can often help to resolve the issue quickly.
- **Depression** – Some children may bottle up their feelings and become withdrawn. They may not want to play or see friends and may be more tired and lethargic. This is a normal reaction to a serious change in circumstances.

How can I support my child and re-assure them?

It's normal for a child to react to a significant change just as it would be for an adult. Although you may be feeling awful yourself, spending a little more time with your child playing, talking, listening and reassuring them will help your child feel loved and secure. Here are some helpful tips to help you manage the change:

- **Be consistent** – Be firm but kind. Keep rules clear and simple, in keeping with your child's age and ability. Don't give in, be clear how you would like them to behave and stick to it.
- **Routine** – A clear routine can help a child feel safe and secure. When circumstances around them are changing it's important for them to feel a sense of normality.
- **Give lots of time for affection and praise** – Praise works better at encouraging the behaviour you want rather than criticising and punishing for problem behaviour. Praise helps your child feel more confident. Make time to ask how they are getting on and to take an interest in what they are doing, it will make them feel valued and connected to the people they love.
- **Be honest and make time to discuss the situation** – Try to be as honest as you can about what is happening and give them time to ask questions and share their concerns.

Where to get advice and support

The National Prisoners' Families Helpline ([prisonersfamilies.org](https://www.prisonersfamilies.org)) for Wales and England offers support for families who have a loved one in contact with the criminal justice system.

Contact the freephone helpline on: **0808 808 2003**

For positive parenting tips and expert advice, visit: gov.wales/giveittime

