

# Locked Up: Communication Between Children with Incarcerated Parents

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## Abstract

*The United States prison system is far from perfect. In fact, the criminal justice system as a whole is in need of some desperate changing. One major aspect of it that needs some repair is how the criminal justice system deals with the children of the incarcerated. Children that have incarcerated parents themselves are not criminals and should not be treated as such. Between long drives to prison, body searches, and small dark rooms that can be scary to a child, no one wants to send children there. Prisons today focus a lot of their time on punishing those who are inmates. But why are we also punishing the children? Children of the incarcerated are the silent victims to this corrupt system we call The United States criminal justice system. Research has shown that allowing an inmate to see their child actually improves behavior inside and gives them an incentive to get out sooner. By making it so difficult for a child to visit their mom or dad puts a strain on the parent/child relationship that is needed for a healthy childhood. The first step in making sure a child does not follow in the steps of their incarcerated parent is to make it clear through communication with them that prison is not a place you want to end up.*

The U.S. prison system is corrupt, and that is no secret. It has been compared to that of hell (Jewkes, 2014). All around the world there are kids out there with parents who are incarcerated. In the United States especially, the number, which now has grown to be about 2.7 million seems to be higher than any person or government would like to see (Reilly). These children a lot of the time are not even granted access to see their parents, let alone hug them. Growing up knowing that your mom or dad is locked away can be detrimental to a child's wellbeing. What's

even more harmful to the child is not being able to properly talk and see their parent. Research done by the National Conference of State Legislatures suggests that intervening in the lives of incarcerated parents and their children to preserve and strengthen positive family connections can yield positive societal benefits in the form of reduced recidivism, less intergenerational involvement in the criminal justice system, and promotion of healthy child development (Christian, 2009). That is why studies, like the one done by Julie Poehlmann (2010), showing the

communication between child and imprisoned parents are so important; without them people will not be aware of the issue, and therefore no one will be trying to solve it. Prisons safety rules can sometimes impede children from visiting their parents which in turn harms the child. The prison environment can be frightening and traumatic for children, both in the attitudes and behavior of prison staff and the physical setting. Visits can include long waits, body frisks, rude treatment, and hot, dirty and crowded visiting rooms with no activities for children (Christian, 2009). These conditions do not encourage frequent visits between incarcerated parents and their children. Some states do, however, have laws that gear to help those with children on the outside. For example, Colorado law requires corrections officials to determine whether an inmate is a parent and, if so, whether the child is in school (Christian, 2009). The department of corrections also must collect and compile information related to programs that help students whose parents are incarcerated (Christian, 2009). California law requires the director of corrections to examine any close family ties and to assign an inmate to a facility closest to his or her home (Christian, 2009). Some places are doing something about it, but it remains a huge problem. Allowing parents to see their children once they are locked up will most likely improve their prison behavior and motivate them more to do their time and get out. Seeing their kids will show them that their kids aren't giving up on them and still want to see them. Allowing children to see their parents a lot of the time helps prevent them from winding up in juvenile detention or prison as well. Communication between parents and child is very important in any relationship. Where else do you think kids learn to walk, talk, and distinguish right from wrong? Sure, these

traits can be inherited from any mentor in life, but it is still the communication between the two that guides the child through life. When a kid grows up without any contact with their mom or dad, their everyday life suffers. Many times, kids have been known to fall behind in school or fall in to the wrong crowd all because they have the burden of knowing their parent is in prison and they can't interact with them the way a child should be able to (Poehlmann, 2014). People do bad things and end up in prison, that's understandable, but it's still not right to keep them from their child. There are organizations like Ambassadors for Hope that will help these children with everyday things such as school supplies, or books to read, or even a person to look up to. Ambassadors for Hope don't wait for the children to get into trouble first, they jump in right as soon as the parent goes to prison, and they try to help. The communication between a child and incarcerated parent is just as or maybe more important to the well-being of the child and needs to be encouraged instead of stopped. There is very little research that is done on the communication between a child and their incarcerated parent. People usually do not have access to these kids or families and people think they would be harming the child more if they got them to open up about their parent who is in prison. That is not true however, most kids find that they enjoy talking about their mom or dad and it helps them get through the very tough situation. Kids need to feel like they can speak up and reminisce about happy times with their parents. They should not feel ashamed of what their parent does, which has nothing to do with their behavior at all. If we stop making kids feel like they are at fault we might see a decrease on the amount of kids who follow in their incarcerated parents' footsteps.

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