

TIPS FROM A FATHER IN PRISON

The following is a list of suggestions that you can use to maintain the attachment to your children from inside a prison.

1. Even if your relationship with the mother of your children is over, you need to establish and maintain a positive relationship with her. For the sake of your children, try to find ways to connect with her respectfully.
2. Do not expect big changes right away from your family members. Take your time.
3. Find out about policies regarding how you can connect with your child—visitation, letters, telephone calls, and audiotapes. Ask your prison chaplain, counselor, or other staff.
4. Develop a plan and follow it on how often you will connect with your child.
5. When explaining to your children why you are not living with them, be honest but respect their ability to understand it according to their age.
6. When telling your children how important they are to you, do not be surprised if they do not respond the way you want them to. Children are often angry that you did something wrong that prevents you from being with them.
7. To establish and maintain your family relationships, be ready to make amends and apologize to them.
8. Find ways to support your children emotionally, financially, and spiritually as much as possible.
9. Your family and children need to be able to rely on you if you say you will call or write regularly, so be consistent in your approach and contact schedule.
10. Be realistic about goals and expectations. Do not expect too much, too soon from them.
11. Remember family celebrations, special occasions, and cultural events. If you have a hobby or crafts at prison, make gifts or draw pictures and make them into a coloring book.
12. If at all possible, purchase small items for your children through the commissary or mail order catalogs.
13. Use your time constructively. Get your GED, or take parenting classes, anger management, adult continuing education classes, anything that better yourself.
14. Some prisons allow you to purchase and make video or audiotapes. Use these to tell stories, share memories, and bedtime stories. Have your children listen to it when they miss you.
15. Before your release date, clear up any legal problems that may be pending such as your driving record, credit problems, or child support.
16. Your children might not know how to say exactly what they are feeling and thinking, so be patient with them.
17. Make a realistic plan and follow through, no matter how bad things get, when re-connecting with your children after you are released from jail.
18. While you are still in prison, research programs that might help you reach your goals once released. Seek out programs about parenting, housing, jobs, legal problems, or credit problems.
19. Work with other prison fathers trying to connect with their children from inside prison.
20. Get some counseling from the appropriate staff (psychologist, chaplain, case manager, or correctional counselor).
21. Think about how you want to be a parent and your future as a dad and make decisions about that future. Look at your own relationship with your dad to see what was learned, good and bad.
22. Go to the prison library, take the time to read what you can to try to learn about being a better dad. Try to read as much as you can about father/child relationships.
23. Check out some of the other resources in the Incarcerated Fathers Library.

For more help for incarcerated parents and their families, please visit the *Family and Corrections Network* at <http://www.fcnetwork.org>.

Carlin, M. (2002). *Tips from a father in prison* [On-line]. Available: <http://www.fcnetwork.org/library/p10TipsFromAFather.html>.

Adapted by F. Mederos from: Rosenberg, J. & Wilcox, W.B. (2006). *The Importance Of Fathers In The Healthy Development Of Children*. US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect.

FATHERS IN THE COURTS: BEST PRACTICES

RESPECT: men often feel disregarded and disrespected by people in different systems. There is a history of negative labels that are attached to fathers, particularly out of home fathers—'deadbeat', 'absent dad', 'batterer', violent, angry, etc.—but many men who have complex histories have positive visions of what they would like to mean to their children and are open to moving forward in a positive way as long as they sense respect. Many of them have negative histories with systems. **What to do:**

- ◆ *Hear what others have to say about him and read the CORI, but approach him with an open mind.* This is men's most frequent complaint—people judge them based on what they read or hear about them, or on their appearance.
- ◆ *Accept that many fathers care deeply about their children.* Fatherhood is as real for most men as motherhood is for mothers. Men often report that they have to prove that they care, that fatherhood is real for them.
- ◆ *Out of home father does not mean uncaring father.* The most common reasons for fathers to be out of the home are conflicted relationships with mothers and poverty. Many men who feel they cannot be providers take themselves out of the picture.
- ◆ *Listen carefully—give the men a chance to speak.* A little patience goes a long way.
- ◆ *Explain his choices and his rights carefully. Ask him to explain what he heard to check his understanding.* Despite appearances, many men are intimidated and feel disempowered in the courts.
- ◆ *Consider being thick-skinned.* Fearful and frustrated men often present as angry or hostile. If they are asked what their concerns are, and they are reassured that they are being heard, most will calm down.
- ◆ *Ask him about his feelings and hopes for his kids.* 'Tough' guys may pull back and reflect when they are approached in this way. It is also an opportunity to assess his strengths.
- ◆ *Acknowledge that frequent court appearances are difficult for low income men.* Many men have work that does not allow frequent absences or does not pay if they are absent. Also, missing a day's wages can make a huge difference for some men.
- ◆ *Judge fathers on what they do and how they follow through, not on their history.* Men often respond well to being asked to complete tasks that they understand are related to good fathering practices.
- ◆ *Refer men to appropriate services.* Fatherhood programs and support groups for fathers, for example, are gender-specific and evidence-based interventions that are recognized by the federal government.
- ◆ *Remember that custodial fathers may have legitimate economic issues.*

Among the challenges that fathers may bring are domestic violence, involvement in community violence, and drug abuse. It is important to take into account these men's strengths and levels of risk and keep in mind that there are enormous variations in levels of domestic violence, other types of violence and substance abuse, and capacity to change. There are also vast variations in fathering capacity and history that should be acknowledged. The question is not *whether* to engage these fathers, but *how* to engage them in safe and appropriate ways that take into account both their strengths and the risks they pose currently.

TIPS FOR DADS: ADVICE TO FATHERS WHO ARE OUT OF THE HOME

1. Respect the mother of your children. Regardless of your feelings for the children's mother, please treat her with respect—for the sake of the children. Children are happier and feel more secure when their parents get along. You should ignore negative comments, remain cordial, compliment her when you can, and keep the lines of communication open. It's best to seek common ground with her around common goals for the children, and never criticize her in front of the children.

2. Keep your promises. Children whose parents have broken up or never lived together often feel abandoned and distrustful of the adults in their lives, or blame themselves for what happened. Fathers who are not at home need to be careful to earn kids' trust. You need to keep promises you make to the children, and if this means promising less, that's fine. Keeping your word is essential to rebuild trust.

3. Don't be a "Disneyland Dad." Fathers who are not at home are often tempted to play "Disneyland Dad." They spend a lot of the time they have with their kids in expensive and fun activities. They miss chances to get to know their children in their ordinary lives. You'll get to know them a lot better doing regular activities. Here are some ordinary things to do with kids:

- Attend their sports events consistently.
- Take them to school or day care, and pick them up. Do this on time. It builds trust.
- Take them for medical or dental visits and read books for them while you wait.
- Take them out so the mother can do chores.
- Take them out to play in public parks.
- Take them out to get haircuts.
- Help them with homework—you can do that at the public library.

4. Stay in regular contact. If you are not at home, you should stay in regular contact with the kids. If they live locally, you should be faithful about seeing them regularly. If you do not live close by or are incarcerated, you should be faithful about calling or sending a letters or emails to them on a weekly basis. Children thrive on regular contact with their dads. This advice holds even for teenagers, who may have to be asked to make sacrifices in their social or sports schedules to keep up with you. In the end, maintaining the father-child bond is more important than a missed game or movie with friends.

5. Do not be too soft on your kids. Fathers who are not at home are tempted to go easy on their children when it comes to discipline. Nurture, fun and discipline always need to be in balance. Given how brief visits are, many dads do not want to risk angering their kids by disciplining or discussing behavior, but this is a big mistake. Children will take advantage of your lack of discipline by pushing the limits even more. Dads who are not home should be firm and consistent with their children, even if that means that sometimes a lot of time is spent on discipline. In the long-term, children who are disciplined well are better behaved and more respectful of their fathers than children who are given a free rein.

6. Do what you can for your children financially. Step up in whatever way you can. You don't have to be a "big wallet" guy. At the same time, regular financial support is a way of showing that you care and of modeling responsibility. Children who know their fathers contribute are more confident that their father is there for them. If your resources are limited, you can think of other things you can do with and for children. See no. 3 above for some ideas.

Note: This advice draws on educational material from The Children's Trust Fund of Massachusetts, The National Fatherhood Initiative, the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, and the National Center for Fathering. Adapted by F. Mederos from: Rosenberg, J. & Wilcox, W.B. (2006). *The Importance Of Fathers In The Healthy Development Of Children*. US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect.

TIPS FOR DADS: RE-CONNECTING WITH YOUR KIDS AFTER A LONG ABSENCE

You didn't get into this mess overnight:
You're not going to get out of it overnight.

Getting back into regular contact with your kids after a long absence is a special challenge. Many men feel defeated by the past or discouraged because they haven't kept up with their kids. However, fathers matter a lot to kids, even if they have been absent. Knowing who your father is and that he cares for you is crucial. Kids get part of their identity from their fathers. If the only thing they have is absence, they can imagine it's their fault or that they didn't measure up in some way. **As the father, you can do things for your child that no one else can.** Here are some things to keep in mind:

- ◆ **Patience is key.** Things are not going to change overnight. Maybe you'll be stood up a few times. Maybe visits will get interrupted sometimes. Maybe getting together will bring back unpleasant memories of the child's mother for you. It will be essential for you to persist and show you care by showing up again and again.
- ◆ **Expect a lot of feelings.** It is not unusual for kids to feel angry, abandoned and distrustful. They may also have heard bad stories about you from others. This is normal. Children need to be able to express their feelings and they need to feel that you can hear them and try to understand them. You don't have to agree with their feelings or agree with what they say about you: just show you care by listening and trying to understand. Their feelings will change if you are consistent and caring.
- ◆ **Expect some mistrust.** Remember, a lot of feelings aren't going to go away just because you show up. If you can be consistent, show you care and tolerate some "testing", you should be able to move toward some trust.
- ◆ **Focus on them.** Take one step at a time. Does it make sense to start with phone calls and move on to some activities they like? Something to do is particularly important with younger children. Being able to draw, play a board game, eat a snack or play cards can break the ice and ease the way to more comfortable conversations.
- ◆ **You don't have to be a big wallet dad.** Some men think they have to impress children with expensive activities or gifts. Playing with them in parks, taking them out to eat a simple meal, going to a library, and watching a movie they have picked out are all low cost and simple activities that you can engage in without high costs. The point is that they have an opportunity to spend time with you and get to know you.

Remember mom is the primary caretaker. Maybe you and the mother do not get along. No matter how you feel about her, please remember, *for the sake of your kids*, that usually you have to have her agreement in order to see the kids. Here are some things that help: remain cordial, compliment her when you can, treat her with respect, and speak about her respectfully in front of the kids. Acknowledge all that she's done for them if you can. Be on time for pick ups and drop offs. And give it time. If you can be consistent, it should help. Remember: *You didn't get into this mess overnight!*