Kids have a right to see their parents in prison.
By Linda R.

One of the toughest parts of having a parent locked up is that many kids only get occasional visits—if you get any visits at all. In New York, for instance, regulations say that kids are supposed to have regular visits with an incarcerated parent, unless the judge rules that a visit would be harmful. But according to the Department of Justice, about half of incarcerated mothers and fathers say they’ve received no visits from their children since they’ve been in prison. (Close to half of incarcerated parents do have weekly contact with their kids, either by phone, mail or through visits.)

Sometimes kids themselves don’t want to go because it can be a big hassle to visit someone in prison. The visiting rooms are often noisy, crowded and uncomfortable. Plus, there are all the security procedures. Anything or anyone brought into the prison walls has to be thoroughly searched.

Left With Unanswered Question

And kids often can’t visit because a parent is locked up far away. Sixty percent of incarcerated parents are locked up more than 100 miles from home. Our government doesn’t make it easy for families to stay connected.

Children may also find that visiting an incarcerated parent can feel like waving cheese in front of a mouse, and then taking it away. It can hurt even more to know that at the end of a visit, you’re going home and your parent can’t come with you.

Many times, though, children don’t see their parent because the child’s caretakers—relatives, friends or foster parents—don’t want to bother, or because they think the less children know about the situation their parent is in the better. The caretakers might also resent the incarcerated parent, and say that if parents cared enough about their children, they’d avoid prison. Most of the time, the foster parent or caseworker doesn’t even know the parent so it makes it easier for them to say that the parent is a bad person.

Even if caretakers are trying to act in the child’s best interest, having someone else decide that you can’t see your parent can really hurt, especially if you had a close relationship with your
parent. It can also mean you're left with a lot of unanswered questions.

Tanya Krupat, who runs the Children of Incarcerated Parents Program, said she often sees foster parents and caseworkers trying to protect kids, but instead they wind up keeping them in the dark.

**Focus on What the Child Wants**

Ms. Krupat believes that children should be involved in the decision to visit their incarcerated parent. In the last few years, the Children of Incarcerated Parents Program has begun to educate caretakers about this topic. They started training caseworkers, and have also trained one group of foster parents. They hope to do more.

The training sessions try to help caseworkers and foster parents focus on what the child wants and whether that parent was a significant person in that child's life, explains Ms. Krupat, instead of what the caretakers think of people who are in jail.

"The biggest barrier is the attitude toward people in prisons and jails and the type of people who wind up there," she said, adding that parents who wind up in jail are not always horrible people who committed bloody and evil crimes. "Most cases are non-violent, drug-related crimes," she said.

**Giving Relationships The Space to Grow**

The program has also been working with Rikers Island to create more child-friendly visitation days. Now Rikers Island sets aside Tuesdays just for children in foster care to make a two-hour visit. There are scheduled buses reserved for foster children and their caretakers, and usually between 10 to 20 youth in foster care visit each week.

Once they're there, the strict rules that usually apply to visitors are relaxed. There are snacks and they've even had picnics, almost like a real family outing, with kids running around the visiting room, Ms. Krupat said.

There's no saying that these visits will always be positive. But more visitation time for kids does give their relationship with their parents space to grow. It gives parents a chance to explain themselves and be close to their kids, and it gives children a chance to explore their feelings and be close to their parents.

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