



Practice Guidelines

Engaging Incarcerated Parents in Reunification Cases

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Encourage parent-child contact.

Visits should occur unless there are child safety or well-being concerns, or court orders restricting contact. Consult a psychological consultant and your supervisor to determine if and/or how visitation or other contact should occur. **If the parent has been charged for a crime with a child victim, review court orders for child contact restrictions.** If there is doubt about paternity and no current relationship, establish paternity before starting visits.

Ask the parent if the facility allows children to visit, and:

- What type of permission or identification is required?
- Is there a dress code or prohibited items?
- Is there a safe family member who can transport the child?
- Are there available activities, such as board games?
- What questions might the child ask, and how might the child react to the visit?

Talk about what to expect during visits. Help the parents to plan topics to talk about during the next visit, such as the child's extracurricular or social activities.

Encourage the parent to:

- write to the child about what to expect during the first visit;
- send letters, e-mails, drawings, and stories if in-person visitation is not possible, or in between in-person visits;
- write about a time the parent was proud of the child or how much the parent enjoyed the last visit, and send this to the child.

At the first contact, learn about the parent's protective capacities, family relationships, and the child's history.

- Explain to the parent why DCS is involved with his/her child.
- Inquire about the length of sentence. Document the parent's location, inmate number, and contact information in CHILDS.
- Ask about the parent's past, current, and desired relationship with the child; when the parent last visited or parented the child; and whether paternity is established and/or questioned.
- Ask the parent to talk about the child (significant events, physical/emotional/behavioral health, interests, etc.).
- Discuss activities or people that are important to the child (sports, cultural events, clubs, friendships, tribal events, community).
- Ask for the names and contact information of maternal and paternal relatives and significant people in the child's life (grandparents, siblings, aunts/uncles, cousins, kin, godparents).
- Get contact information for all, not only potential caregivers.
- Ask questions to assess the parents' daily functioning and protective capacities.

Maintain frequent and meaningful contact with incarcerated parents to keep them involved and informed.

In most reunification cases, DCS Specialists should have at least monthly contact with parents who are in jail or prison.

- Call the jail's program coordinator, or the prison's Correctional Officer III (CO3) to explain that you need to have regular contact with the parent. Ask about procedures for in-person visits by a DCS Specialist, and for phone communication.
- Schedule a standing in-person or phone call appointment on a certain day every month.
- Consult your supervisor to determine if an exception to monthly in-person contact should be made. An exception may be appropriate if the parent:
 - is in an out-of-state facility or several hours away;
 - has chosen to have no involvement and/or is stating he/she has no desire to be involved with the child; and/or
 - will not be able to reunify with the child due to length of incarceration, nature of the felony, or concerns for the child's safety.

When an exception to monthly in-person contact is made, meet the parent's needs for information and involvement. At minimum, quarterly telephone or written contact is required. A combination of letters and telephone contact is most effective. Telephone contact is more personal and letters give the parents a document to reference whenever the need arises.

Prepare children and caregivers for visitation and other contact.

Talk to the child about his/her rights and wishes regarding contact with an incarcerated parent, and what to expect, including:

- how often visits will happen, who will transport/supervise;
- the jail/prison environment (metal doors, security guards, etc.);
- the parent's appearance (clothing, handcuffs, etc.);
- whether contact will be in person or through glass or a television monitor;
- how long the visit will last; and
- the types of activities allowed during the visit.

Talk to the caregiver about the importance of the parent-child relationship. Address any conflict or resistance to visits/contact. Contact can help the child to feel more connected and less worried, which can improve other areas of the child's life such as school, health, mental health, etc.

Talk to the caregiver about:

- facilitating regular phone contact or video visitation, if available and appropriate;
- having the child draw pictures or write stories to send to the parent;
- providing emotional support to the child after visits, or professional counseling.

Suggest the caregiver and parent read *Behind Bars: Difficult questions children ask...and the answers that might help, a Caregiver's Guide*. This resource and others for incarcerated parents wanting to keep a connection with their children can be found at

http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socw/ork/nrcfcpp/info_services/download/Working%20with%20incarcerated%20parents%20CWIG%20Bibliography.pdf.

(Child Welfare Information Gateway. Bulletin for Professionals. Child Welfare Practice with Families Affected by Parental Incarceration.)

Develop and pursue the permanency goal and services to achieve timely permanency.

- Assess the potential for reunification.
 - How long will the parent be in jail or prison?
 - Review criminal records, including charges, convictions, and court orders that may restrict contact with the child or any children.
 - Is reunification not being pursued because of an aggravating circumstances of abuse or neglect?
- Obtain a paternity test while an alleged father is in jail or prison, even if reunification is not possible, to identify paternal relatives and in case ICWA applies (requires a court order).
- If the sentence length prohibits reunification, assess the parent's ability to have a safe and supportive relationship with his/her child, and the child's need and desire for a relationship with the parent.
- If reunification is possible, what behavior changes are needed?
 - What needs can be addressed while the parent is in jail or prison?
 - Consult with a psychological consultant to determine whether a psychological evaluation is needed, and arrange it while the parent is in jail/prison (requires a court order).
 - Learn what services are available within the facility, such as mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and parenting classes. Encourage the parent to participate in services.
 - Request the parent sign a release of information to allow DCS to obtain records from the prison or jail about services/treatment.
 - If the parent is nearing release, obtain the parent's conditions of release. Discuss with the parent and the CO3 (if applicable) how the DCS case plan can support the parent's success after release.
- Involve the parent in case planning, unless there is a documented reason why it would compromise child safety or violate a court order.
 - Include the parent by telephone in any case plan staffing, CFT, or TDM meeting.
 - Provide information about the child's medical, educational, and behavioral health needs, services, and appointments.
 - Talk about upcoming court hearings and case related meetings. Help the parent prepare for these meetings and suggest information the parent might share or questions s/he might ask.
 - Provide a copy of the written case plan and answer questions.
- Ask a unit case aide or the parent's therapist or jail/prison case worker to research books or on-line articles the parent can read related to the reasons for the child being in out-of-home care.

To locate a parent who might be in jail or prison, search:

Federal prison <https://www.bop.gov/inmateloc/>

State prisons or local jails www.vinelink.com. Use the 'find an offender court case' option to search for the individual.

AZ Department of Corrections inmate database:

<https://corrections.az.gov/public-resources/inmate-datasearch>

For additional information:

- DCS policy Chapter 3: Section 10.3 Services for Incarcerated Parents
- *Child Welfare Practice with Families Affected by Parental Incarceration* <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/parental-incarceration/>
- *Visiting Mom or Dad, The Child's Perspective* <http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/>
- National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu>