

Families Outside - Support & Information Helpline



call free on **0800 254 0088**



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supporting
families affected
by imprisonment



7. Visiting a Scottish prison with your child

Visiting a parent or relative in prison is one way a child can stay in contact with them. Carers can help children cope with separation by making it possible for them to visit their parents or relatives in prison. If you have not been to a prison visit before, you may find it helpful to make the first visit on your own so that you will know what to expect.

- **Preparing children for a visit**

It is important to prepare the child for a prison visit, especially if it is their first time. Prisons can be frightening places. Talking to the children about the journey and what it will be like when they arrive at the prison may help. Some children may not want to visit, and they should not be forced, but talking to them about why they feel that way can help to reassure them.

- **Explaining what will happen when they arrive may help to ease some of their worries:**

- They may have to wait for a while.
- There will be security procedures, and visitors may be searched.
- There will be a lot of people in uniform.
- Doors will be locked.
- There may be a lot of other people visiting.
- Visit rooms can sometimes be noisy and busy places.
- The parent or relative will have to stay behind when you leave.

- **You may want to find out what facilities are available at the prison, such as:**

- Are there play facilities in the Visitors Centre or prison visits room, and when are they staffed?
- What types of visits are available, e.g. children's visits, family day visits, weekend or evening visits?
- Is there anything for older children to do?
- Can children play with their person in prison and move around?
- What can the children take in, e.g. pictures, photos, and letters?
- What about pushchairs, nappy changing and feeding?

- **The Visit**

You may find it helpful to plan your journey, especially if you are travelling a long way. It can be an anxious time as the visit draws near.

Visits are different at each prison, and the length of the visit can vary. You may want to explain how long the visit may last. This should give the child an idea of what to expect and how long they may have with their relative/loved one.

When you arrive in the visiting room, to settle the children, it may be helpful if there is a play area, to show the child to this area before the visit starts so that they know it is safe for them to go again themselves during the visit.

It is good for each child to get some 1 on 1 time with their relative/loved one, if possible.

The time may go quickly and leaving their parent/relative at the end may be difficult. They may need reassurance about the next time they can be in touch, perhaps by another visit, telephone, video call or letter. Planning when and how that will happen is important.

Let the children know it is okay to show or talk about how they are feeling during or after the visit.

- **After the visit**

It is likely that after a visit, everyone will be a bit tired and may feel stressed. The children may be feeling sad that they have had to leave their parent or relative behind. They may feel angry if the visit was not as they expected.

It is important that you allow the children time to talk about what has happened. It is normal for a child to be upset or emotional following a visit; this may be a healthy way of expressing feelings rather than having to bottle it all up inside. Pay attention to the children's behaviour after the visit. If it is different or unusual for them, it may be their way of letting you know they need you to listen to them.

All children will cope with things differently. You may want to consider extra help or support if you feel they are not dealing with what is happening.

Your health visitor or GP may be able to suggest who to contact for specific advice.

Talking to their schoolteacher about support at school may also be helpful.

- **Where else can I get support?**

Each prison has a Family Contact Officer (FCO) who should be available to discuss any concerns about visiting with a child. They can be contacted at the prison through the telephone switchboard, or they may be available when you visit.

Some prisons also have Visitors' Centres or Family Help Hubs, where you can access support and information from staff.

You can also call the Families Outside Support & Information Helpline on **0800 254 0088**.

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