



# How are children affected by having a parent in prison?

---

This is a very difficult question since every child and every situation is different, however studies have found that children separated from a parent due to incarceration have some of the common emotional and behavioral reactions.

## **Emotional reactions (common feelings children may have)**

- Sadness, grief, low self-esteem, loneliness, or depression because of being separated from you or feeling rejected because you went away. Children, especially younger children, may believe they did something wrong to make you go away or that you went away because there is something wrong with them.
- Confusion or feeling helpless because they don't understand what has happened or don't know how to change it to make it better
- Fear, worry, anxiety about your safety and their safety
- Anger at you, "the system," and/or their caregiver for being separated from you
- Guilt because children may think that they did something to make you go away
- Difficulties in trusting people or fear of getting close to people
- Expectation of being rejected in other relationships
- Shame or embarrassment if other people make fun of them for having a parent in prison or otherwise speak badly of you

## **Behavioral reactions (how children may act)**

- May withdraw from friends and family
- May have problems sleeping or have bad dreams
- May have problems in school, including: difficulty concentrating, lower grades, missing classes, dropping out of school, becoming disruptive in school, or getting into fights
- May start making up stories or not telling the truth
- May abuse drugs or alcohol
- May get in trouble with the law
- May have developmental problems (for example, have trouble learning language skills)
- May "regress" and start acting younger than their age (for example, wetting the bed, clinging)
- May have difficulties bonding to their own children later in life

In addition to coping with the separation from you, children may also have to deal with the stress of adjusting to someone new taking care of them, living in a new house, going to a new school, and/or meeting new friends. Also, most children experience what is called "enduring trauma" due to the ongoing period of separation caused by incarceration.

For information about local resources and support call: