HONEST WORDS FOR LITTLE HEARTS

Explaining Incarceration to Children

A gentle guide for caregivers helping children understand where a loved one is, feel secure, and stay connected.



There is no perfect script. There is your steady presence, the truth in words they can hold, and room for every feeling.

BEGIN HERE

The Three Golden Truths

1. It is never your fault.

“Nothing you said, did, or thought caused this. Grown-ups are responsible for their own choices.” Repeat it even if your child does not ask.

2. You are loved.

“Your loved one cares about you. Being apart does not change that.” Avoid promising a call, visit, or release date unless you know it will happen.

3. You are safe.

“I am here to care for you. You will sleep here tonight, and this is who will pick you up tomorrow.” Give a dependable, concrete plan.

A CALM FIRST CONVERSATION

Choose a quiet moment. Say “prison” or “jail” if that is true. Keep it short and ask: “What are you wondering about?” It is okay to say, “I do not know yet, but I will tell you what I learn.”

SIMPLE WORDS, REAL ANSWERS

What to Say at Every Age

AGES 3–6 · SIMPLE AND CONCRETE

“Daddy is in a place called prison right now. Grown-ups have rules, and he has to stay there for a while. You did not cause this. I will take care of you.” Use a calendar for the next confirmed call, not a guessed homecoming date.

AGES 7–11 · MAKE ROOM FOR WHY

“Your loved one broke a law and is in prison. We can talk about what that means. It is not your fault. You can feel sad, angry, or embarrassed.” Answer only what they ask and avoid details they do not need.

AGES 12+ · RESPECT THEIR VOICE

“I want to be honest about what happened and what we know. What do you want to ask? What would you rather keep private?” Let teens choose how and whether to connect.

Keep the door open as children grow.

If they ask when their loved one is coming home, say what is known: “I do not know the exact date. I will tell you when I know more. We have a plan for today.”

THEIR STORY IS THEIRS

Friends, School & Other People

A child never owes classmates the whole story. Practice a few answers together and let them decide what feels comfortable:

“My loved one is away right now. I do not want to talk about it.”

“They are in prison. I am okay, but I do not want to answer questions.”

“That is private. Want to play instead?”

BRING IN A TRUSTED ADULT

If your child wants support, tell a teacher or school counselor the basics. Ask how they respond to teasing. Agree on what may be shared and with whom.

IF SOMEONE SAYS SOMETHING HURTFUL

“That was not okay. You did not deserve it. You can walk away and tell an adult you trust.” A child is not responsible for defending a parent or explaining adult choices.

PREPARE WITHOUT FEAR

The First Call or Visit

BEFORE A PHONE CALL

Explain that calls may be short, recorded, or interrupted. Practice a hello and one easy question. Let them draw a picture to describe. If a call cannot happen, remind them it was not their fault.

BEFORE A VISIT

Check the facility’s current rules for visitors, clothing, photos, toys, food, and touch. Describe the trip, room, waiting, and goodbye in plain words. Show a photo of the building if available.

DURING AND AFTER

Let the child choose whether to talk, wave, cry, or sit with you. Never force a hug or cheerful reaction. Afterward ask, “What was it like for you?” Offer a familiar snack or bedtime routine.

> **“You can love someone and still feel confused or upset.”**

If your child is not ready for a visit, consider a different way to connect. Follow their pace and the facility’s rules.

ACROSS THE DISTANCE

Keep the Bond Alive

SAME-SKY NOTE

Draw the moon or weather each night and share a page when mail rules allow.

QUESTION OF THE WEEK

Ask one small question: favorite snack, a brave moment, or a new song.

TWO-WAY STORY

Start a story in a letter and ask your loved one to add the next chapter.

MEMORY JAR

Write down one good memory a week to share on a call or visit.

BEDTIME STORY PROMPTS

“If our family could go anywhere in a dream, where would we go?”

“What is one thing you want them to know about your day?”

“What would you draw for them if you had one whole page?”

Connection counts, even when it looks different.

CARE FOR YOURSELF, TOO

A Note for the Grown-Ups

Children may return to the same question again and again. This is how they make sense of change. Answer calmly and consistently. You do not need every answer tonight.

WHEN THEY NEED MORE SUPPORT

If sleep, school, play, eating, or mood changes persist, speak with a pediatrician, school counselor, or child therapist. Asking for help is care, not failure.

TRY THESE WORDS TONIGHT

> **“You did not cause this. You are loved. I am here, and I will help keep you safe.”**

Keep promises small and real: a bedtime story, a call to a trusted adult, or a plan for tomorrow. Your steady presence matters more than perfect words.

WHO CAN SUPPORT YOU WHILE YOU SUPPORT THEM?