



How do I tell my child that their parent has gone to prison?

We know that telling a child that their parent might go to prison, or is in prison, is not easy. Here are a few things to consider that might help you:



It's ok to tell your child **in your own time**. There might be lots of people giving you advice or even pushing you to tell your child before you feel able, but it's important that you do this when you feel the time is right for you and your child.

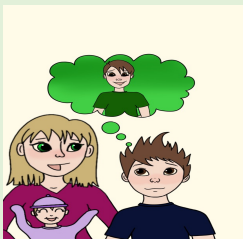
A lot of parents and caregivers tell the children that their parent has gone away to work. This is very common. Many families go down this route, at least at first, so if this is you **don't feel guilty**. It's understandable you might want to come to terms with the news yourself before you feel ready to tell your child/ren.



Research does, however, indicate that **children tend to cope better with the truth**, and children that have attended TMUK support groups tell us that they much prefer it when adults are honest with them.

Children are **stronger and more resilient** than some adults might expect, and many adults tell us they were so surprised how well their child coped with the news, which was often better than they expected.

Children need to be able to trust the people who care for them the most; this helps them to grow up and feel that the world is a safe place. Knowing the truth often helps children feel less confused and more settled. Also, if your child asks you a question that you don't know the answer to yourself, **it's ok to say, "I don't know"**, but perhaps also say that when you understand more you will share what you can with them.



If you have started with the 'working away from home' story and want to now tell your child that their parent is in prison, **don't worry!!** You don't have to say you lied. Instead, you could tell your child, that you are ready to give them 'extra' information now they are older (even if they are a few weeks older). **You could praise them for being more mature lately and say you feel they are now ready to know more about the situation.** This helps to maintain the trust the child has with you. Also, many people do work inside prisons, so it is reasonable to say you are now telling them additional information. Or **you could explain you had to understand more yourself before you could help them.** You don't have to discuss the nature of the crime if you feel the child is too young to understand. If they are curious, you could say that is a conversation for when they are older.

If it feels right for your circumstances, you could explain to your child that **just because their parent has gone to prison it doesn't make them a bad person**; rather they have made a poor choice and that prison is a place where adults go to learn to make **healthier choices** for themselves and people around them.

Some families have found it helps their child to know there are opportunities in prisons for parents such as training courses, access to the gym, mental health support, and work opportunities. It can help children to know that their parent will get 3 meals a day, and that **prison is not what you see in cartoons or in lots of TV shows**. If it is right for your family, you may visit, have phone calls, or write letters.



Reassure your child that **it's not their fault and they are not alone**. Explain there are lots of children with a parent in prison and there is support available to help them explore their feelings if they want it. **It's perfectly normal for them, and you, to feel a range of emotions** including sadness, anger, worry and even relief. It's ok to tell your child that sometimes you feel upset too; this might help them know that sharing difficult feelings in your family is allowed, but of course do this in a calm way. Reassure them that you as a family will get through this, even if it's not always easy right now.

