

# FACTSHEET

## Keeping in touch with your children



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**Being held overseas can be particularly difficult for those with children, who might find the separation very hard. Regular visits with children and other family or friends may not always be possible because of the costs involved, language barriers, prison regulations or your family's work commitments, to name just a few.**

**One question that might arise, then, is – how can I maintain a good relationship with my child during my sentence? And can Prisoners Abroad help me with this? We hope this factsheet will answer these questions, and give you some ideas about how your child can grow and develop safe in the knowledge that you love them and care for them.**

*We encourage you to write with your ideas, feedback, comments and advice for other parents in similar positions! Please let us know **your** thoughts so that this factsheet can develop based on **your** experiences. What worked for you? What have you tried which wasn't such a good idea and why? Which ideas in this factsheet worked well and which ones didn't? How do you feel about being away from your children and how have you stayed in touch? If enough people write we will include some stories in a separate factsheet written by, and for, our clients who are parents.*

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## **1 Should we tell the Children?**

It is not always easy to decide whether or not to let a child know about the imprisonment of their parent, or another family member, such as a brother or sister. Some families prefer not to tell them, fearing that the news would be too upsetting. Other families feel that “honesty is the best policy” because children might blame themselves for their parent’s disappearance or “fill in the gaps” for themselves unless they are told the truth.

Prisoners Abroad has another factsheet discussing this issue, so please do not hesitate to request this if you are unsure about whether to tell the children, or what to tell them. Please also request a copy of “Questions Children Ask” published by Families and Corrections Network which you might find useful.

**This factsheet is only aimed at people whose children are aware of your imprisonment and to people whose children would like to stay in touch.**

## **2 Writing to my child**

Writing to your child might seem odd at first – after all, it might be the first time you’ve ever written them a letter! However not writing to them at all may leave them feeling deserted and rejected. And what about younger children? Is there any point in writing to them? Yes! You could send them pictures, cards, stories, or short letters which their caregiver at home can read out to them, which might help them feel more secure – you’d be surprised what younger children can understand even at an early age.

Remember you can request Prisoners Abroad’s “freepost” envelopes so that you can keep in touch with your family and children without needing a stamp. We have two sizes, large and small. The freepost envelope is addressed to Prisoners Abroad and you should not need to use a stamp to send this back to us – simply enclose your letter(s) and write the name and address of the person to whom we should forward the letter to onto the letter itself. If you are sending more than one letter please send as many as possible in one freepost envelope, rather than sending different letters in separate envelopes.

It might not be easy to write to your children at first. You might ask yourself “what is there to write about?” or “do my kids want to hear about my news?”

Here’s some basic tips on keeping in touch:

- Tell your child you love them – it can make all the difference
- If you have more than one child, write a separate letter to each child every time you write - this will help each child feel cared for as an individual
- Write often – a short letter now and again is better than writing one long letter after months of no contact
- Keep a list of important dates – birthdays and Easter for example.

A client in America wrote:

“Let them know that we love them regardless of financial embarrassment or the miles between us. Our families still need us and knowing that we love them can really make a difference, so let’s not let these beautiful people believe that our hearts have grown cold – they need us just as much as we need them.”

You might have other ideas and thoughts to share, so please write and let us know.

### **3 Activities to send my child**

Sending your child some fun activities to do is a great way to stay in touch and your child might enjoy doing things you suggest – you could also write to your child to ask what they did and if they found the activity fun, to help you stay in touch.

Examples of things you can send to your child are:

- **Recipes** – send details of some fun foods which your child can cook with their caregiver. Ask Prisoners Abroad to send you our list of “Child Friendly Recipes” – you could either copy them out and illustrate them or send one a month to your child’s caregiver. Cooking is fun and educational, teaching many skills, so a great way for you to be involved in your child’s development.
- Send **puzzles/crosswords/wordsearches** – fun games that children like to do. Once again, you could copy them out, send one a week, illustrate them, change them to make them more personal, or create your own games. Please ask Prisoners Abroad to send you our list of puzzles and games - we have games for older and games for younger children, so please tell us which you would like.
- Send **origami instructions** or, alternatively, if you have the correct sized paper, make a few origami models to send to your child with your letters. We have 5 sets of origami instructions we can send to you, which you can then forward to your children – we have instructions for Sailing Boat, Cup, Love Heart, Star and Van.

### **4 Sending Cards**

Sending cards is a good way to stay in touch and to tell someone you are thinking of them. If you are unable to buy cards in your prison, you could ask a family member to send you some. Prisoners Abroad can also print off cards onto paper and send you a few occasionally, so please write to let us know. We only have a limited supply of designs such as “Happy Birthday”, “Thinking of You”, or “Miss u like crazy” for example. Please tell us how many cards we should send to you (maximum 5) and what type of cards you would like.

Another of our clients, also held in the USA, wrote to say:

“It would be nice for them to get a card once in a while from us saying ‘Thinking of you’ – ‘I love you’ – ‘I miss you’ - I’m sure as you know kids love to get cards.”

### **5 Reading and Children**

#### ***5.1 Reading together***

You and your child/children could agree to read the same book and then write about what you thought. You could also encourage your child to draw pictures about characters in the book or to send you a picture about the story.

You could also send your child some stories – either make one up, or write out and illustrate well-known stories or fables which you remember from your own childhood.

Prisoners Abroad has some short stories for very young children, which we can send to you if you request them – you can either send them as they are, or copy them out and illustrate them yourself. Please ask Prisoners Abroad to print and send you one of the stories for very young children – they are called “Silly Willy”, “A Fishy Tale” and “Round Bird”.

## **5.2 Create a book together**

One fun idea could be to create a book together with your children! Prisoners Abroad can send you a blank booklet onto which you begin the first page of a story you make up with a picture if you wish. You then send the book back to your child with instructions to write the next page of the story on page two with their own picture – they can then send the book back to you to find out what the next part of the story will be, and so on, until the book is completed! If this sounds like a good idea, please write to us to request a “Create a Book” factsheet and booklet.

## **6 Sending Jokes**

Kids like jokes, so sending a few with your letters can help to make them smile. Please ask Prisoners Abroad to send you our list of jokes – you could send one a week, or even illustrate them to give them something to hang on their wall!

## **7 Praising your child**

Children love to receive praise, especially from their parents! Telling a child they have done something well helps them to achieve self-esteem and self worth. You can praise your child about anything they have done – reading a book, helping Mum, being polite, eating dinner. Ask your child’s caregiver to tell you what they have been doing so that you can tell your child you are proud of them.

You could also consider creating “certificates” to send home to each child letting them know what they have done well. Some prisons may have computer facilities or other materials which you can use to create your own certificates – however if you are unable to do this in your facility Prisoners Abroad has some blank certificates we can send to you which you can complete with details of your child’s name and what your child has done – please ask for a few copies if you want them. You can also ask us to print a message onto the certificate itself and send it to you (for example “This certificate is from Joe Bloggs’ father because he has been helping Mum around the house”, or “This certificate is presented to Katie for her excellent homework project”). Please let us know if we should write a message onto the certificate or send you a blank one.

## **8 Providing guidance to your child**

Being so far away, and perhaps with few chances to have visits from your child, it might feel as if you are having little input in your child’s upbringing. Whilst this is understandable, we have already mentioned some ways you can have some influence – sending praise, sending cards and letters telling your children you love them will help to have a positive influence.

You could also send some fun pictures reminding your child of what is expected of them– pictures might say, for example, “Go to bed at 8pm”, “Eat five portions of fruit and veg a day”, “Eat your greens”, “Remember to feed the animals every night”, “Listen to your mother”, “Take the dog out for a walk” for example. Prisoners Abroad has the following pictures which you could either copy out and write your own message or instruction to go with it, or ask us to write your own message onto it on your behalf. Alternatively please let us know if we should just send the picture with no message, so that you can write whatever you want underneath. Here are the pictures we have, with examples of what you could ask us to write onto them:

1) Picture of a Boy in bed with a clock behind him at 8pm

Example of message which could be written at the bottom of the picture

“Dear David, I love you very much – Remember to get to bed at 8pm – Love Dad”

2) Picture of a cat and a goldfish

Example of message which could be written at the bottom of the picture

“Dear Mary, I love you very much – Remember to feed the animals every night – Love Mum”

3) Picture of cartoon character pouring tea

Example of message which could be written at the bottom of the picture

“Dear John, Daddy Loves you very much – please make your Mum a cuppa once a week OK?! Love Daddy”

4) Cartoon picture of tooth and toothbrush

Example of message which could be written at the bottom of the picture

“Dear Cassandra, Mummy Loves you very much – Remember to brush your teeth every morning and every night – Love Mummy”

5) Photograph and fruit and vegetable stall

Example of message which could be written at the bottom of the picture

Eat your greens! / Remember to eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables every day to grow strong and healthy!

Remember to tell us which picture(s) you would like and whether we should send it to you blank, or if you would like us to write a message at the bottom, and if so, what the message should say.

## **9 Additional Publications**

We have some further publications to send to you if you feel you need further guidance about staying in touch with your children:

“Daddy’s Working Away – A Guide to Being a Dad in Prison” – Written by male prisoners and their families, this practical book aims to deal with the difficult issues facing prisoners who, although away from their children, still want to be good dads. Mothers may also find this book helpful. Please note that the book deals with issues relating to the UK prison system but is still useful discussing the general issues of parenting and prison, and we are currently only able to send a photocopy which is in very small print and is the size of 18 pages of standard-sized A4 paper.

“Dads Inside and Out” – This is a transcript of an animated film covering the issues of imprisonment, parenting, and re-joining the family after imprisonment. Although watching the film is better, reading the transcript can still be useful.

“Maintaining a Relationship with your Children” – a short but helpful leaflet published by The Canadian Families and Corrections Network.

“Questions Children Ask” – Detailed factsheet discussing the pros and cons of telling children about imprisonment, what and how to tell them and what children might like to know.

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If you spot any errors or inaccuracies in this factsheet please let us know by emailing [info@prisonersabroad.org.uk](mailto:info@prisonersabroad.org.uk). Thank you.

If you require this leaflet in a large print format, please contact us. Our details are below.

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