

**Excerpt from Prisoners Abroad “Handbook for Families and Friends”,
Chapter 4 “What about the children?”**

All children are different and will show their feelings in different ways. Some of the effects you may encounter include the child becoming babyish, fretful, clingy, isolated, anxious, attention-seeking or aggressive. He or she may become quiet and suffer from depression. They may begin overeating or may lack appetite. They may start bed-wetting, having nightmares or temper-tantrums. Some will have difficulties at school. Children are often afraid that they will lose the other parent, that they will be bullied and that other people will find out.

These are sometimes passing phases whilst the child comes to terms with the situation and their parent’s absence. Some children will not display any of these symptoms. However, sometimes you may find it helpful to seek outside support and advice on dealing with the child’s behaviour – please consult our “Handbook for Families and Friends” for a list of helpful organisations.

Children are likely to be anxious and worried about where their parent is, and whether he or she will be coming back. They may also feel that they are in some way responsible for their mother/father being away. If you can dispel some of these fears, then the child will be less troubled.

Once you have told your child, the most important thing is to keep listening to them. If they don’t want to talk about it, don’t force them. Children will cope best if given love, understanding, constant reassurance and time to express themselves. Some other useful suggestions made by parents in similar situations about helping your child cope are:

- respect them as individuals - no matter what age they are, they have opinions which should not be ignored. Babies and very young children will obviously not be able to understand what has happened but you can still talk to them about the other parent.
- be honest and open with them.
- share your own feelings. If you are upset, say so. If you are angry, explain why. Don’t exclude them by saying nothing.
- give them time for questions.
- allow time for their tears and anger.
- don’t be afraid to ask for advice on meeting their needs (perhaps by consulting an appropriate organisation, for example).
- it may be helpful for your child to have a second person who they feel they can trust - a relative, friend or teacher. There may be things they feel unable to tell you, perhaps because they are worried that it will upset you.
- keeping a routine going can be important as it helps children feel more secure if they know what to expect each day.

- being consistent and setting clear rules on behaviour can sometimes feel like more hard work than it is worth, but in the longer term can help keep the family on an even keel.

Whatever the length of time their parent is away, it is important to give the child a sense of the future. Count days to special events like birthdays, school holidays and, if appropriate, the next visit. Older children may like to keep a diary. You need to take account of your child's wishes when it comes to keeping in touch - by using letters and drawings (and, if appropriate, by telephone calls and visits), your child can choose how much contact they have. They will need your support and encouragement in the choices they make. They also need to know that it is still OK to love their parent who is in prison - whether it appears that the parent has done wrong or not - and that their parent still loves them. Above all else, they will need constant reassurance from you and help in maintaining contact with their parent in prison abroad.

What about other people?

Unfortunately, you may not be able to stop other people knowing about your situation which means there may be times when you will have to help your child deal with people saying or doing things which upset them. In the case of an arrest with media coverage, prejudices and fears in the local community may be strong. The children will need your support and reassurance that they have done nothing wrong. You may also like to think about confiding in your child's teacher so that they are aware of the additional stress on your child. You can ask the teacher to treat the information you give them as completely confidential - other staff only need to know that there are changed family circumstances and that one parent is no longer at home.

What about your own feelings?

The absence of the parent who is in prison abroad changes relationships within the family. The carer at home has to take on more responsibility and in some cases, assume a responsibility they did not have before. Grandparents, siblings and friends may suddenly find themselves caring for a child when there is no one else to do so. The burden of child-care may feel overwhelming at times especially when combined with worrying about the welfare of the person who is in prison abroad. At times, you may well feel tired and irritable. Finding another adult, a family member, friend, or someone in the same situation (Prisoners Abroad can help with this, as we have a Family Linking Scheme and sometimes we hold family days) to talk to and off-load some of your feelings on to is really important.