



Dear Incarcerated Parent – It’s important to write letters to your children.

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Having worked for more than two decades with incarcerated parents and their children, I wanted to share my observation on the importance of letter writing. My agency, Arkansas Voices Left behind, utilize letter writing as part of our parenting from prison and jail curricula, as well as a way to provide support for the children left behind. I have had the chance to read letters written by the parent, read letters received by the child, and read letters written by the children to their parents. Here are my insights based on these different lenses of observation.

When children are separated from their parents due to parental incarcerated, many parents re-discover the almost-lost art form of letter writing. While phone calls and contact visits are also important, letter writing offers as a valuable form of communication – one that is tangible and can be read and re-read by a child throughout their life.

First, regardless of what your child may say, children need someone who will love them unconditionally, a love that is invaluable when it comes from a separated parent. Children are always looking to their parents for this acceptance. When they feel that you, their parent, truly value them, you provide them with the courage and resilience to overcome feelings of self-doubt, knowing that they have a place in this world because they have a place of value with their parent.

Many parents, both inside and outside of prison, take it for granted that their children know how special they are to their parent. However, most parents do not communicate this acceptance and love in a concrete or repetitive manner. This is especially difficult for parents separated by prison or jail walls and their children are coping with the loss of the parent in their daily lives. The children don’t have the opportunity to observe the parental love in small, daily ways which those of us on the outside take for granted. Sometimes, the children are torn between caregivers who may or may not allow collect phone call from you, or may even forbid them to write letters to their incarcerated parents. However, if your child’s caregiver permits them to receive your letters, these letters offer a genuine way for a parent

inside to communicate the sought-for message of acceptance, value, worthiness in a way that children ‘hear’ the message. The letter is a message that they can read again and again.

Many children have told me they sleep with these letters. Many children have shared these letters with me, and those that receive them too infrequently will tell me how often they return to the letters for comfort and soothing of their loss. Letters matter to the children of incarcerated parents.

Here are some suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of letters from a parent in prison or jail to a child. First, it is important to focus on the child in the letter, but avoid asking questions that place the child in an awkward position if the caregiver is also reading the letter. It is best to write words of encouragement and of value—as unconditional as you can compose – such as:

“I think of you so often and wonder what you are doing, hoping it is interesting or fun.”

“I admire (like, love, appreciate, value) the kind of caring person you are becoming.”

“I have noticed or hear from (your grandmother, father, and foster parent) about how hard you work at school.”

“I admire you for the efforts you are putting out. I believe that being willing to work hard is so important in all that you do.”

Briefly share with your child that you are well, getting along with so-in-so, doing so-in-so, in whatever brief way you can reassure your child that you are okay. Please avoid telling them your troubles, health issues, fears, woes, or anxieties, especially for younger children. Also, avoid attempting to discipline the child through a letter. For example, if someone has told you some negative behavior or attitude of the child, avoid being the source of negative complaints about their behavior. Because you are not there, try not attempt to correct behaviors or attitudes with a letter, but do keep the door open for them to share with you their feelings, fears, offering them a listening ear without judgment. Parents who are incarcerated cannot discipline effectively long-distance and your frequently re-read letters are not the place to state a negative opinion of the child, from someone else or from you. You are the encourager, perhaps the most important encourager in your child’s life during your separation; your role as disciplinarian will come after you are back.

Here is an excerpt from an actual letter from an incarcerated mother in prison to her daughter:

When you are going through a difficult time, you may wonder if you’re making the right choice. You may wonder about how things will work out. Make sure the choice you make feels right to you and that you have prayed about it. I know you for who you are. You are a very strong and a very intelligent and motivated young lady. And you can and will face the challenges that come to you, and make the right choices for you. And never forget that you are a very loving and warm person with a lot to give others, as well as to receive love from others...”

This is the kind of letter that inspires and reassures children. This mother has given her child some things to think about, ways to be positive about herself, convey unconditional acceptance while encouraging and nurturing qualities, character skills, mindfulness and encouragement. This letter represents a few of the things that a child of an incarcerated parent needs from their parent.