

## What's So Tough about Communication?

When parents leave for incarceration the type and degree of difficulty their children face can widely range. Regardless of how children initially react to parental incarceration, “maintaining close family ties during incarceration has been shown to result in decreased recidivism rates, improved mental health of inmates and other family members, increased likelihood of family reunification following release, and greater potential for parole success” (Hariston, 1991; Schaefer, 1991; Reed, 1997).

At the expense of the children, the logistics behind communication between children and their incarcerated parents make communication, and therefore, stability within the family unit, often-impossible goals. So we're here to explain: What's so tough about communication?

The issue is embedded in Distance, Time, Cost, and Lack of Privacy and Comfort, all of which are deeply intertwined.

Understandably, prisons are located in remote areas, relatively far away from society, making it difficult for most families to visit often, if at all. In a 1993 study, it was reported that “the distance from the child's residence to the correctional facility accounted for 43% of the reasons cited by mothers for having infrequent or no visits from their children (Bloom and Steinhart, 1993; Reed, 1997).” In the same study, “61.5% of the children lived over 1000 miles from the mother's incarceration” (Bloom and Steinhart, 1993; Reed, 1997). This truth is not limited to one obscure study back in the 90s, but can be verified on a large scale. For example, the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Justice cited only 19% state parent inmates report seeing their children at least once a month (USDJ, 2008). More notably, 58.5% of state parent inmates and 44.7% of federal parent inmates report having never been visited by their children (USDJ, 2008).

It is important to recognize that driving hundreds of miles to visit an incarcerated parent usually requires waking up abnormally early, typically requiring the guardian spend several hours driving and paying for gas, or paying a bus service to drive the children and guardians to the facility and back. Either way, the distance by which the children and incarcerated parents are separated translates into a time, cost and energy commitment that is often unsustainable.

The trouble with visitation does not end there. It has been well documented that “visitors are treated, at best, as unwelcome guests to be barely tolerated and, more often, as intruders to be kept in line through humiliation and intimidation;” children are not exempt from this (Pratt, 2004). Without regard to the apparent emotional, social and developmental differences between adults and children, “children must endure correctional procedures just as everyone else. This can mean being searched and treated in a demeaning manner or having their actions restricted due to the rules of the institution”(Pratt, 2004). Despite the fact that visitation is known as the most successful method in maintaining meaningful, healthy relationships between children and their incarcerated parents, “prison visiting is both psychologically and physically demanding for children and adults,” and does not seem to be changing any time soon (Pratt, 2004).

In addition to visitation, telephone calls from the incarcerated parents to the children can be made. To be clear, there is no way the children can ever contact the parents via telephone. One telephone service provider monopolizes all telephone calls, which thereby limits the amount of calls inmates can make. Due to the monopoly, families who complain about the rising cost or poor service provided have little to no effective recourse available to them; as a monopoly, the service provider knows these (often low-income) families have no alternative. Calls from inmates last at most for only 30 minutes at a time, sometimes even less. Additionally, calls can only be placed by the inmates during specific designated times, which drastically limits the window in which children and incarcerated parents may communicate. It is clear to see how “communication factors under these conditions make it virtually impossible for children and parents to have any type of meaningful relationship” (Pratt, 2004).

The last option children have to communicate with their parent is via written correspondence. “All written correspondence is read by correctional officers and searched for illegal items,” eliminating any kind of privacy between the children and parents (Pratt, 2004). While this may be the simplest of the options available, the frequency with which these letters and photos are sent is not high. 48.3% of all state parent inmates and 35.8% of all federal parent inmates report to receiving mail from their children less than once a month or less, with 30.4% of all state inmate parents and 16.0% of all federal inmates report to never having received any mail from their children (USDJ, 2008). This is because while it is the simplest, it is still not simple.

Many children (especially minors) are unfamiliar with the U.S. postage system, or do not have the extra money to send a substantial amount of letters and photos regularly. Frankly put, it is an additional inconvenience that falls on the child, who is already burdened with the emotional trauma and difficulty that accompany losing a parent (This is where Photo Patch comes in).

In highlighting these four issues, the intricacy and inconvenience of parent-child communication become apparent. With incarceration in the United States reaching an unprecedented rate, so does the number of children with incarcerated parents. Now is the time to take action and ensure these children are able to maintain healthy relationships with their incarcerated parents, something research proves directly correlates with children's success. Support Photo Patch. Support the kids.

This article was written by Krista Staropoli, Chief Editor of Photo Patch Foundation.

1. Pratt, N. S. "Families overcoming obstacles together: A comprehensive program for incarcerated parents and their children" (2004)
2. Reed, Diane F., and Edward L. Reed. "Children of Incarcerated Parents". *Social Justice* 24.3 (69) (1997): 152-169.
3. U.S. Department of Justice (2008) Bureau of Justice Statistics, Social Report; Incarcerated Parents and Their Children