Parenting From Prison

A Hands-on Guide for Incarcerated Parents

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To God,
who deserves all glory
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Introduction

It is estimated that 2,000,000 children in the United States have a parent behind bars. If you are reading this book, you're most likely one of the parents of these children or you know someone who is, and it is your desire to reach out and help them with the additional emotional burdens they are facing.

Unfortunately, there are relatively few programs or agencies focused on helping an incarcerated parent build and maintain a healthy and positive relationship with their child. This book was written for the parent in prison who is seeking to establish or grow a quality relationship with their child.

Each child's emotional situation is unique, as well the circumstances surrounding your incarceration, and the home environment your child is now in. As such, it is extremely important to remember that your child's best interests are the main goal and priority in determining the appropriate parenting strategy to employ. If there is any question about how to proceed, please seek the advice
of a professional therapist or counselor. This book was written for those situations where establishing and growing a relationship is in your child's best interest.

Parenting any child is typically a big challenge. Parenting a child, when you are an incarcerated parent, can seem overwhelming but it is not impossible. It is a unique experience that requires you to adapt, your traditional parental roles and responsibilities, to the prison environment and the limitations that come with it.

As a child develops and grows, they are faced with learning a wide range of new physical and emotional skills. The separation of a parent, due to an incarceration, often creates a situation where the child is unable to progress along the typical emotional development path. This disruption generally occurs because the child is exposed to new, additional or more powerful feelings, which have the overall effect of weakening their ability to cope and normally progress emotionally.

The range of feelings a child may experience can be very broad. They can include anger, rage, abandonment, rejection, hopelessness, powerlessness, loss, sadness, fear, guilt, disbelief, anxiety and confusion. It is important to help children understand and work through their feelings. There is only one way or you to do this with your child - to stay connected to them in a healthy, positive and supportive way.

A healthy connection (relationship attachment to you) with your child is based on a strong foundation of love and trust and is maintained through consistent parenting. Trust and attachment is
critical for a child’s development and is more fully discussed in Chapter 1 – A Child’s Development Needs.

Consistent parenting allows a child to develop trust in you, that you are going to be there for them over the long haul, that they can share their feelings with you, that you will be there to encourage them and that you'll continually guide and support them. Chapter 2 - Preparing to Parent From Prison, details many of the steps required to prepare yourself for parenting your child and includes a sample Parenting Plan.

A child typically asks lots of questions. Your child will ask even more questions. They need honest answers to build trust with you and to more completely understand the situation and feelings they are now experiencing. Chapter 3 – What a Child Asks, identifies and answers the four key questions they will ask you. In addition, this chapter also looks at two critical questions they want to ask you but typically don't.

Despite the challenges and potential issues, personal visits can be one of the most effective ways to connect to your child. Preparing yourself, your child and their caregiver are essential to a successful visit and are reviewed more fully in Chapter 4 – Visiting with Your Child.

Every contact you have with your child is an opportunity to strengthen your relationship and become more connected to them. Activities, separate from visits and phone calls, are a powerful strategy to increase your interaction with your child and become more actively involved in their life. Chapter 5 - Activities to Stay
Connected, presents over thirty activities that will get you more involved with your child.

You can have a strong connection to your child, even despite the challenges you are facing with being incarcerated. Providing your child with love, emotional support, and encouragement are of critical importance to them and will also bring you a renewed sense of hope and strength.
A Child's Development Needs

Parenting plays a critical part in a child's overall development. A child's overall development encompasses a wide range of physical, intellectual, social, emotional and moral development processes. Your role as a parent is to facilitate these processes while providing for your child with the overall love, care, nurturing and protection they need.

When children are dealing with a trauma, such as having a parent in prison, it diverts their emotional energy and moves them away from their required development processes. It is especially important to remember that children are always traumatized by any parental separation. It has a very profound effect on them and can lead to trust issues and behavioral problems.

A child suffering separation trauma, related to a parental incarceration, has unique features. This type of child typically experiences feelings of shame, guilt and low self-esteem. These feelings can impact a child developmentally, especially in the areas of areas of intellectual progression, social development, emotional maturity and moral development.
Preparing to Parent from Prison

The majority of parents who are incarcerated are able to eventually reunite with their children. Even though you are presented with major challenges, it is very important to both you and your child, that you continue in your role as a parent. Both fathers and mothers play very critical roles in the development of their child's sense of security, identity and belonging - which will impact them throughout their entire lives.

A parent, who is incarcerated, typically has a number of major parenting related concerns, including: how to deal with the emotions of being separated from their child, making decisions regarding the care of their children, staying in contact with their child, and reuniting with their child once they are released from prison.

Parenting isn't easy. Parenting from prison is even harder, however, it is still very possible for you to play an active role in your child's life. Unfortunately, many incarcerated parents lose contact with their children and this does not have to happen. It will take a concerted effort on your part, and on the part of your child's other parent or caregiver, and maybe even the court.
On the following pages, a sample Parenting Plan has been provided to assist you in the process of getting started. After the example, there is a blank worksheet that you can use to build a plan specifically for your child. Take your time on the plan; refer back to materials throughout the entire book frequently.

You'll need to modify your child’s plan over time (probably every six months or so) as your child ages, advances developmentally (use chapter 1 development table), changes their ongoing activities and if there have been any behavioral changes.

Be specific as possible - list what you are going to do - commitment is the key – your child needs to know that you care, that you will be consistent and that you will follow through with things you have promised.
What a Child Asks

A developing child will ask lots of questions. Your developing child, with you being incarcerated, will ask even more questions. Their questions and your answers will become a key part of the ongoing relationship that you have with your child. This relationship will require and thrive on honesty and genuineness from you.

A child needs genuine caring parents who provide love, encouragement and nurturing. They need honesty, even when they have been exposed to or are undergoing bad situations, so that they can learn to understand their situation, express their feelings and develop coping skills.

There is often a negative stigma associated with a parent’s incarceration, and in many cases, may cause parents, caregivers and family to make a concerted effort to conceal the truth from the child, their friends and others in the community - thinking they are helping to protect the child. This “concealing of the truth” can take
Visiting with Your Child

One of the very important elements of building and maintaining a child/parent relationship, while you are incarcerated, is direct contact with you child through visitation – if allowable and in the best interest of your child. Personal visits, however infrequent or restricted, are still one of the most effective ways to communicate, relate and attach to your child.

Some people believe that it may be too traumatic for a child to visit with a parent who is in prison. Many children, however, can benefit from contact with their parent; even if it occurs in a prison. Every child is different, but generally the sooner a child can have contact with their incarcerated parent, the better. Although a visit can be emotionally trying for your child, the long-term benefits may outweigh any potential short-term difficulties.

Personal visits, allow you to more closely relate with your child – to express your love for them and to see how they are growing and developing. You are also able to see their body language and expressions, have personal contact (if permissible) through hugs, etc. They can also see personally how you're doing,
Activities to Stay Connected

Your child needs to stay in contact and to be connected with you, while you're in prison, in order for your relationship to grow and develop in a meaningful way. Contact can be in the form of personal visits, phone calls, letters and other personalized activities.

Each of the contacts with your child, create opportunities for you to develop relationship connection points. These connection points give you the opportunity to show your child that you love them, care for them, are interested in their uniqueness, see how they are feeling and to learn about what issues they are struggling with. They will also help your child to adjust and heal from the trauma caused by your separation from them.

The value that each connection point brings to the relationship you have with your child is dependent on the quality and content of the interaction that occurs during the connection. As you effectively interact with your child, it will create an opportunity for them to potentially adjust their behavior and attitudes and to be more able to adapt to the new situation.
You Can Effectively Parent From Prison!

In Parenting From Prison, James Birney tackles child separation issues with an indispensable and practical survival manual that will help you to build and maintain a healthy, positive and rewarding relationship with your child.

Parenting From Prison isn't academic theory, it's a hands-on guide packed with tips, techniques & activities that will get you and keep you connected to your child.

Learn Techniques that will help your child:
- Feel Loved & Valued
- Build Hope & Resilience
- Be Encouraged & Affirmed

Full of essentials on How to Prepare To Parent, Questions & Answers about What Your Child Will Ask or Wants to Ask But Won't, Preparing for a Visit, and dozens of activities to keep you strongly connected between visits.

Not just tools and tips, Parenting From Prison helps you build positive and honest relationships; where children can thrive and grow.

James Birney previously operated a prison ministry focused on supporting prison inmates and their families.