

Not living together in the same household can make it difficult for any dad to maintain contact with his children and remain involved in their lives. But the unique experiences of dads in prison—given their environment and its limitations—can make staying connected with family and children a particularly tough struggle.

Being apart from your children can be frustrating and discouraging. You may have a tremendous feeling of loss knowing you are unable to participate in a wide range of daily activities with your children, such as reading, watching TV, going to fun events, doing homework, shopping, or just being together doing nothing special. Although your in-person time with your children might be brief right now, you can develop creative ways to renew or increase contact with them to hold onto or build positive, caring relationships.

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Take Time to Be a Dad Today

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Connected



One incarcerated father wanted to learn more about how his daughters were doing in school. He sent the girls' mother a 9" x 12" clasp envelope, already addressed to him in prison and with enough postage for about 40 sheets of paper. He asked their mother to send him any extra school papers she did not want to keep and otherwise would throw away. He now receives an envelope filled with school papers every 3–4 months. He reads each paper carefully and with the information they provide, he can praise his daughters and encourage them to keep up their good work in school. "We don't play 20 questions during phone calls or in letters any more," the dad reports. "We have lots to talk about now and we've grown closer as a result of my receiving their school papers."

A group of fathers in a Missouri State prison purchased plain white pillowcases from the prison store. Using fabric markers, each father created a personalized pillowcase for each of his children. When the pillowcase art was complete, the dads mailed the special keepsakes to their children, along with a handmade card for each child.

At McNeil Island Corrections Center in Washington State, fathers sent "hugs" home to their children. Using a 3-foot wide roll of brown paper, each father had someone trace his head and upper body, with arms outstretched, on the paper. Then each dad drew his features on the paper and added a personalized message to his child. (One father made a hug for each of his eight children.) The traced pictures were cut from the paper and mailed to the children, who were able to wrap their dads' comforting life-size arms around them whenever they needed a hug at home.

A group of fathers incarcerated at the State Correctional Institution in Chester, Pennsylvania, identified games they could play with their children through the mail. They created a booklet, "Father and Child Activity Book: Ideas for Keeping Connected through the Mail," which was made available to all the men in the facility. The booklet explained how dads could play games such as chess, checkers, Battleship, Scrabble, and dot-to-dot—and a few games they invented themselves—exchanging mail and taking turns with their children.

Dads in other institutions ask their children to create fictional characters. Each month, the dads write a new chapter of a story that features the characters the children imagined. The relationships between father and children strengthen as the fathers weave the characters into new adventures and send the tales to their children.

Writing in a journal is another way dads in prison keep in contact with their children and help prepare them for the day they will be reunited. You can write about your family, what your life was like as you were growing up, who your heroes were and why, and any other recollections or details that will help your children understand the man you are. Try to write a few sentences every day and share the journal with your children regularly. Before you know it, you will have a powerful, informative personal snapshot that will enrich the connection between you and your children.

Staying aware of your children's needs and interests is an important step in remaining connected. As children grow, what and how they learn will change. Make sure your approach to keeping in touch with your children is age-appropriate. For example, a toddler could enjoy a paper hug from dad, but as a non-reader could not bond with dad by reading his journal, as a teenager could.

For a variety of reasons, many dads do not see their children on a regular basis. As a result, they often have to redefine their roles and responsibilities as a father. Incarcerated dads have extraordinary challenges to keeping track of their children's development and activities. Nevertheless, incarcerated dads across the country are improving the quality of their relationships with their children just by starting with a little inspiration, mixing in some imagination, and adding a lot of love.

Look and Learn

MOVIES

Drumline

The Rookie

Stand by Me

National Treasure

National Treasure: Book of Secrets

Secondhand Lions

BOOKS

1001 Things Your Kids Should See & Do
by Harry Harrison

How to Really Love Your Child
by Ross Campbell and D. Ross Campbell

Whose Kids Are These Anyway?
by Ken Swarner

The Five Love Languages of Children
by Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell

Chicken Soup for the Father & Daughter Soul: Stories to Celebrate the Love Between Dads & Daughters Throughout the Years
by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Patty Aubery, and Nancy Mitchell Autio