

A BILLOF RIGHTS FOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

Right #5: "I have the right to speak with, see and touch my parent."

Children of Incarcerated Parents: Keeping In Touch

Communicating is an important part of keeping a relationship alive. When children are separated from a parent or loved one, communication becomes a necessity. A child needs to communicate with their parent/loved one as much as their parent/loved one needs to hear from their child.

Letters

Letters are a lifeline for both the child and the parent/loved one. Letters are a great means of communication during a family separation.

Letter writing is not easy for adults, let alone children. Many children may have never written a letter.

Help a child understand:

- It is not what the letter looks like or how well it is written that makes it important. It is the fact that they have communicated with the parent/loved one.
- That their parent/loved one would like to know what is going on with them, good or bad. They would like to know about their friends and how they spend their free time.
- The parent/loved one would also like to know that the child still loves and needs them.

Be sure to emphasize that "Patience" is very important when communicating through letters. Inform the child that mail is irregular at best. Letters and packages seldom arrive two days in a row--sometimes as much as two to three weeks pass between the time you place in the mail and the time they received it.

Guiding a child to write:

Here are a few ways to enhance a child's letter writing:

Instruct the child to:

- Write as though they are talking directly to their parent/loved one.
- Let their parent/loved one know they still need them, by asking advice when needed.
- Tell of daily activities in amusing and interesting ways.
- Remember to express their love for their parent/loved one.
- Share their feelings as openly and freely as they can.
- Let their parent/loved one know that they would like to know how they are feeling.
- Enclose pictures in their letters. Send pictures of home, the Christmas tree, activities around the house, etc.
- Relay news of the neighborhood, friends, and relatives.

How Adults Can Help:

In helping a child write, remember that your goal is to make writing easier and more enjoyable.

1. Provide a place.
It's important for a child to have a good place to write--a desk or table with a smooth, flat surface and good lighting.
2. Have the materials.
Provide plenty of paper--lined and unlined--and things to write with, including pencils, pens, and crayons.
3. Allow time.
Help the child spend time thinking about a writing project or exercise. Good writers do a great deal of thinking. The child may dawdle, sharpen a pencil, get papers ready, or look up the spelling of a word. Be patient--the child may be thinking.
4. Respond.
Do respond to the ideas a child expresses verbally or in writing. Make it clear that you are interested in the true function of writing which is to convey ideas.
 - *This means focusing on "what" the child has written, not "how" it was written.*
 - *Ignore minor errors, particularly when a child is just getting ideas together.*
5. Don't you write it!
*Don't write a paper for the child.
Never rewrite a child's work.
Taking responsibility for the finished product, and feeling ownership of it are important parts of writing well.*
6. Praise.
Take a positive approach and say something good about the child's writing.
 - *Is it accurate?*
 - *Descriptive?*
 - *Thoughtful?*
 - *Interesting?*
 - *Does it say something?*

Ways to Encourage Kids' Writing:

What Would Make it Easier for a Child to Write?

Write yourself! Set an example by letting the children see you writing a letter. Then read the letter to the children. Let them add to the letter you are writing. Perhaps you've always wanted to write a short story? Try it. Read it to the children and see what they think of it.

Help the Reluctant Writer

It's natural for young children to bubble over with ideas, schemes, and jokes. Unfortunately, capturing those ideas on paper is not so natural for many kids. They may freeze up, forget their ideas, or fight the pencil.

Struggling writers need practice, but you don't want to make it seem like another chore. The answer is to sneak writing into play — and vice versa.

As Joseph Pearce says in *The Magical Child*,

"The child can never learn to play without the parent playing with the child. Play ... is a huge creative potential built within the child, which never develops unless it is stimulated by the adult model, the parent."

Remember that your role as a writing coach is to have fun and to honor the child's imagination. You don't have to be the drill sergeant in charge of spelling. In fact, research shows us that in the long run, it's far more important to encourage the communication of ideas than to hamper a child's style for the sake of correct spelling.

The root of the word "communication" is "to commune" — in other words, to coax the ideas in a child's brain down through the paper and up into your brain. You can help by:

- Saying, "Let's play a game." There's no need to mention "writing game" if a child is a reluctant writer.
- Choosing subjects a child loves, like brontosaurus or monster movies or soccer or shoes.
- Talking through ideas, asking questions, and listening carefully to answers.
- Making drawings, notes, and story maps together, if a child can't remember ideas.
- Praise honestly and liberally.
- Keeping games short.
- Sending it to family members and friends. Writing is meant to be shared.
- Quitting if it isn't fun.

Things to Do

1. Make it real.
 - a. A child needs to do real writing.
 - b. It's more important for the child to write a letter to a relative than it is to write a one-line note on a greeting card.
 - c. Encourage the child to write to relatives and friends.
2. Suggest note-taking.
 - a. Encourage the child to take notes on trips or outings and to describe what (s)he saw.
 - b. This could include a description of nature walks, a boat ride, a car trip, or other events that lend themselves to note-taking.
3. Brainstorm.
 - a. Talk with a child as much as possible about his/her impressions and encourage the child to describe people and events to you.
 - b. If the child's description is especially accurate and colorful, say so.
4. Encourage keeping a journal.
 - a. This is excellent writing practice as well as a good outlet for venting feelings.
 - b. Encourage the child to write about things that happen at home and school, about people (s)he likes or dislikes and why, things to remember or things the child wants to do.
 - c. Especially encourage a child to write about personal feelings--pleasures as well as disappointments.
5. Use games.
 - a. There are numerous games and puzzles that help a child to increase vocabulary and make the child more fluent in speaking and writing.
 - b. Remember, building a vocabulary builds confidence.
 - c. Try crossword puzzles, word games, anagrams and cryptograms designed especially for children.
 - d. Flash cards are good, too, and they're easy to make at home.
6. Suggest making lists.
 - a. Most children like to make lists just as they like to count. Encourage this. Making lists is good practice and helps a child to become more organized. Boys and girls might make lists of their records, tapes, baseball cards, dolls, furniture in a room, etc. They could include items they want.
7. Encourage copying.
 - a. If a child likes a particular song, suggest learning the words by writing them down--replaying the song on your stereo/tape player or jotting down the words whenever the song is played on a radio program.
 - b. Also encourage copying favorite poems or quotations from books and plays.

Things to Know:

Drawing as a Form of Writing

One of the first means of communication for a child is through drawing.

Writing is anything that the child is able to put down on paper. It doesn't necessarily mean words or letters. Drawing and scribbling are important pre-writing skills. Children use symbols to express their ideas as they draw.

Let them draw things and then ask them what they have drawn. Drawing things represents something to children.

1. Do encourage the child to draw and to discuss his/her drawings.
2. Ask questions:
 - a. What is the boy doing?
 - b. Does the house look like yours or someone you know?
 - c. Can you tell a story about this picture?
3. Show an interest in, and ask questions about, the things a child says, draws, and may try to write.
4. If a child is able to tell you what the drawing represents, but unable to write yet, ask them if they would like you to write a word or two on the picture.

Writing requires:

1. Clear thinking.
Sometimes the child needs to have his/her memory refreshed about a past event in order to write about it.
2. Sufficient time.
Children may have `stories in their heads' but need time to think them through and write them down. You may not often have long enough time.
3. Reading.
Reading can stimulate a child to write about his/her own family or school life.
4. A Meaningful Task.
A child needs meaningful, not artificial writing tasks. Suggestions for such tasks are in the section, "Things To Do."
5. Interest.
All the time in the world won't help if there is nothing to write, nothing to say. Some of the reasons for writing include:
 - *sending messages*
 - *keeping records*
 - *expressing feelings*
 - *or relaying information.*

Games to Encourage a Child's Writing

Fortunately/Unfortunately

The writer Remy Charlip wrote a classic children's book called *Fortunately*, in which one good event happens, followed by its unfortunate opposite. The book opens with,

"Fortunately one day, Ned got a letter that said, 'Please Come to a Surprise Party.' But unfortunately the party was in Florida and he was in New York."

You do not need the book to play this game, but it's more fun if you first read it together.

Each person playing the game receives one sheet of paper.

1. Write in large letters at the top of a sheet of paper "Fortunately." On the reverse side, write "Unfortunately."
2. Talk with the child about a trip he or she has always wanted to take: To Disney World? Across the United States by bicycle? To the moon?
3. Help the child think of a first sentence about the trip, starting with something like

"Fortunately, we won the lottery. Our whole family decided to buy bicycles and ride across the United States. Mother quit her job."

4. Once the "Fortunately" sentences are written, pass each paper to the other player.
5. Turn it over and write the "Unfortunately" part. For example:

"Unfortunately, it rained every day, and our bicycles rusted."

6. If a child wants to play more, you can either make new Fortunately/Unfortunately sheets or you can draw a line under the first part and continue the story.
7. Number each part on the front and back, so you can read the finished stories out loud more easily.

(Remember, this is not the time to fuss about spelling. If it's easier for your child with LD, let her dictate to you. Your role is to help your reluctant writer communicate her ideas to the world.)

Time Capsule

Start by gathering paper and writing tools, and an envelope for each child. Tell the children that you will be making imagine they are making a time capsule, to be opened in one or five or ten years (or for whatever length of time you all vote). It is to be a record of who you were, who you are today, and who you want to be.

Have each child write a private letter, telling the world about his or her life. Where were you born? How old are you today? What do you look like? What are your favorite activities? Foods? Books? Movies? Colors? Vacations? What's going on in the world today? Where do you want to be in one or five or ten years? If a child has pets in the family, have the children write letters for the pets.

When each person is finished, have them write a "This is who I am and what I want to do in (whatever length of time you all voted)." Seal the letter in the envelope and address it.

If I Ruled the World

Tell each child they each have been elected to rule the world. He/she will need to give an acceptance speech on TV to his adoring subjects, but must supply the text of his speech to the person (you) who types it for the TelePrompTer.

Now plan the speech. If a child has trouble with handwriting or sequencing, talk first about his ideas for ruling the world. What needs to be changed in the world? What would make it fun for his subjects to live in his world? Is there anybody he wants to thank for helping him reach this important position? What are his plans for the future?

Make Writing a Game, Not a Chore!

(Excerpted from the Friends Outside Visitor Centers' Program Manual: "Bridging the Communications Gap: Encouraging Children to Write" 2007)