

15. Coming home

When a family member comes home from prison

Returning home to family from prison can be challenging for everyone. Family roles and relationships have often changed while the family member has been away, and it can be hard to adjust. Former inmates may find it tough to step back into community life. Finding work and coping without the structure and routine of the prison may be difficult. Often there are high expectations by at least one party which can't be met.

Do you want your family member to return to your home?

Families often face a lot of pressure to take in a family member who's leaving prison. This pressure may come directly from your family member, or from others, sometimes including service providers working with your family member. Think carefully about whether you want to do this. You need to weigh up the needs of all the family, including children, before making this decision.

If in the past you've experienced violence or abuse from your family member, or have been affected by their use of drugs or alcohol, don't assume that just being away in prison has changed things.

Remember that once your family member is released and living with you, it's often very hard to get them to leave.

If you're feeling guilty about not wanting your family member back, don't let your feelings push you into a decision that may be bad for you and for others at home. It's okay to care about someone but still not want to live with them. Your family member will have to take responsibility for their future if they're to successfully adjust to life 'outside'. You can't rescue them, or take on their responsibilities for them.

Changing roles

Former inmates

An inmate returning to their family has to make many difficult changes as they readjust to family life. This is true for parents, sons, daughters or partners. Life in prison is highly structured. There are few decisions to make and little need to deal with other people's feelings and choices. Inmates have described life in prison as being quite 'black and white'. Family life is much more complex. It isn't possible just to focus on yourself. Although inmates are usually keen to leave the prison, they may find it very hard to settle back into the family.

Partners

Partners often have to take on more responsibility for financial and other matters while their partner is in prison. They may feel surprised or even uncomfortable about how well they've coped during that time. Some may not love their partner any less, but they've been able to get on with life without them. Others may question whether they want to continue the relationship after release. This independence can create difficulties for the former inmate as well. They may assume that everything will just be the way it was before they were incarcerated. Men in particular may be used to being in charge, and may have mixed feelings when they realise that their partner doesn't depend on them the way they did before. Inmates who have had a lengthy sentence may also find it hard when they're dependent on their partner to help them cope with things that have changed



while they were inside, like using a mobile phone or the internet.

Children

Children respond in different ways when a parent comes home from prison. This partly depends on the child's age and partly on how long their parent has been away. Younger children may feel insecure. They may need reassurance that the parent is not going to leave again.

Children may be clingy, and get worried when the returned parent leaves the house or even the room. Some children withdraw from the parent, or avoid them. They may feel they can't rely on them, in case they leave again. Some children ignore the parent or treat them like a stranger in the house. Older children may feel upset about the changing roles in the family. They may 'test the limits' by acting up or resenting the attention that the returned parent is receiving.

There can often be competition between an older child and a returned parent. Older children have often taken on extra responsibilities while their parent was away. They may react badly when the returned parent tries to discipline them. Their attitude may be 'Who are you to tell me what to do? You've been in prison.'

Some older children

feel protective of the other parent and angry with the returned parent because their actions have hurt or stressed other people in the family. If they've faced teasing or rejection from peers, they may be angry with the parent whose actions have led to this.

It's really important to talk to children about what's happening. They need you to listen hard and let them say what they think. Let them know that it's normal to have a mixture of feelings, some good and some bad, towards the returned parent. If children feel safe to talk about how they feel, they're less likely to withdraw or behave aggressively.

If you find it hard to talk with your children, another trusted adult may be able to help. Some children find it hard to talk to parents because they're trying to protect them. A family friend, school counsellor, teacher or youth worker may sometimes be an easier person for them to talk to. You could also give them the number of Kids Help Line – **1800 551 800** and allow them privacy and support to make the call. You can help by letting them know you understand they may need to talk with someone outside the family, and by respecting their privacy. Avoid trying to get them to tell you what they've said. If you keep communication open, they'll tell you when they're ready.

Carers

Resuming care of children after time in prison can be challenging for the parent, the carer and sometimes the children. It can be hard for carers to let go, especially if they're not confident about the former inmate's ability to look after the children, or have different priorities in parenting. Carers often form close bonds with children in their care, and it can be hard for both children and carers if this relationship is suddenly disrupted.

Try to talk about the children's care in the visits before the parent is released, rather than leaving everything until they get out. This can clarify whether everyone has the same needs and expectations, or whether there are issues to be resolved. Some carers may be quite happy to let go of their role once the parent returns, especially if they've only been caring for the children for a short time. In other situations it may work better for the parent to gradually take over responsibilities. This will work better if the parent is confident that the carer will support them and isn't trying to prevent the children from going home. It may work well for everyone if the carer can have an ongoing role in the children's lives and can provide back-up for the parent.

Parents may find it harder than they expect to resume parenting responsibilities. They may benefit from a family service that can assist

them with strategies and support as they adjust to their role. If carers have real doubts about the parent's ability to cope with the children on release and feel they can't address these issues directly with the parent, they may need to seek legal advice.

Parents

Parents with a son or daughter in prison may have conflicting feelings about their child's release. They may be relieved that they'll no longer have to visit the prison. If their family member has had a long sentence, they may feel anxiety about this next stage. Some parents may have had a more peaceful life while their family member was in prison than when they were outside. They may be worried about what it will be like to have them back home again.

Many parents worry that their family member may reoffend or use drugs once they're released. They may try to monitor or control their family member's behaviour to prevent this. Unfortunately this can backfire, with the family member offending or using drugs as a way of 'breaking out' of their parents' control and asserting their own will. If your son or daughter is going to live with you when they're released, try to talk about how they would like you to support them, rather than monitoring them behind their back.

At the same time, remember it's

your home and you have the right to set house rules for the people who live there. Reasonable house rules include expectations about paying board, having visitors, doing washing, tidying up, and not using drugs or doing other illegal activities on the premises. If there's an unresolvable conflict about what's acceptable behaviour, it may be better for your son or daughter to find somewhere else to live (see '**Planning for release**' on p.107). You'll need to think about this if your family member will be on parole and living at your place is a condition of their parole order. Community Corrections Officers prepare a release plan that includes where the former inmate will live. This happens about six months before a release date.

Readjusting to life outside

If your family member has been away for a long time, they'll have lost touch with many day-to-day things. For example, they may not know how much things cost, or how to use public transport. The names and expectations of government and community agencies may have changed while they were away. Many former inmates suspect that other people can tell they've been in prison, even if they don't tell them directly. Fear and insecurity can lead to withdrawing from the world altogether, locking themselves in

a room much as they were when in prison. They may experience severe mood swings and become emotionally unpredictable.

In prison your family member might have had to use threats, violence or withdrawal to try to deal with conflicts. These strategies won't work well on the outside. Try not to take negative reactions personally. Seeing these behaviours as coping strategies that your family member needed in the prison can help you find the patience you'll need. This doesn't mean you have to accept their negative behaviour. Let them know how you feel. For example, 'I feel hurt when you don't respond to me when I talk to you'. For your own safety and that of your children, don't tolerate violent, controlling or abusive behaviour. If your family member tries to deal with situations in this way, get outside help fast. Excusing violence because your family member has been inside means they don't have to take responsibility for learning to deal with situations differently. If this behaviour escalates, it can be dangerous for everyone.

Expectations of partners

Because of the limitations placed on a relationship when a partner is in prison, both inmates and their partners outside can have quite unrealistic expectations about what the relationship will be like after prison. Inmates have a lot of time to day dream about how things will

be, with little opportunity for 'reality testing' these fantasies. Prison relationships can sometimes seem 'perfect' away from the real world.

Once the inmate is back home, both partners have to face reality. Sometimes partners have put up with the offender's abusive behaviour, drug or alcohol abuse, or criminal lifestyle, for years. It can be tempting to believe that a partner has 'learnt their lesson'. They may have made promises that things will be different, and you may want to give them the benefit of the doubt. For your own sake, be realistic.

You need to talk about issues and expectations clearly before your partner leaves the prison, or as soon as possible after release. If you can't talk about these things, ask yourself whether things have really changed. Some tips for getting back together:

- > take it slowly to allow time to get reacquainted;
- > be prepared for your partner to have difficulties adjusting;
- > be honest about the problems you had before your partner went into the prison – time alone won't have changed them;
- > allow for privacy and personal space;
- > make time for your own needs, including relaxation and recreation;
- > be honest and open about your feelings;

- > negotiate your expectations of each other and the roles each of you will take on;
- > spend time talking to the children, before your partner is released, about what will happen;
- > get support, either separately or together, from family, friends and professionals.

Addressing family issues before release

An inmate's actions may have had a big impact on family members. Family may have been victims of crimes committed by the inmate, or may have suffered because of other people's reactions to what the inmate has done.

Family Group Conferencing can provide an opportunity for the inmate to meet with their family and for the family to acknowledge the hurt they've suffered as a result of what the inmate has done. The presence of an independent facilitator ensures that the meeting stays safe and focused. Conferencing can prepare everyone for when the inmate is released, and can help people decide what future involvement they may have, or choose not to have, with the inmate.

Family Group Conferences can be arranged through the Services and Programs Officer (SAPO) at the prison.

Concerns they will use drugs after release

If your family member has a history of drug use, you may be understandably concerned for them once they leave the prison. While you can provide support, you can't stop them from using drugs if they decide to do so. If your family member uses drugs like heroin when they get back outside, there's a real risk they could overdose, especially when they first start using again. The first 72 hours is the period where they'll be at most risk of overdosing, although there's a risk in injecting drug use at any time.

If you're worried about your family member using safely, you may want to make sure they know about the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (MSIC). The MSIC operates at 66 Darlinghurst Rd, Kings Cross, seven hours a day, five days a week – phone **9360 1191**. Clients must be over 18 years old.

The centre is totally confidential and non-judgemental. It has booths where people can inject themselves, waste bins for used syringes, a fully equipped resuscitation room to manage drug overdoses, and a counselling room. There are two trained staff, including a registered nurse permanently on duty.

Need help?

Note that 1800 numbers are free for calls from a landline but may only be available in certain locations, e.g. outside Sydney. Some may charge for calls from mobile phones, so check this if you need to call from a mobile. Check with your local library for free internet access.

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

Advice, information and referrals about drugs and alcohol. Ring ADIS to find the nearest Needle and Syringe Program (see p.120).

9361 8000

1800 422 599

Child Protection Helpline

Contact FACS if you're concerned that a child is at risk of harm or to request assistance.

132 111

Community Legal Centres

Community Legal Centres offer free legal advice. Contact them to find the centre nearest you.

9212 7333

www.clcnsw.org.au

Community Restorative Centre (CRC)

Provides support to inmates, former inmates and their families.

9288 8700

www.crcnsw.org.au



Family Drug Support



Family Drug Support offers information and referral, family support groups and courses for families affected by a family member's drug use.

1300 368 186

www.fds.org.au

Fams



Contact Fams to find the nearest family service. Family services are non-government organisations whose support workers can help with parenting and other family matters through home visiting, counselling and groups.

8354 3799

www.fams.asn.au

Kids Helpline

24-hour telephone counselling service for children and young people.

1800 551 800

www.shineforkids.org.au



Lifeline

24-hour telephone counselling and referral.

13 11 14



Lifeline – Sexual Assault and Family Violence Counselling Line

Assistance and referral for people affected by domestic violence.

1800 200 526

1800 RESPECT

Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (MSIC)

9360 1191

NSW Rape Crisis

24-hour counselling and support for people affected by sexual assault, domestic and family violence.

1800 RESPECT

www.nswrapecrisis.com.au



NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA)

Provides safe injecting information, advocacy, support and referral for people who use drugs.

8354 7300

1800 644 413

www.nuaa.org.au



Parentline

Advice, counselling and referrals for parents and carers of children 0-18 years. Monday to Friday 9am-9pm; Saturday & Sunday 4pm to 9pm.

1300 1300 52



Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia.
NEW SOUTH WALES

Relationships

Australia provides face to face and online counselling services and family therapy. They also provide Aboriginal counselling services.

1300 364 277

www.relationshipsnsw.org.au

SHINE for Kids

Services include support, advocacy and referral for children of inmates, inmates and carers. **See p.75** for more details.



Silverwater..... **9714 3000**

Parklea..... **9933 7900**

Windsor **4573 3900**

Kariong **4340 3836**

Bathurst..... **6328 9900**

Cessnock..... **4993 6800**

Wellington..... **6845 5000**

Junee **6934 6000**

Kempsey **6561 3800**

Call **9714 3000** for details about Nowra and Goulburn services

www.shineforkids.org.au