

# CHILD-FRIENDLY PRACTICES WITHIN THE PRISON SETTING

SECOND EDITION



Developed by

Children Visiting Prisons-Kingston Inc.

Canadian Families and Corrections Network

2005

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## Table of Contents

<b>Who May Benefit from This Booklet .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Should Children Visit Prisons? .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The Role of the Correctional Staff .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Criteria for Children’s Indoor Play Spaces .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Floor Plan .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Providing Outdoor Play Space .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Preparing a Child for a Prison Visit .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Telling the Children .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>What Is a Toy Library? .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Craft and Story Times during Visits and Socials .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Visitor Resource Centre.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Children’s Books .....</b>	<b>22</b>

## **Who May Benefit from This Booklet?**

- Warden
- Assistant Warden
- Visits and Correspondence Supervisors
- Visits and Correspondence staff
- Social Development staff
- Chaplaincy Departments
- Inmate committees
- Education Departments within federal institutions
- Families with an incarcerated loved one
- Family Court personnel
- Various community services geared toward children
- Educators
- Volunteers working with families and children

## Introduction

*Play is the vehicle through which children explore, discover and learn about the world and how they relate and fit into it. Therefore, it is essential that play be an integral part of the visiting experience.*

Kathleen Manning

Adapted from Kathleen Manning

Author of *Structuring Play in the Early Years at School*, 1977

The main purpose of this booklet is to emphasize the importance of providing a stimulating, inviting, and family-friendly atmosphere for children while visiting an incarcerated parent or relative. Although this book is intended primarily for those who work directly within the institutional setting, it is our hope that it be used as a direct resource in facilitating the child's visiting experience for all those involved. We wish to provide some valuable insight for families and the community as a whole into the challenges that may be expected as a result of having an incarcerated family member, and equip them with the tools and resources needed to do so. This will enable a smooth transition between the outside world and the institution by offering a comfortable and familiar haven for the child once inside, and offering knowledge to deal with the many situations that may arise.

When children visiting prisons are provided with opportunities for positive interactions between the parent and themselves, it enhances the bonding experience. This in turn encourages and supports the optimal growth of the child during this most difficult time for the family.

It has also been noted that the continuity of maintaining family relationships is a key element supporting reintegration into society of an individual upon his or her release.

## Should Children Visit Prisons?

**According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child, Article 9:** *...ensures that any child who is separated from one or both parents has the right to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if that is contrary to their best interests.*

People often wonder if it wise to expose children to a prison environment. Some fear that the environment may terrify the child, or alternatively, it may be seen as quite a pleasant place to spend one's time. Inmates themselves might discourage visits because they want to spare their families the frustration and distress of visiting. They may also have feelings associated with being in prison. There is no one right answer for every situation, but the case can be made that families benefit from maintaining family ties through crises. In fact, the family is probably the most valuable weapon there is in fighting crime. As long ago as 1972, Holt and Miller in *Explorations in Inmate- Family Relationships*<sup>1</sup> found that, "The central finding of this research is the strong and consistent positive relationship that exists between parole success and maintaining strong family ties while in prison."

There is a need to provide child-oriented visiting spaces in prison visiting rooms and to modify some security practices so that families with children feel welcome. Keeping parents and children apart in most circumstances does not benefit the child or the inmate.

There are many questions that arise when we think of children being inside a prison environment. Will it be a negative or positive experience? Will children be upset by seeing bars on the windows, guards in uniforms, the ion scanner, or drug dogs? Or will they be so focused on the person they are going to visit that they will not be disturbed by the external environment?

When children visit prisons, it is because an important person has been removed from their lives, and the visits to the prison are a key way to maintain contact. Very young children do not understand the workings of the adult world regarding crime and punishment, but they do feel and mourn the loss of a parent. Older children, from 2 to 5 years of age, can express their feelings about the separation, but are still too young to understand that it is not their fault that their parent has been removed from their lives. In both cases it is important for the children to visit their parent and

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<sup>1</sup> At <http://www.fcnetwork.org/reading/holt-miller/holt-miller8.html>

see for themselves that he or she is alive and well. Their imaginations are likely to conjure up scenarios that are much worse and more frightening than the reality of the situation. Until he saw a picture of an inmate being served a substantial meal in the prison cafeteria, a youngster of 5 thought his father was living on bread and water! To deprive a child of the opportunity to visit a parent is to wrongly punish the child for someone else's mistakes.

Children of any age can suffer serious trauma due to separation from a parent. They may be angry, or depressed, have temper tantrums, or regress to bedwetting. Older children may withdraw and neglect their studies. We as adults often have a great fear of the unknown. Imagine what this must be like for a child. In addition to the incarceration of a parent, children may suffer similar reactions when a sibling is jailed.

Creasia Finney Hairston, Ph.D. Dean and Director of the Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago is quoted as stating, "Frequent visiting between parents and children is important to the well-being of fathers, mothers, and children and to the maintenance of parent-child bonds."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Social Policy and Research Notes, March 1996. *Fathers in Prison and Their Children.*

## **The Role of Correctional Staff**

We do not know the history of the child entering a correctional institution to visit his or her parent. In fact, some recent research has shown that the child of the incarcerated parent may exhibit symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Children may have witnessed the arrest of the parent. Children may not have been given an explanation about why the parent may have disappeared from their lives or about the parent's incarceration. As well, if the couple's relationship was formed during incarceration or the child was born after the parent's incarceration, the child may have never known life with that parent in the home. Visiting a parent in the institution may be a normal piece in their lives.

Whatever the circumstances, how children and correctional staff interact will contribute to the child's impression of authority figures.

- Treat children in a friendly manner. They are victims of the criminal behaviour of their parent—they are not the offender.
- Provide a clear explanation of security procedures when they affect the child. Explain what you are doing and why. This is one means of protecting them and their parents.
- Personal items or toys may contain contraband. It may be difficult for the child to understand why a favourite toy is not allowed during the visit.  
Staff: "I will have to look after that toy while you are visiting Daddy."  
Child: "I want to show Daddy my toy."  
Staff: "The rule here is that no toys can go into the visiting area. There are other toys where you are visiting Daddy that you can play with."
- Children may be the victims of inappropriate adult behaviour if contraband is found on them. If contraband is found on the child, it is likely that a parent placed it there. If charges need to be laid, encourage the mother or caregiver to let the child know what is happening.

### **Options:**

Staff to Mom: "Would you like to explain to your child what is happening, because we are going to call the police."

Staff to Mom: "We need to talk to you without the child being present. Will you let your child know he/she is safe with this staff

while we talk in this room?” (parent would know the staff)

Staff to Mom: “We will be talking in this room while your child is watching TV. You will be able to see him/her through the glass.”

- If a visit is not permitted, allow some time for the parent to explain to the child what is happening. These extra moments may help to create a smoother departure.

Correctional institutions are not normal environments in which to maintain a family relationship. The resources for children are limited, and children can easily become bored. Volunteers in the visiting area can support family relationships and provide constructive play activities for children. Some ways that correctional staff can support children in the visiting area are as follows :

- Food is an important part of the visit. Ensure the food and drink machines are full and in working order.
- Provide a clean, organized area for children to play with their parents or independently.
- Supply activities to amuse children so that other visitors are not disturbed.
- Support the display of the books on the shelves so that they are welcoming.
- Constructive interaction with children is a means of teaching children how to relate to their peers and adults. Welcome the children to the visiting area and demonstrate an understanding of children’s emotional outbursts during visiting time.

## Criteria for Children's Indoor Play Spaces

When space and materials are not provided for children's play, children may quickly become bored. They may run around, they may whine, or they may make themselves unpleasant and disrupt their parents and other visitors during visiting time.

Operating Standard 32.7 from *Children Visiting Prisons: A Good Practice Guide*: "The visiting area, including the waiting rooms, should provide for the needs of families and children. Facilities should promote an informal and relaxed atmosphere. They should include refreshments, waiting areas, toilets, a supervised children's play area, a baby changing area, and access to a pay phone. The area should be kept clean and well decorated."<sup>3</sup>

Since toys and books may not be brought into the prison visiting area due to safety concerns, the institution must provide these. There are some key criteria to be considered:

### Physical Setting

- A minimum of 3 square meters of floor space for each of the average number of young visitors provides the space needed for appropriate child play activities such as building blocks, playing with a car mat, or playing house.
- Comfortable floor covering is essential in the play area, as the children will use many of the activities while sitting on the floor. The floor covering should be made of a material that is durable and can be easily cleaned.
- The play space should be located in a bright area near parents' seating, to give the parents the opportunity to visit between themselves, while still ensuring that they are able to monitor their child's activities.
- See-through barriers that provide visibility for monitoring by the parents and the security staff should define the play area.

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<sup>3</sup> Children Visiting Prisons: A Good Practice Guide. Edinburgh, Scotland. Scottish Forum on Prisons & Families, 1998.

## **Storage and Display**

Toys on open shelves are accessible to the children and their family members. Toy boxes may hinder the care of some toys. Small cars, animals, and blocks stored on the shelves in clear plastic containers are welcoming to the children and encourage families to partake in cleanup.

Children will be attracted to books that are placed on shelves that are low enough for them to see and reach. If covers are facing out, younger children are often attracted by the pictures on the front of books.

Craft resources encourage the child's and family's creative expression. Accessible pencils, crayons, and paper will provide the family with these opportunities. Other craft supplies for supervised activity time are best stored in a movable trolley or storage cupboard and can be provided to families upon request.

## **Maintenance**

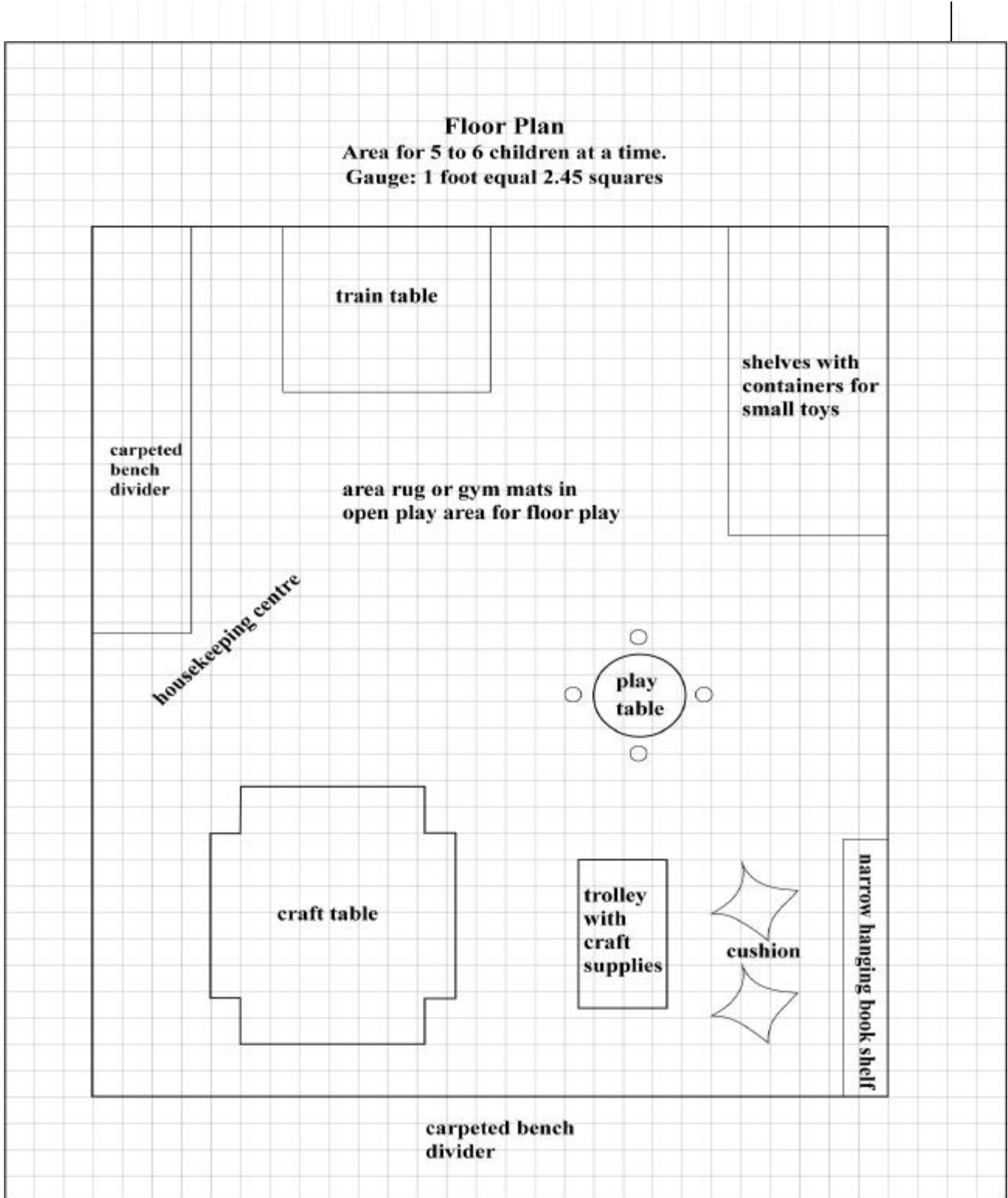
- Health standards are honoured if the toys are cleaned and sanitized regularly. Diluting 5 ml of bleach in 1 L of water can make an appropriate disinfecting solution.
- A regularly tidied toy area will be inviting to children.
- Safety of the play area will be maintained if broken toys are discarded and, if necessary, replaced.
- When toys and books are rotated, children are regularly offered something new.

## **Selection of Toys**

- Safety, security, and obviously finances, must be considered when purchasing toys for the play space.
- Considering the age and developmental stage of children will assist in the appropriate choice of toys. The toys should be versatile, durable, and aesthetically pleasing.
- Toys with small parts may be dangerous to toddlers as the small parts are most likely to be swallowed or lost.

# Floor Plan

This sketch is adapted from the Collins Bay Institution Play Area, Kingston, Ontario.





**Toys should provide for the following:**

<b>Imaginative/Dramatic Play</b>	<b>Constructive Play</b>	<b>Cognitive/Artistic Development and Expression</b>
<i>For Example:</i>	<i>For Example:</i>	<i>For Example:</i>
- barn with small animals	- large or small wooden blocks	- puzzles
- play animals	- Duplo or Megablocks (small Lego are not recommended)	- checkers
- dollhouse and accessories	- Brio Mec	- Snakes and Ladders
- dress-up clothes and props	- cars and roadway play mat	- Monopoly Junior
- puppets	- large trucks and cars	- jumbo lotto
- dolls and accessories	- soft foam blocks	- dominoes
- Barbie and accessories	- concept blocks (alphabet and shapes)	- memory games
	- small balls	- Scrabble Junior
	- quiet pull-along toys	- pencil and paper games (such as crosswords)
		- paper, markers, crayons
		- chalk and chalkboard or whiteboard
		- easel and paints

## **Selection and Display of Books**

- Books for a range of ages should be provided.
- Books should be arranged on shelves, with covers facing outward.
- Books should be rotated and repaired or replaced when necessary.
- A selection of multicultural books should be available.
- Books that portray a variety of diverse family backgrounds should be made available.
- Books by respected children's authors should be included in the selection.

## **Providing Outdoor Play Space**

### **Selection of Equipment**

- Safety is always the prime consideration when selecting large play equipment such as structures and seating.
- Careful planning should consider the ages of children expected to use the equipment, the utilization of space, the cost, and the design.
- Equipment for sensory play, such as a sandbox and water play, with accessories, should be provided in the summer.
- Active play equipment such as a climber or a basketball hoop and balls should be provided.
- Some other suggestions for outdoor toys and equipment include softballs and baseball gloves, skipping ropes, footballs, soccer balls, and scoops.

## **Preparing a Child for a Prison Visit**

### **For Incarcerated Parent and Caregiver to Do Before the First Visit:**

- Telling children that a parent is in prison is difficult, but it is a task that should be undertaken by a parent or caregiver as soon as possible and as simply as possible. The choice is between telling the child yourself or having him/her find out from someone else. (Please refer to the section on “Telling the Children.”)
- Give the child specifics about the upcoming visit. It will be important to give the child some notice of the visit, as this gives the child, as well as yourself, the time to ask questions, read a book about visiting if you choose, and to simply prepare. It will be up to you how much notice you want to give the child. A general rule of thumb to follow is, the younger the child, the closer to the visiting date you will want to tell the child. Periodic reminders will be helpful. For example, smaller children often correlate anticipation of an exciting event with “how many sleeps before....,” as they have a difficult time putting several days of the week into perspective. Older children usually need more time to prepare.
- Indicate how long the visit will be. The time and duration of the visits will vary at different institutions. For visiting information, contact the institution directly.
- If the parent and the child have had a long separation, it helps for the parent to write the child a letter saying simply that he or she has missed the child and is looking forward to seeing him/her. In the letter, describe what you will do together during the visit, what you will be wearing, any changes in your appearance (weight, hairstyle, or anything the child might notice). Describe the physical environment of the prison and visiting room (the colour of the walls, arrangement of the tables and chairs, other people, the guards, etc.).
- Both the parent and the caregiver should give the child as much information as possible about what to expect on the day of the visit.

### **For the Caregiver (or Chaperone) to Do on the Day of the Visit:**

- Remind the child about what can be expected today. Describe the ride to the institution, what the institution looks like, and what the check-in procedures will be. Anxiety about the visit will be less if the child is well-informed.
- Help the child to identify and label feelings, and offer reassurance. For example:

“I bet you are excited about seeing your Mom/Dad today.”

“I guess you might be wondering what you will see there.”

“You must be wondering what you will talk to Mom/Dad about.”

These types of statements will open up the lines of communication between you and the child. This will allow you to address the child’s concerns or questions and reassure the child that there will be other children visiting their parents, too. Also, this would be a good time for you to help the child formulate questions for the parent and help him or her to focus on and rehearse the specific things that he or she wants to tell the parent.

- There are many wonderful books available for children, as well as adults, relating to a child’s visiting experience. For a list of recommended books, please refer to the section “Children’s Books.”

## **Telling the Children**

Whenever possible, it is the responsibility of the parent or caregiver to tell the child that he or she has a parent or family member in prison. Every family is unique and will decide how best to manage sharing this information. Caregivers can use supports and resources to educate themselves on when, what, and how much to tell a child.

How children react to the incarceration of a family member will vary with the circumstances of the arrest.

- Were they a victim of the crime?
- How old are they?
- What kind of relationship do they have with the incarcerated individual?
- What changes are they dealing with in their everyday lives? (e.g., foster care, change in school, lack of resources)

Frequently children's behaviour may deteriorate with the changes that incarceration brings to a family. They may start wetting the bed, become aggressive, withdraw into themselves, become depressed, get low grades at school, and/or push the rules. Sometimes children believe that if they are bad, they will get to be with the incarcerated parent.

### **Some suggested guidelines when considering children's needs are:**

- Consider the age of the child, how much he or she can comprehend, and what he or she will understand at this time in his or her life.
- What does the child already know? Did he/she see the arrest? Was he/she a victim of the crime? What support does he/she need? Clear, constructive, and honest communication based on the information or questions a child may have is a good place to start. Children will ask questions and seek answers if you are receptive and approachable.
- Children need to know that their parent is not incarcerated because of their negative behaviour. Reassure the child that he/she is not responsible for the parent's incarceration.

- Children are unique individuals; do not assume that you know what they are thinking or feeling. Children often express emotions through their behaviour. Affirm children for their strengths and positive behaviour. Provide them with constructive ways of expressing and releasing feelings, such as drawing, sports, bike rides, skipping, playing with puppets, sand, or play dough.
- Having an incarcerated parent or other family member is a loss. Children and adults are both grieving this loss. Children tend to move in and out of the grief journey in a different rhythm from adults. Adults need to be sensitive to the grief journey with which the child is struggling.
- Children need to know that they are not responsible for the behaviour of the incarcerated individual. It is important for a child to know that the incarcerated individual still loves the child and that there are ways of maintaining contact through the mail, by phone, or with visits, if the courts will allow them.
- Having a family member incarcerated is stigmatized by society. Children need some guidance on what to tell their friends to protect themselves from social rejection. Single-parent families are a norm of society, and a simple explanation that the parent is living in another community is plausible.
- It is important when talking to children, in an attempt to normalize their experience of having a family member incarcerated, that the prison, incarceration or crime are not normalized.

## **What Is a Toy Library?**

A toy library is a collection of toys, books, and craft materials that can be made available for families who are making a Private Family Visit (PFV). These items are catalogued by age appropriateness and stored in an area where inmates or visitors can choose suitable items for their children to use during a 3-day visit. This means that the institution does not have to stock the PFV houses with a wide range of toys for different ages. There is an opportunity to check for maintenance of the toys, for cleanliness and sanitation, and for broken parts. The family is encouraged to take responsibility for the choice of play materials for their children. At Collins Bay Institution, the Toy Library started out as an adjunct of the Library. It is now located in an office space within the visiting area, and its weekly maintenance is supervised by a volunteer from Children Visiting Prisons-Kingston Inc.

## **Craft and Story Times during Visits and Socials**

A 2- to 3-hour visiting period can seem very long for young children, even though there are toys to play with and videos to watch. Volunteers from Children Visiting Prisons-Kingston Inc. understand the need and necessity of providing a stimulating, nurturing, consistent, and positive visiting experience for children within the institutional setting. The volunteers are trained individuals, usually educated in fields relating to child development, education, and/or who have a keen understanding of how to support the visiting experiences of children.

A volunteer may do such things as read stories or prepare a craft session for the children. Sometimes parents need some time to talk about private issues during a visit. The diversion of the activities for the child can be most helpful in accomplishing this. This time also provides the parents with an opportunity to interact with their children in a pleasurable activity, which is not only rewarding, but supports the bonding process. Children feel valued when activities are planned to meet their needs. An additional benefit is the opportunity to model for parents the kind of activities that can be done at home with very little expense. Many of the craft materials are recycled from household discards.

Federal Correctional Institutions such as Bath, Collins Bay, Kingston Penitentiary, and Joyceville have found ways to purchase and store books and craft materials on-site. Some of the funding has come from the inmate committees at the various institutions, many of whom are parents.

## **Visitor Resource Centre**

The Visitor Resource Centre (VRC) is an initiative of Canadian Families and Corrections Network (CFCN). CFCN is a national organization that supports families who are experiencing incarceration and reintegration. Its mission is to build stronger and safer communities by assisting families affected by criminal behavior, incarceration and reintegration.

VRCs are located in the visiting area of the correctional institution.

A VRC is staffed by staff and trained volunteers of CFCN. CFCN staff provide supervision of volunteers. Volunteers are trained using “Waiting at the Gate: Families, Corrections and Restorative Justice,” an eight-module curriculum on effective service provision to families. Volunteers are expected to attend a Correctional Service Canada (CSC) orientation and CFCN training before entering the institution. Training is also available through an on-line course at the CFCN's web site.

The VRC exists to meet the needs of adults and children visiting relatives or friends at the correctional institution. The VRC provides a safe, pleasant environment, where all visitors are met with dignity and respect and receive confidential support.

Services provided by the volunteer of the VRC are:

- information display and brochures on institutional and community resources
- rules and regulations related to visits
- resource library
- education on relationships
- orientation to newcomer families
- interim support services while accessing existing resources
- support in constructive networking of families and their children

Families may be in crisis and require support during a loved one's incarceration. Strong family ties are an effective form of crime prevention and lead to safer communities. The services provided by the VRC assist the family in maintaining ties.

## Children's Books

Blumenthal, Deborah. Illustrations by Ted Rand. *Ice Palace*. New York: Clarion Books, 2003. ISBN 0618159606.

A girl and her father help plan the annual winter carnival in Saranac Lake, New York as the girl's uncle and other prisoners help to build its centrepiece, the ice palace.

Calvert, Patricia. *Glennis, Before and After*. New York: Athenium Books for Young Readers, 1996. ISBN 0689806418.

A novel about a teenage girl who moves in with an aunt to be near the prison where her father is incarcerated. She believes implicitly in his innocence and is going to prove it. Ages 10–14.

Hickman, Martha Whitmore. *When Andy's Father Went to Prison*. Niles, IL: A. Whitman, 1990. ISBN 0807588741.

Told from a child's point of view. An honest depiction of a boy's emotional reactions to the family's move to be near his father. Ages 6–10.

Gillot, Lawrence. Illustrated by Antoon Krinks. *Le pré sans fleurs ni couleurs*. Paris: Éd. Bayard Jeunesse, 2001. ISBN 2747001326.

Un matin, Blanc-Museau se réveille et sent que ce n'est pas comme d'habitude: son papa est parti et sa maman est toute triste. À l'école, on se moque de lui et on traite son papa de voleur. Sa maman finit par lui dire la vérité : son papa a fait une bêtise et il est puni, il est en prison au pré sans fleurs ni couleurs. Blanc-Museau va lui rendre visite et comprend que même puni et loin de lui son papa l'aime et qu'il reviendra. 3 à 6 ans.

Meyer, Marliss, and Jane Ainalie. *Daddy is in jail*. Edmonton, AB: John Howard Society of Alberta, 1992.

Assists young children to understand what jail is like and how to deal with a father's absence. Ages 4–8.

Paterson, Katherine. *The Same Stuff as Stars*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002. ISBN 0618247440.

A story of how an 11-year-old, whose father is incarcerated, takes on adult responsibilities.

- Sachs, Marilyn. *Fourteen*. New York: Dutton, 1983. ISBN 0525440445.  
A girls meets and becomes friendly with the new boy next door who has an incarcerated father. Ages 12–16.
- Testa, Maria, and Amanda Schaffer. *Nine Candles*. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, 1996. ISBN 0876149409.  
The story of a seven-year-old visiting his mother in prison.
- Williams, Vera B. *Amber was brave, Essie was smart: the story of Amber and Essie told in poems and pictures*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 2001. ISBN 0060294604.  
Two sisters help each other while their mother is working and their father is incarcerated. Ages 8–12. Available in French as *Ambre était vaillante, Essie était intelligente*.
- Wittbold, Maureen K. *Let's talk about when your parent is in jail*. New York: PowerKids Press, 1997. ISBN 0823950433.  
Discusses why jails exist, why people go to jail, and how to deal with having an incarcerated parent. Ages 4–7.
- Woodson, Jacqueline. Illustrated by James E. Ransome. *Visiting Day*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2002. ISBN 0590400053.  
A young child excitedly prepares for her monthly out-of-town trip, with her grandmother, to visit her incarcerated father.

**The above books can be borrowed through inter-library loan.**

**For further information, contact:**

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