



**My mother is in prison.
What I'd like to know...**

Answers to questions that a child
whose mother is in prison might have

Who is this leaflet for?

It's for every child whose mother is in prison.

Why is an informational leaflet like this necessary?

Many times children whose mothers are in prison have questions that they're too embarrassed or afraid to ask, or they don't know who to ask. This leaflet was made:

to help them understand that sometimes people make choices in their lives that can even lead to being sent to jail to help them understand issues concerning the law and the penal system, such as the procedure followed for arrest and detention, trial, conviction, imprisonment and the correction centre (prison)

to provide information on issues concerning daily life in a correction centre



to encourage them to express their feelings about their mother and her imprisonment, but to also understand that it's perfectly fine to continue to love their mother, even if they feel confusion, fear, sadness, anger or -sometimes- relief



to provide important information on how they can communicate with their mother and visit her

to inform them of their rights



Emotions

A mother's imprisonment changes not only her life, but also the lives of the entire family. For some children, their mother's imprisonment can be especially traumatic, while others may not be affected to such an extent.

Some children may feel many different –and maybe conflicting- emotions at the same time or go through various stages of being: shocked, afraid, angry, helpless, and finally, to adapt to the new situation. Experiencing any of these feelings is to be expected and normal.

What's important for all children to know is that **under no circumstances is their mother's imprisonment their fault and this is why they must never feel responsible for what has happened.**

A mother's imprisonment, as with all people, is the result of something that she has done herself, under certain circumstances and for many different reasons that have nothing to do with her child. This is why it's okay for children to continue loving their mother even if they are angry with her, but they shouldn't feel guilty for what has happened to her.

Every child reacts differently to his/her mother's imprisonment. A child's reaction has a lot to do with his/her family life before imprisonment, his/her age as well the child's personality.

A child may feel

- Anxiety
- Regret
- Grief
- Surprise
- Anger
- Fear
- Terror
- Guilt
- Shame
- Rejection
- Loneliness
- Helplessness
- and even Relief!

A child may experience many emotions at the same time and feel confused or unable to understand exactly what s/he is feeling. In any case, it is definitely better for the child to express his/her emotions and to talk about them with people that s/he trusts.

Changes in a child's life brought on by a mother's imprisonment

In Europe, there are more than 100.000 women in prison (approximately 4,5% of all prisoners), while throughout the world, women prisoners are estimated at around 500.000. Many of these women are mothers who are usually the sole person responsible for their children's care.

All children of imprisoned mothers have to deal with major and significant changes in their lives, which often force them to grow up suddenly.

Their daily routine

Children can't see their mother as often as before, there may be changes regarding the people who take care of them, their living environment and their routines; they may have to change schools, and may even need to find new friends.

How they feel

Children feel new and strange emotions, which are often difficult to deal with and to talk about. They may think that they are the only ones that this has happened to and that no one can help them.

How they behave

Children's behavior is influenced by their emotions. Children whose behavior was different before their mother's imprisonment may become withdrawn, aggressive, lose interest in themselves and their studies or even get mixed up in dangerous situations.

How others treat them

Often the way that others behave towards a child whose mother is in prison doesn't change. Sometimes though, they don't know how to handle it: they may want to help and because they don't know how to, they do things that upset the child. Other children may be curious and their questions might embarrass the child. There are other situations where people "label" a child whose mother is in prison, with the result being that the child gets hurt.



What's changed for me

Think about what changed for you when your mother went to prison. What changed in your daily life, your emotions, your behavior and the way that other people treated you?

It's likely that some of the changes you have experienced are similar to those described above. As you can see, you are not the only child whose mother is in prison and you are not alone in facing these difficulties.

What you can say to people who ask...

Very often, other children or even adults can ask you things about your mother and sometimes, it makes you feel like they are judging you.

Now that you have some information you can answer that:

- ▶ *"I'm not the only one whose mother is in prison. There are other children in our country as well as in the world whose mothers are in prison"*
- ▶ *"No one has the right to judge me or blame me because my mother is in prison and I don't have to listen to any criticism of my mother"*
- ▶ *"I know that I haven't done anything wrong and that's why no one has the right to make me feel ashamed or guilty"*

And, of course, you should keep in mind that you don't have to tell everyone that your mother is in prison. It is completely your decision to choose which people you want to talk to about this issue.

When you're alone, every problem and every difficulty seem impossible to overcome. This is why it's always good to share your problems and concerns with your friends and your siblings. There are some issues however in which you will need help from an adult.

First of all, don't be afraid to talk to your mother, if that's what you want to do.

Depending on your home environment, there are always people that can help you.

If you are staying with your relatives, you can tell them exactly what's going on and ask them, if they aren't able to help you themselves, to find an appropriate specialist, like a doctor or a psychologist.

Who can I talk to about my concerns?

If you are staying with foster parents, you can either ask them for help or ask the social worker in charge of your case.

If you are staying in a center with other children, you can ask the people who are taking care of you or ask to speak with a psychologist or social worker from the center.

Whatever the case may be you can talk with any adult that you trust and think can help you like your godfather or godmother, a friend's parent, one of your teachers, your doctor or a priest, if you'd like.

Where else can I ask for help?

All problems, small or big, are equally important. If you feel that you can't talk to any of the adults in your life, there are some help lines where you can call to talk with a specialist who will listen to you and offer you advice.

Such phone numbers are:

If you ever feel that you are in any kind of danger, you can always call

- ▶ the police (tel: _____) or
- ▶ Child Protective Services (tel: _____)



All of us face some problems and we're always looking for ways to support ourselves. This is especially important for you, as you're facing the additional problem of your mother being in prison.

There are things that you can do to feel better and to help yourself.

How can I help myself?

- ▶ Make sure that you don't let your entire life revolve around the fact that your mother is in prison.
- ▶ Try as hard as you can to continue living your life the way you did before.
- ▶ Choose your friends. You don't need to hang out with people who make you feel bad.
- ▶ Don't neglect yourself, your interests or even your studies.
- ▶ Think of some extracurricular activities that interest you and ask the people taking care of you and ask the people participating in them. Sports, music, dance and painting are just some of the activities that you can turn to and through which you can express yourself.
- ▶ You could, if it seems like a good idea, try keeping a journal. Often, writing down our thoughts makes it easier to deal with our problems.

What are my rights?

Every child whose mother is in prison has the right:

- ▶ To communicate and have contact with his/her mother, to write to her, to talk to her, to see her, as long as it is possible and the child wants to.
- ▶ To know what his/her mother does or what happens to her while she's in prison.
- ▶ To find out how long his/her mother will be in prison, once it has been decided.
- ▶ To have adults nearby who will provide proper care and supervision according to his/her age and needs.
- ▶ To express an opinion on issues that concern him/her.
- ▶ To not be judged, blamed or "labeled" because his/her mother is in prison.
- ▶ To ask for and to receive help for any difficulties, practical or emotional, that s/he might face due to his/her mother's absence.
- ▶ To live like all children his/her age do.

In general, children of imprisoned mothers who know that their mother is in prison and can talk about it, either with her or with a person s/he trusts, seem to cope better than children who don't know what is happening and therefore feel insecure.



Apart from how you feel about your mother being in prison, it is expected that you have many questions about prison as well.

In general, when children don't get satisfactory explanations or answers about the reasons why their mother is away from home, or what her life is like in prison, then they may imagine different things and make up their own explanations "to fill in the gaps" in the story they have been told. When this happens, some children may believe that their mother has forgotten or abandoned them, or even that their mother doesn't plan to ever come back. Other children may blame themselves for what's happened to their mother. Many times they imagine that her life in prison is worse than it really is.

It's likely that you've seen movies, television series or video games with many images of prison, some of which are completely wrong. The reality differs from country to country.

What is my mother's life like in prison?



Below you will find a glossary with basic terms concerning the penal system. After the "glossary", you will find information about:

- ▶ life in prison
- ▶ the possibilities for prisoners to communicate with their families in general and
- ▶ visitation and other ways you can communicate with your mother

Glossary: What is...

Law: A set of rules that all people in a society must follow. All countries have their own Laws.

Offence: Any act that violates the Law.

Suspect: A person accused of an offence, regardless if s/he is guilty or innocent.

Arrest: The act by which the police take a person considered to be a suspect into custody.

Temporary Custody / Detention: Temporary detention of a suspect in the Police Station or in a Correction Center.

Court: The authority that has the responsibility and the power to decide if a person has violated the Law, in other words, s/he has committed the offence for which s/he has been accused.

Judge: The professional who's had special training in order to decide on the basis of the information available if a person has violated the Law.

Trial: A process with specific rules intended to help judges determine if a person has violated the law and, if so, to impose appropriate punishment.



Verdict: The act by which judges assert that a person has or has not committed the crime for which s/he has been accused, whether s/he is guilty or innocent. If found guilty, the verdict is conviction; if found innocent the person will be acquitted (set free).

Punishment: If the person is convicted by the Court, then a sentence is handed down that the court considers appropriate for the person who was found guilty, in other words the consequences for having violated the Law.

Detention: The time that a person who the court has found guilty will spend in a Correction Center, namely imprisonment for a time period set by the punishment.

Correction Center: Prison.

Inmate: Prisoner.

Life in prison

Loss of freedom for a person who has committed an offence, in other words time spent in prison, aims -in accordance with the Constitution, International Conventions and related Laws to correction- to rehabilitate the person.

In general, treatment of inmates should ensure respect of human rights, no discrimination and appropriate treatment according to their special needs.

Moreover, there are Institutions and Organizations that include in their aims the protection of inmates' rights:

European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
(www.cpt.coe.int/en/states/grc.htm)

World Health Organization
(www.euro.who.int/prisons)

In our country:





Therefore, although inmates are deprived of their freedom, they continue to have the right -like everyone else- to have their basic needs met. For this reason, Correction Centers provide them with suitable housing and everything else they need (e.g. sleeping, eating, working, leisure time, medical/ psychological attention, etc.).

Concerning imprisoned women, several Correction Centers provide them with the opportunity to work in the Center. Instead of money, working inmates buy time off from their sentences.

Correction Centers provide inmates with adequate conditions

Moreover, in many cases, imprisoned women are provided with the option to participate in various group activities, classes or projects, to watch TV, walk in the yard, read books from the center's library, listen to music or just talk with other inmates.

There are usually psychologists –or even medical doctors– in the Correction Centers, where inmates can ask for psychological support or medical care for problems they may face.

Last but not least, inmates have the right to communicate in various ways with their families. Below you'll find more information on this issue.

Possibilities for Prisoners to Communicate with their Families

In general, Correction Centers, via their Social Services or other related services, are responsible for assisting inmates in maintaining bonds with their families –given that both, inmates and their families wish to have contact with each other.

Usual ways of communication are the following:

Correspondence:

inmates may send and receive as many letters as they wish (there is no limit). Usually there is a mailbox in a communal area that is accessible to all inmates.

Furloughs:

every inmate can ask for and receive permission to leave the Correction Center in order to visit her family. These temporary releases can be regular, special and for training reasons. The duration and frequency of temporary releases are specified by the regulations that usually apply nation wide.

Visitation:

each female inmate is entitled, if she wishes, to accept short visits from her relatives, and other people such as her advocate, while some Correction Centers have a special place properly designed for children visiting their incarcerated mothers. The frequency of visits, their duration, the mode of communication, the process of visitors' control for security reasons and other details are defined according to each Correction Center's regulations and therefore may vary from prison to prison.

Phone Calls:

every inmate has the possibility to communicate by telephone with her family or any other person she wants by using phones that are usually located in communal areas (mobile phones are not permitted).



Correction Center:

Address:

Tel.:

Further information:

Information on Visitation

Visiting your mother in prison can be a positive experience for both you and her, as long as you are both properly prepared for it. A positive experience doesn't mean of course that during your visit or at the end of it that you won't feel sad about separating from her or that you won't get emotional: a visit like this is expected to invoke strong emotions for both you and your mother and this is normal. On the other hand, the visit is a good opportunity to see your mother and to spend some time with her.

If you haven't already visited your mother in prison, now you have some information on the methods and procedures for communication, especially during visits, think about how special and valuable your visit can be for both of you, but only if you want to!

For more information you can call

Social Services

Tel.: _____

Correction Center's Secretary

Tel.: _____

**For every
child family is
the place where
s/he feels safe
and happy!**

Every family is different.

Some children live with their mothers, other children live with their fathers and others live with both parents.

In other cases, parents may not live together and the child sometimes stays with one parent and sometimes with the other.

A child may live with foster parents or with their grandparents or with other relatives.

A child might be adopted and live with his/her adoptive parents or a child might live in a children's center, being taken care of by the people who work there.

In every type of family, one or more members may live under different conditions: one may live with other relatives or in a center. In another country, one may be in prison, another may live with other relatives or in a center.

There are extended families where children live with both of their parents, full or half siblings, with relatives like grandparents, uncles, aunts...

But there are also families made up of two people where the child lives with only one parent.

Some children live with an adult sister or brother.

It's doesn't matter where each of us lives.

What's important for all of us is to have people around us that we can rely on and who make us feel safe.





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