

Raising a Child
through Prison Bars...



isn't easy but...
it isn't impossible!

Being a mother is not an easy job at all! Sometimes you may feel pressure, worried, anxious or let down. Other times you may feel satisfied, proud and happy. All mothers may feel exhaustion, anxiety, anger or guilt, but they also feel love, responsibility and hope for the future.

When a woman goes to prison, her life changes. But if this woman is also a mother many things may change for her children and her family too.

Some mothers lose contact with their children after entering prison. This doesn't necessarily need to happen. To continue being a mother from prison can be very demanding and difficult, but it's certainly not impossible!

"A mother's love for her children cannot be imprisoned" (Christine, imprisoned mother)



This leaflet...

is written	for all imprisoned mothers who have children who are minors
is based on	the ideas, the experiences and the suggestions imprisoned mothers shared with us during their participation in 21 "Discussion Groups for Mothers" in 5 female prisons in Greece, Bulgaria and Romania.
was made because	many questions and concerns imprisoned mothers have about their relationship with their children are quite common. Whether they have young or older children, they are pre-trial detainees or they have been sentenced, or are serving short or long sentences, they are all mothers!
we hope	will help all imprisoned mothers answer to: → her child's questions about prison and → her own questions about her role as a mother from prison
wants to remind you that	→ it is very important to maintain open and honest communication with your children—every mother is unique! → Every child is also unique! Your relationship with each of your children is unique!
isn't a recipe!	You will decide which of the topics written below better suit you and your child/ren, as well as your relationship with your child (or with each of your children).

The perfect mother doesn't exist! Every mother, though, can always become better if she wants to.



A mother's concerns from prison ...

Should I tell my child that I am in prison or should I hide it?

Telling your child that the reason you are absent is because you are in prison certainly isn't easy and can make you anxious. You may feel ashamed of being in prison or you may be afraid of how your child will take it ("what if my daughter doesn't want to talk to me again", "what if s/he thinks that I am a bad person").

Some mothers believe that hiding the truth from their child will actually protect him/her from being hurt. But, when children don't understand why their mother isn't with them, they may come up with their own explanations "to fill in the gaps" in the story they were told.

For example some children may believe that:

It's my fault! She left because I was bad.

My mom will never come back.

My mom has abandoned me.

Something has happened to her. She may have died.

She has forgotten me.

Even younger children (under 5 years old), including babies who don't understand exactly what is happening, may pick up on the feelings around the "secret" in the family or the anxiety the people who take care of them have and ultimately feel like something is wrong. Besides, children are smart. Even if you have convinced your child that you are in the hospital or working away from home, you can't control what other people around them tell them (e.g. in their school or in the neighbourhood). Sooner or later, whether s/he hears something or something happens, s/he will begin to suspect that what s/he's been told isn't true.

It seems that keeping such a secret, in the end, neither protects the child nor the mother's relationship with her child. On the contrary, children who are aware of their mother's imprisonment and can talk about it with her or with other people they trust seem to cope better with many aspects of their lives (eg friends, school).

So it is usually better to tell your child the truth but in a way that it is appropriate for his/her age, so s/he can understand it. (See below "Why am I in prison?")

"It is better to tell the truth yourself, as a mom, to your children rather than to hear it or learn it from someone else, like the neighbors."

(Anna, imprisoned mother)



Remember that you do not have to do this alone. Seek support from the person(s) taking care of your child now (if your child lives in an institution talk about your decision with the person(s) responsible for him/her). You can also talk about this with the prison's psychologist or social worker.

Some useful notes to keep in mind:

- It is better to explain to your child face to face rather than on the phone (if this is possible).
- Adjust your explanation to your children's age. You can use a fairy tale or some toys may also be helpful for younger children (under 5 years old) if it suits you.
- Do not "force" them to respond or "say something" immediately after your explanation. Children usually need time to digest this kind of information. In this case, it is better to respect your child's pace, giving him/her as much time as s/he needs, while stressing that "I'll wait and whenever you feel comfortable, we can talk about it."
- Mention the duration of your absence (only if you know it) and the ways you can use to maintain contact (e.g. phone, mail, visitations).

*More than half
of the imprisoned women
in European prisons
are mothers.*



**How do my children feel about my imprisonment?
Is there anything I can do?**

When a mother goes to prison it may be very difficult for the children. For some children this experience may be extremely hard while for others it may seem less serious. The age of the child, any support s/he may get from the person(s) who is taking care of him/her or from other friends or from the community s/he lives in, and the relationship that the mother maintains from prison, all play a part in the overall impact this experience will have on the child.

Children may experience a variety of feelings about their mother's absence and it's not at all unlikely for these feelings to contradict themselves and to change from one minute to the next. They may feel sad, angry, scared, outraged, confused, embarrassed, indifferent, alone and many other emotions. These feelings are normal. Children, though, need help to understand why they feel like this and how they can deal with their feelings in a way that's beneficial to them.

When the mother and the person(s) taking care of the child give a name to the child's feelings (e.g. "I do understand that you are angry because I am not there to kiss you goodnight before you go to sleep") and help the child to find healthy ways to express and to release these feelings ("But every night at 9 when you go to bed, I think about you and



send you a kiss. If you want, when you're a little less angry, you can also send me a kiss at the same time"), then the painful emotions begin to make some sense to the child.



Don't forget that the way children feel shows in the way they behave in different aspects of their lives. If you notice any change whatsoever in your child's daily behavior (e.g. at home or at school) it is important to stay calm and have an honest discussion with your child (depending on his/her age) as well as with the person(s) taking care of him/her. You could also ask for professional advice from a psychologist.

Every imprisoned mother and every child whose mother is in prison has the right to communicate with each other, as long as there isn't a court order that forbids mother-child communication.

Keeping contact with each of your children while you are in prison requires that:

→ **you want it!**

→ **your children want contact with you** (and they can say what they want to say)!

→ **you have the possibility** of communication. If the person(s) taking care of your children don't allow you to have contact with or access to your children, you have the right to legal advice or aid that may be provided by the prison, (depending on the prison's regulations) or your lawyer, or another organization outside of the prison that may be able to offer legal aid on these issues.

→ you communicate with them **on a regular basis**. It is very important for you to keep in mind that it is very difficult for a child when his/her mother suddenly appears or disappears. Children of all ages need stability in their lives, and this is why they feel more secure if they know when (hour and day) to expect their mother's phone call or letter or when they can see her if they want to. For example, you can make a schedule together with each of your children, like: "Every Monday after school, around 15.00, I'll call you. If I don't call you, it means that either I don't have a phone card or there was a long waiting line for the phone and time ran out."

Even if you didn't have much or any contact with your children before your imprisonment, it is never too late to try and have a relationship with each of them by starting communication from prison. However, you have to be sure that you have decided to maintain regular, constant and honest contact with them, before you begin to communicate with them.

Am I allowed to communicate with my children from prison?

According to United Nation's Resolution and the Recommendation of the Council of Europe for the Treatment of (Women) Prisoners, women prisoners' contact with their children should be facilitated by all reasonable means. Visits, phone calls and mail are some of the means of communication you are allowed to use from prison to contact your children.



I don't have any money to communicate with my children.

How can I maintain contact?

Most of you seem to choose phone calls as a means to communicate with your children. Maybe it relieves your anxiety to speak directly with your child and to hear his/her voice and hear how s/he's doing and feeling. However, as phone calls may also be costly (and the phones must be shared), you may not be able to talk to your child as often or for as long as you want to. You can try other ways of communication that you and your child might also like.

- Have you ever tried giving or sending your child a **drawing, card, or letter**? Making a card or writing a letter is certainly cheaper than making a phone call and is a great way for your child to have something that you made especially for him/her.
- Another idea that doesn't cost much is to make something handmade out of scrap material (e.g. a doll or a small car)

If you think that you don't know how to make these kinds of things (drawings, cards, handmade crafts, etc) you can always ask for help from another inmate.

I want to see my children but I am not sure that visiting me in prison will be good for them.

For a child, visiting his/her mother in prison can be a positive experience for both the child as well as the mother, as long as both -and especially the child- are prepared for it. Keep in mind that a positive experience doesn't mean that the child or the mother doesn't cry or that they may be upset at the end of visit. Visitations bring up strong feelings for both of them anyway. This is normal and it can be helpful to tell the children that they may both feel sad after the visit. However visitation is one of the limited opportunities the imprisoned mother has to see her child and to spend some time together.

As for children, giving them enough information about what to expect during the visitation, as well as giving them the time they may need to work through any unpleasant emotions they may feel before or after their visitation, will make the time they spend with their mother during the visitation special and precious.

Some mothers feel that separation from their children at the end of the visit will be painful for them and that they will not be able to deal with their emotions. It is possible to feel like this, maybe because of the difficulty in connecting and separating again with your children. If you feel like this you can talk about it with the prison's psychologist or social worker or with another imprisoned mother.

Before Visitation

- Make sure that the child's caregiver or the person who will escort him/her to prison are available for the specific visitation dates and hours. If this is their first time coming to the prison, inform him/her (the caregiver/person who escorts the child) about the process based on the regulations of the facility (security measures, duration of the visit, any papers necessary to bring etc).



→ Before you arrange your child's visitation, ask him/her if s/he wants to come. Remember that s/he has the right to answer negatively (that s/he doesn't want to) and, in this case, you will have to accept it. It may be very painful for a mother to accept it, but sometimes children may just need more time to cope with such a meeting inside prison and they may have very mixed feelings about this. In this case, it may be helpful for the child if you try to understand what s/he is feeling and to give a name to their emotions in an age-appropriate way (e.g. "I understand that you may feel scared. It is ok!").



- Make sure that the child knows where s/he is going.
- Children may have several questions before the visitation which are important to be expressed and answered. Remember you don't have to do this alone. The person who takes care of your child can help.
- Keep their age and their emotional maturity in mind as you explain the process to them. Give your child as much information as needed in order to describe what s/he is going to see in prison so s/he feels prepared, but not in so much detail that may make him/her feel scared.
- Explain the process to the child, mentioning:
 - what the prison and the visitation room look like (e.g. if you will sit next to each other or opposite with a glass or a table between you, if you will talk through a phone or directly, if you can hug and kiss each other etc)
 - what it is allowed and (mostly) what is forbidden to do during the visit (e.g. giving you something)
 - the security measures s/he will have to go through, for example if there is a chance that s/he will have to undergo a body search, that the guards will take things (even gifts) that s/he brought for you, in order to check them and give them to you later
 - what is allowed and what is forbidden according to the prison's regulations and inform him/her, in case s/he wants to bring you a present (e.g. crayon drawings may not be allowed but drawings with markers may be allowed)
 - that you can't leave with him/her at the end of the visit. Make sure that the child has understood this. Young children especially may need to hear this more than once or in different ways.
- Talking about the visit later on the phone or via other means (e.g. a letter, drawings) can be helpful for both of you to work through your feelings.

What can I do if my child doesn't want to maintain contact with me?

It is possible that for a certain amount of time, your child may not want to speak to you on the phone or to answer your letters or to visit you. You may feel disappointed, rejected, depressed, guilty, or even angry. All of these emotions are normal!

The important thing however, is that you understand that this hasn't happened only to you: it has happened to other imprisoned mothers as well as to mothers who have never been to prison. Even



more importantly, you should try to understand the reasons that might be making it difficult for your child to communicate with you during this time. Of course every child is different, and your child's reaction towards you depends not only on your child's personality but on the relationship you had with him/her before you went to prison as well.

This certainly doesn't mean that a child who doesn't want to have contact with his/her mother doesn't love her. Some children find it difficult because they feel anger (usually adolescents, 12-18 years old) towards their mothers for going to prison and now they are forced to accept many changes in their lives, for example the person(s) taking care of them while their mothers are in prison. Younger children may feel confused because they don't understand "the grown-up world" and what is happening.

In the end, it's the mother's responsibility to find a way to win her child's trust. It certainly requires strength, patience and persistence in your efforts to communicate with your child, while at the same time allowing your child to express his/her needs. If you need help or some advice, you can ask a mother's group, professionals (e.g. psychologist, social worker) working in the prison, friends, etc

Is it important to maintain a good relationship with the person who is taking care of my children?

Getting along well with the person(s) who is taking care of your children while you are in prison is important indeed, because it will make your children's daily lives easier and will facilitate the relationship you have with each of them. However, cooperating with your mother or your husband or your sister or the social worker of the institution where your child may reside may not always be easy for you at all.

If maintaining a good relationship with this person isn't possible, it is very important not to involve your children in it by asking them to take your side. Remember that both of you want what's best for the children. It is very important during your imprisonment that your children are safe and given the care they need by people they trust.

Trying to maintain regular contact or maintaining good relationships with the person(s) who takes care of your children—especially if s/he takes good care of them—is another way of being a mother from prison; because it shows that after all you really do want your children to live in a safe and protected environment.

Another person takes care of my children now. How can I show that I am still the mom?

Sometimes parents may believe that there is only one place for one person in their children's lives and if another person takes that place they lose their children's love and trust. But this is a myth!

Every relationship the child has with another person s/he trusts is unique. However, there may be times when imprisoned mothers have doubts and feel uncertain about how their children feel about them, since another person, the one who is taking care of them has "won them". You may feel like this too. Every mother in prison may feel insecure or confused about her role as a mother especially if before her imprisonment she was responsible for arranging her children's daily activ-

ities and needs (e.g. discipline, homework, cooking dinner/lunch), while now another person is in charge of her children's daily lives. This person may be the children's father or a relative, like the children's grandmother/-father or an older sister/brother or an institution etc. You can't be with them every day, but you can be present in their lives as the mother who cares, who sets rules and limits and who loves them.

Many times actions are not enough for children to understand our intentions or how we feel about them. So they need to hear what's happening to them or how their mother feels about them. For example, you can explain that every child's family can be of a different kind. It may include the mother, the grandmother, the aunt and the uncle, the father (ex-husband), the siblings etc. His/her family may include the mom in prison with whom s/he can talk to on the phone when s/he wants to ask for her advice, the grandmother who lives with the child and takes care of cooking, laundry, trips and homework, and the aunt, uncle and cousins who may go with him/her on vacations and play together. Especially for young children it is important to explain the change in their family. For older children is also important to know which people are their family, to whom they can go when they need help, advice, support or just to talk about anything that is bothering them.

*"My parents take care of my children really well. But I wonder if my children think about me and still love me."
(Kate, imprisoned mother)*



There are times when I miss my children so much that I can't take it. What can I do?

For a mother in prison, dealing with separation from her children may be a difficult and sometimes painful process. There may be times when you feel: sad, stressed out, desperate, lonely, angry, upset, tired, inadequate, guilty, powerless etc. You may experience many strong and unpleasant emotions while you are in prison including some that you may have never felt before. There may also be times when you feel all of these emotions together.

Many imprisoned mothers feel the same way due to separation from their children. What's different is the ways each mother finds to comfort herself. There isn't only one and right way to cope. On the other hand, the difficult conditions in prison may inhibit you from seeking and trying other ways to deal with your unpleasant and difficult emotions, ultimately making you feel helpless.

It can be comforting if you try to understand and name each of your emotions rather than to not let yourself think about them. Some ways that imprisoned mothers found helpful in comforting themselves when they felt like this about their children and have suggested to other mothers are the following:

- to talk with another woman you trust
- to talk with the prison's psychologist or social worker
- to keep a journal or notebook and write your feelings and emotions
- to listen to music
- to draw or make arts and crafts
- to go for a walk in the prison's yard
- to knit
- to pray
- to read a book.



Is it possible to lose custody of my children?

Yes, this is a possibility, but it depends on several conditions. You could ask your lawyer, who knows your case, about the likelihood of this happening. You can also refer to the prison's services which are responsible for issues regarding your children (e.g. Social Services Office).

If I lose custody can I maintain contact with my children?

As long as there isn't a court restraining order and your children want to maintain contact with you, yes you can. Besides, in most cases losing custody doesn't mean that the relationship you have with your children will change, it just means that your children's caregiver has the legal right to decide on issues concerning their daily lives (e.g. school enrollment, health insurance-hospital care).

What if my child asks ...

It is normal and common for a child with an imprisoned mother to ask about the prison. Below we have listed some common questions children have asked their imprisoned mothers and some ideas for helping you to respond to your child.



Remember!

- There isn't one and only one way of answering. Besides, every answer should be adjusted according to your child's age. The most important thing, though, is to stay calm (don't panic!) even though answering such questions may be hard for you.
- It is better to say "I don't know" to some of your children's questions that you do not feel ready to answer or you really don't know the answer to instead of ignoring them or lying. Even young children, who can't understand exactly what is going on, may pick up on their mother's doubt or anxiety which will make them feel more worried or stressed.
- You need to be prepared to answer your children's questions about prison, life in prison, your offense or conviction. Keep in mind that answering such questions may take some time. For example, at the time you choose to tell him/her that you are in prison, your child may not say a word, but s/he may ask you several questions after some days "out of the blue"!



... why am I in prison?

Every mother talks to her child in her own, personal, way. It is important every time you respond to your child's question or you try to explain something to him/her to find your own words and your own personal style. In this way you will feel better and your child will better understand what you are saying.

If the child is young (around 5 or younger) you can say something like: "In every country there are rules that tell adults how they should behave. These rules are called laws. When a man or woman doesn't obey some of these rules then s/he goes to prison for some time."

If the child is older (around 12 or older) you can say something like: "Every action has its consequences, good or bad. Prison is a consequence for breaking the law."

... when can I go home?

If you know when you will be released, it is very important to tell your children. If the child is young, you can help him/her to understand how much time is left by connecting it with something you used to do together, for example after Christmas/New Year's Eves. But **be extremely careful NOT to promise or tell them a date when you are not sure**. It will be very hard on the child to constantly wait and feel disappointed. So, it is better if you don't know when you will be released and return to him/her, to tell the truth that you don't know yet, rather than telling him/her a lie (like "next Monday"). You can also say to younger children that you are living in place from where you can't leave whenever you want to. There are some rules in prison that say that.

... what will happen to him/her?

Your child may want to know several things, like with whom they will live now that you are in prison, if you have left forever or if you going to return some day. If you were living with your child before your imprisonment, maybe you should decide with whom s/he will live with. If there are 2 or more options and your child isn't a baby it is better to ask him/her which option s/he prefers. Remember that children have an opinion and the right to have their opinion heard, especially when a decision is taken about their own lives.

If you are not sure yet about what will happen after your release be very careful not to promise anything to him/her that you don't intend to do, just because you feel that your child wants to hear something like this. In all cases it is better to be honest with him/her. After all, children may not always understand the adult's world, but they have the right to know if they can maintain contact with their mother while she is in prison and after her release.

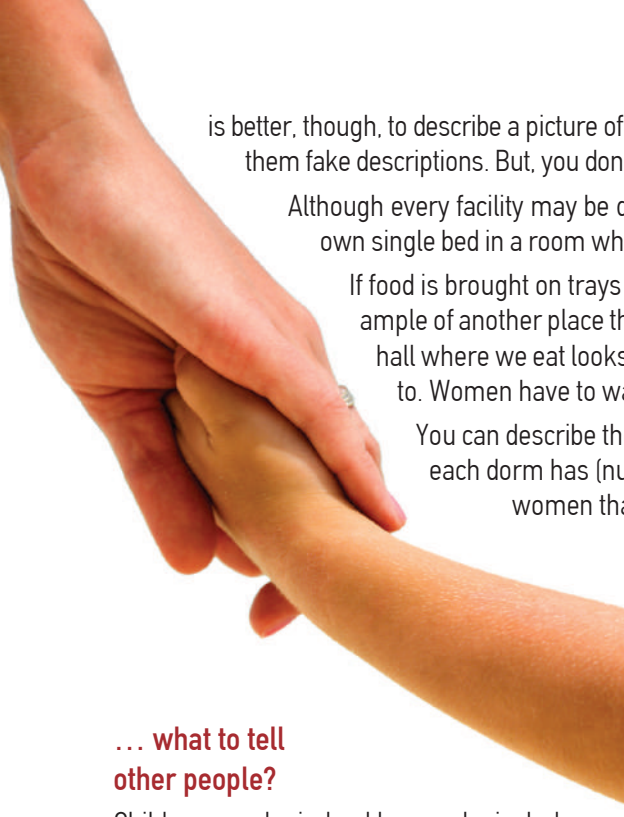
... where do I sleep? Where do I eat? Where do I take a shower?

Children ask these things because they want to get a picture of where you are living and they want to be assured that you are ok. You don't have to panic! If they don't have any information from you about your life in prison, they may imagine the craziest things. You know very well that children (especially older ones) have seen images of prisons in movies, on TV or in video games, many of which are totally false. Some mothers are afraid of replying to such questions because they feel that their children will become anxious or sad if they get the real picture. It



"Where my mom lives in prison it is totally dark. There aren't any lights at all. They give her only bread and water"
(John, 5 years old)





is better, though, to describe a picture of the prison that is close to reality instead of giving them fake descriptions. But, you don't have to describe the prison in detail to children.

Although every facility may be different, you can say something like: "I have my own single bed in a room which I share with (number) women".

If food is brought on trays or if you eat in a dining hall, you can give an example of another place that s/he is familiar with. For example, "the dining hall where we eat looks like the dining hall at the summer camp you go to. Women have to wait in line to take their lunch/dinner".

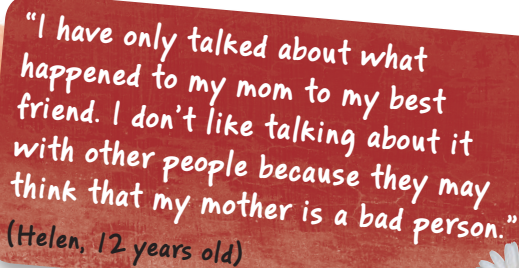
You can describe the shower, if you are in a dorm, by saying that each dorm has (number) showers that can be used only by the women that live in this dorm.

... what to tell other people?


Children may be judged by people, including other children. You can tell them that:

- You haven't done anything wrong. Nobody has the right to make you feel ashamed or guilty.
- Nobody has the right to judge or blame you because your mother is in prison.
- There are lots of children whose mothers are in prison too.
- You don't have to tell everyone (that your mother is in prison). It is up to you to choose which people you want to talk about this with and what you want to tell them.

Encourage your child to talk about his/her concerns and emotions with adults or friends s/he trusts. Keep in mind that your child needs to be supported while you are in prison.



"I have only talked about what happened to my mom to my best friend. I don't like talking about it with other people because they may think that my mother is a bad person."
(Helen, 12 years old)



Remember!

Sometimes mothers in prison tend to talk to their children only about problems and complaints. Do not forget to talk to your child about something different or good that you may have experienced; for example a book you might have read, a song you might have listened to, anything you might have made (a drawing, other crafts). And vice versa, instead of asking him/her only about his/her school performance or about the problems s/he may deal with everyday, ask him/her about things s/he enjoys or things that make his/her life more enjoyable or interesting (e.g. what s/he has done today that s/he really enjoyed and had fun).

A mother who doesn't give up despite the many difficulties she faces in prison, and tries to find ways to take care of herself and her relationships with the people she loves is definitely a good example for her child, showing him/her that s/he can also find ways to feel good.

Useful Information

Below you will find a list of services and provisions that you and/or your children are entitled to ask for during your imprisonment. Depending on the facility where you are now, this information may change. So, there are blank spaces where you can add information that you consider to be useful.



Inside prison, if you need ...

- basic needs supplies (e.g. shampoo, sanitary napkins, toilet paper, etc), you can obtain them from the: _____

- information regarding your sentence and the date of your release (e.g. conditional release, estimate of wages, appeal, etc.) you can ask for information at the: _____

- to take care of administrative issues for you and/or your family [e.g., health insurance, birth certificates, etc.] you can ask for instructions on how to proceed at the: _____

- legal aid for issues involving your children (e.g. custody, child abuse or neglect), you can ask for information at the: _____

- legal aid regarding your case because you don't have a lawyer, you can ask for information at the: _____
- psychological support or counseling regarding issues that concern you as a mother and/or as a woman, you can make an appointment with the: _____

- psychiatric care or change in the medication you are taking, you can you can make an appointment with the: _____

- a doctor (e.g. a dentist) for you and/or your child (e.g. a pediatrician) if s/he lives with you in prison, you can make an appointment with the: _____

- to enroll in parenting programs (e.g. Mothers' Discussion Groups), you can ask if there are any available in your correctional facility and complete an application at the: _____

- to enroll in a vocational (e.g. computer classes) and/or other creative program (e.g. dance, music, theatre) you can ask for information and complete an application at the: _____

- to enroll in a school (e.g. primary school, high school or university) you can ask for information about the education levels that are available in your correctional facility and complete a registry application at the: _____

- to enroll in a therapeutic program for drug addiction, you can obtain information about the types of programs that are available in your correctional facility and the process that you need to follow in order to enroll in one, at the: _____

- a telephone number where your child/ren can contact you in prison (e.g. Prison's Social Services Office), you can ask at the: _____

- a Helpline in order to inform your child/ren where they can call in case they are in danger or there is an emergency, you can ask for information at the: _____

- somewhere to stay temporarily after your release, you can ask for information at the: _____



Outside prison...

Below you will find a list of services and provisions you may find useful upon your release or that your children and/or their current caregiver may need during your imprisonment. This information is different for each country or for different regions in the same country. So, there are blank spaces where you can add information that you consider to be useful.

...if you and/or your child/ren need:

- basic needs supplies (e.g. temporary shelter, food, clothing): _____

- financial support: _____

- medical examinations or first aid, because you/they have health problems: _____

- medical aid for special health problems (AIDS, Hepatitis etc): _____

- psychiatric aid: _____

- help for problems you face with substance abuse or alcohol: _____

- professional, educational & legal consulting: _____

- legal aid for problems you face as an immigrant or refugee: _____

- emotional support helpline for children and/or adolescents: _____

- emotional support helpline for you as an adult: _____

- psychological support or counseling for you: _____

- parenting counseling: _____
- counseling (eg. SOS hotline) and immediate help for incidents of abuse: _____

- counseling (eg. SOS hotline) and immediate help for incidents of child abuse: _____

- emergency services Helpline: _____



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