

Parenting from a Distance: Ideas for Separated Families

When appropriate, helping parents who are incarcerated to stay in contact with their children has been proven to promote child well-being – by keeping the child connected with their parent, allowing the parent to model the importance of avoiding incarceration, and promoting the possibility of reunification. As a Child Welfare Professional, you play a critical role in promoting this important connection. Below are some ways that you could offer to the parent who is incarcerated that promote connections between parent and child. The parent can:

- ✓ Make a chain of construction paper with his/her child. Each loop in the chain represents one day or one week. The parent sends the child the strips of paper and has the child start attaching loops to the chain. The parent can write personal messages on strips of paper and should keep sending the strips of paper until he/she is again able to be with the child.
- ✓ Start a joint family history project. The parent has relatives send stories or information to his/her child about their childhood. The child organizes all the stories and all the information in a three-ring binder. When able to return home, the parent will be able to share the family history.
- ✓ Suggest to the child to make a kite. The parent asks his/her child to write on the kite all the wonderful things they will do together when they are again with them. Then, the child can fly the kite and let the words float to the parent on the wind.
- ✓ Have the child plant a seed in a pot so that he/she can watch it grow. As the plant grows, the days pass. When the parent is again united with the child, both have a beautiful flower or vegetable to share.
- ✓ Ask a friend or relative to buy Hershey's Kisses. Each night before the child goes to bed, the child can have a kiss from the parent.
- ✓ Make a "Bump and Bruises" package to be opened when the child is injured. It might include a note saying that the parent cares, a band-aid and a lollipop or, a care package for when a child is ill. Included in the package might be a can of chicken noodle soup, a get-well card, a coloring book, and crayons.
- ✓ For every night for a week, write five things that the parent appreciates about his/her child. By the end of the week, the parent will have written thirty-five things. Send the list to the child.
- ✓ Circle the spot on the letter that he/she kissed.
- ✓ Send a "Heart Attack." The parent, cuts heart-shaped pieces of paper, writes on them the things that the parent appreciates about his/her child, places the hearts in an envelope, and mails them.
- ✓ Have someone fill a jar with the exact number of M&M's as there are days left until the parent and child see each other. Instruct the child to eat one a day until again together.
- ✓ Have a friend or relative buy a package of valentines. On each, the person writes special messages to the child from the parent and sends them to the child for Valentine's Day.
- ✓ At a celebrated holiday, send a note thanking the child for all the things he/she did for the parent. The parent includes favorite memories of holidays and related traditions.
- ✓ Ask the child what his or her New Year's resolutions are. Find ways to help the child accomplish goals set.

Source: Adapted from the Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance. *Parenting from a distance: Help for parents with children in placement.* Harrisburg, PA. Used with permission.