

Parenting Connection

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Foreverfamily Celebrates 30 of Service to Children and Families

Foreverfamily, the nation's first organization solely dedicated to helping children who experience parental incarceration, recently celebrated its 30th year of providing services to children with incarcerated parents and their families. Headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, since its inception, Foreverfamily has worked to inspire children with a parent in prison to become successful and to strengthen the bonds between the children and their incarcerated parents, enriching the lives of more than 27,000 children.

Foreverfamily has a small staff which is augmented by the support of many volunteers who make their work possible. They include AmeriCorps VISTAs, interns, college students, families and individuals who help with administrative tasks and program delivery. In the past fiscal year, volunteers logged 9961 hours of service.

Foreverfamily's programs are not limited to providing services for children. They also provide services for families, parents and caregivers:

Programs for Kids

Foreverfamily's enrichment programs for young people prepare them in five key areas: educational, leadership, personal and career development and cultural and recreational enrichment.

The Foreverfamily Youth Engagement Zone (YEZ) program provides an opportunity for school aged youth to identify issues within their communities. This allows them to work collaboratively with their peers, identifying specific issues, and implementing community service projects that respond to the issues. YEZ focuses on developing public speaking skills, leadership, project management, teamwork, and problem solving.

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YEZ engages young people in two ways:

1. It creates an intense overnight leadership development retreat experience for a small group of youth called the design team who engage in service learning as they get to know their neighborhood, better develop skills to address community challenges, and organize activities that get large numbers of other youth involved.
2. It taps into the young people's desire to create social change by connecting to youth through their schools and youth serving organizations and giving them an opportunity to decide on the top issue they feel is affecting their community. Once the top issue is selected, the youth come together at a five hour Youth Summit which includes workshops, youth speakers and a collective service project designed to address the community issue they selected.

The Young Entrepreneurs Project (YEP) seeks to improve the economic base of children of incarcerated parents by introducing them to the field of entrepreneurship. Five to ten young people between the ages of 16-28 are selected through a competitive process to work closely with professional mentors, identifying and developing a business idea. After working with a marketing team, they have the opportunity to present their business ideas before the National Board of Directors at the annual board retreat.

The NPU-V Shared Vision program brings together participants with two community youth leaders and three major youth serving organizations to develop a shared vision and agenda for youth leadership and engagement. This program takes place in the six neighborhoods that make up Atlanta's Neighborhood Planning Unit V (NPU-V). Youth come to Foreverfamily's Program site for professional development sessions, facilitated by Foreverfamily staff, and take field trips that inform them of their community's history.

Programs for Families

Since Georgia prison facilities are over 100 miles away from Atlanta, it is no surprise that a majority of children do not get to see their incarcerated parents consistently. Through Foreverfamily's monthly prison trips, transportation is provided to three out of the four woman's facilities in Georgia so that these children can go visit their mothers. Foreverfamily also partners with another agency so children can visit their fathers at select facilities.

Foreverfamily transports to Lee Arrendale, Emanuel, and Pulaski State Prisons for Women. The children spend 5 hours with their mother in either the Children's Center or in General Visitation. Access to the Children's Center is by application only. The children's mothers must talk to the Children's Center Director and must have no disciplinary reports when applying or enrolled in the program.

On trip days, Foreverfamily opens at 5:00 am and to provide a light breakfast for the children at the Center, as well as lunch and two snacks on the bus. The cost for riding the bus is \$1 per person, with a maximum charge is \$3 regardless of family size. The prison visits are designed mainly for the children, but caregivers are welcome to go on the prison visit twice a year:

Foreverfamily partners with a local church to provide transportation to children whose fathers are incarcerated at Georgia State Prison in Reidsville. Food is provided in the African American tradition of a "Shoobox Lunch" which is an individually decorated and labeled plastic shoobox that contains breakfast, lunch, two snacks, fresh fruit, bottle water, and travel games. Upon their return, the children get a meal and school supplies before they head home.

Foreverfamily successfully completed 22 trips during the past fiscal year, facilitating 334 parent-child contacts.



Programs for Parents

Foreverfamily provides support services for parents to help them stay connected with their children, learn tips and techniques to parent successfully while incarcerated and stay on track to a productive life.

The Parent Education and Family Support program, allows incarcerated parents, whether they are enrolled in the Family Visitation Program or not, to receive parenting information and support for their children. Any parent who communicates with children or visits with their children in general visitation or the Children's Center can participate, if they meet the criteria for one of the four membership levels. Each level has different eligibility criteria and offers different privileges.

Each membership level provides the parent with a copy of the Foreverfamily's *Parenting from Prison* handbook and its newsletters, school supplies and holiday toys for their children.

Foreverfamily also provides Parent Workshops to equip inmate mothers with the knowledge they need to safeguard their parental rights and fulfill their parenting role while incarcerated and upon reentry. Foreverfamily offers a 3-hour seminar entitled Strength to Love: Building My Skills to Parent from the Inside at the three women's facilities on a rotating basis.

The seminar is targeted towards women whose children are 18 and under. The seminar's key points include:

- A presentation on parenting techniques
- A legal education panel and breakout sessions with lawyers to explain parental rights and responsibilities
- An inspirational message from a formerly incarcerated mother who is reunited with her children
- A copy of Foreverfamily's *Parenting from Prison* handbook

For parents coming out of prison, Foreverfamily staff work individually with parents to determine their needs and connect them to service providers. A licensed marriage and family therapist works with the parent, children and caregiver to manage expectations and create a family plan for reunification.

Programs for Caregivers

Caregivers are often overworked and undervalued. Those charged with providing care for the children during the parent's incarceration face many concerns.

Foreverfamily helps to provide the support needed to successfully navigate this trying time through the Caregiver Support Initiative. Caregivers can work directly with Foreverfamily staff to secure the resources and assistance they need by calling the Foreverfamily office.

Some the resources include:

- Back-to-school supplies
- Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday food baskets
- Birthday recognition for the children
- Christmas wish toy drive

To honor caregivers, Foreverfamily arranges annual luncheons where they are celebrated and commended for their dedication and all they do for their families.

Contact

To learn more about Foreverfamily's programs or to help them help the children by volunteering or donating, go to <http://www.foreverfam.org>.



Participants Give Read to the Children Program High Ratings

The Read to the Children: Promoting Family Literacy in Colorado's Prisons program (RTC) is a partnership between the Colorado State Library's Institutional Library Development and the Colorado Department of Corrections Libraries.

The RTC program, currently available at 19 Colorado Department of Corrections facilities, helps offenders stay involved in their children's lives by encouraging their children to read.

Since 1999, the Read to the Children program has allowed offenders in Colorado's state prisons to send young family members a book accompanied by a recording of the offender reading it. In the past year, around 1,900 offenders and 3,200 children participated in RTC.

Learn more about RTC at <http://www.coloradovirtuallibrary.org/read-to-children/>.

Books for the Read to the Children program come primarily from donations from generous organizations and individuals. If you would be interested in donating children's books to support the Read to the Children program, contact Teresa Allen at allen_t@cde.state.co.us.

The Library Research Service surveyed 253 caregivers and 366 offenders who participated in RTC between 2013 and 2016. To find out how they felt about the program. These are the results the Library Research Service found:

Offenders told us:

How important is RTC?	91% Very Important
How helpful is RTC as a way to connect with your child?	92% Very Helpful
Would you recommend this program to others?	99% Yes

Caregivers told us: After participating in RTC...

Child's enjoyment of reading	85% Increased
Time child spends reading	82% Increased
Caregiver's contact with the offender	74% Increased
Child's contact with the offender	74% Increased

How did caregivers rate the following?

Offender's relationship with their child	84% Improved
Caregiver's relationship with the offender	76% Improved

A sampling of comments made by program participants:

- "It has changed the way I do my time. To me Read to the Children program is priceless and has improved my relationship with my daughter and grandkids."
- "It's hard to parent from prison and having an opportunity like this is very special to me."
- "As my only outlet to maintain a 'normal' routine it's awesome. I used to read to my kids every night. My kids love the books – my son is at the top of his class in reading."
- "Each child in the world deserves to know and connect with both parents and this program helps to do that."
- "Priceless program with a tremendous impact on keeping a connection between my son and his daddy."



Telling the Children

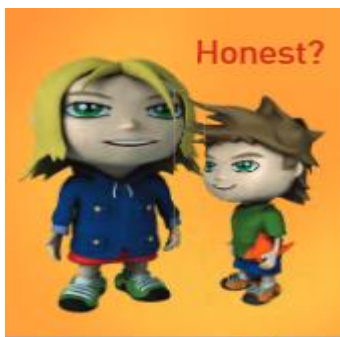
Talking to children about the incarceration of a parent can be difficult. These booklets are designed to help moms, dads, and caregivers to answer children's questions about jail and prison



How to Explain Jails and Prisons to Children (Caregivers' guide)

This booklet was written as a resource to encourage open and honest communication between children and adults. Ideally, a caregiver will read through this booklet and then use it as a guide when talking with a child about his/her parent going to jail or prison.

Website: <http://www.ambassadorsforhope.com>



What happens when a relative is sent to prison: A booklet for children aged 4 – 11

This booklet has been written to help explain to children of primary school age what happens when a parent or relative is sent to prison. It can be a difficult time for all the family. At the bottom of each page there are additional notes for the reader to help with any questions the children may have.

Website: <https://www.familiesoutside.org>



Telling the Children (Booklet for families of prisoners)

This Outsiders booklet provides helpful and practical information about the impact that imprisonment of a parent has on the children. The booklet covers a wide range of issues from what to say to the children, dealing with the child's changing role in the family to coping with changes in a child's behavior.

Website: <https://app.pelorous.com>



Little Children Big Challenges: Incarceration (Story Book)

This story book explains to children that it is OK to miss their parent who is currently in prison and points out that there are other people who love them and who they can be cared for by. In addition, Sesame Street created a *Guide for Parents and Caregivers* to help them:

- use everyday routines to help their children
- encourage their children (ages 3–8) to express their feelings
- talk with their children about incarceration
- connect with their children's incarcerated parent

Website: <https://www.sesamestreet.org>



***A Parent's Message* Guides Families through the Reunification Process**

When Carolyn LeCroy was sentenced to 55 years in prison for possession of marijuana with intent to distribute, she witnessed firsthand the effects of broken relationships between incarcerated parents and their children. After Carolyn was paroled, she couldn't shake the feelings of unhappiness regarding those broken bonds. In 1999, Carolyn took a camera crew and went back to prison – to record video messages from inmates to send to their children and families as Christmas gifts.

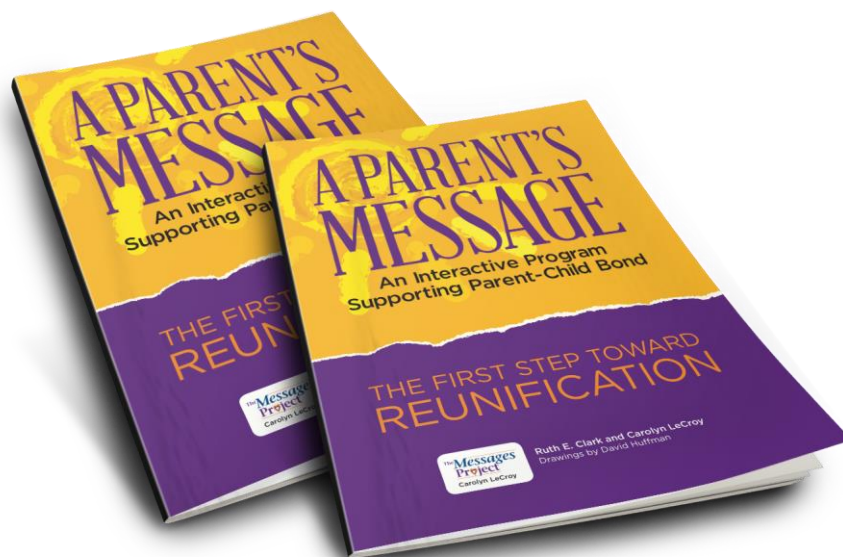
This was the start of The Messages Project. From its founding, the mission of The Messages Project has been to rebuild and maintain the connection between imprisoned parents and their children left behind.

The Messages Project believes, "Healthy parental connections are essential to a child's development. Children are the silent victims of their parent's crime through the trauma and loss of the environment that has been their life. When a child's parent is incarcerated and a healthy connection is maintained, it reduces the child's risk for social, emotional, and educational problems. For the incarcerated parent, family connection decreases the likelihood of recidivism. Maintaining and enhancing the bond between the child and the incarcerated parent through video messages and other interactive media are the focal points of The Messages Project."

Since 1999, The Messages Project has recorded and delivered more than 19,000 video messages from incarcerated parents from correctional institutions across the United States and abroad. The moms and dads also write poems, sing songs, pray, and most importantly, send love to their children and families.

To help establish and maintain the bond between children and their incarcerated parents, The Messages Project has recently published *A Parent's Message* which is an interactive book of activities for families of incarcerated loved ones.

A Parent's Message is designed for those who have a family member behind bars, or those who care for or work with children who have a parent in prison. The text acts as a guide through the reunification process, and it includes removable worksheets that both kids and parents can complete to establish and maintain a healthy bond.



A Parent's Message:

- Aligns with goals of Parent Education Programs
- Uses format for voluntary facilitated groups or self-study
- Supports incarcerated parent's identity as a parent, not an offender
- Facilitates re-establishing child-parent contacts, ties, and bonds
- Fosters respectful kin or other caregiver family relationships
- Provides lessons to translate parental love into parental caring
- Promotes providing honest, factual information to the child
- Uses mail – more beneficial, most common, least costly contact
- Incorporates examination and evaluation of behaviors and progress

A Parent's Message includes:

- 112 Pages of Parent Study Worksheets/Mailings
- 64 Parent-Child Communication Tear-Out Pages
- 24 Meaningful Parent Messages
- 20 Topics of Study and Communication
- 9 Focus Character Traits
- 26 to 52 Weeks of Purposeful and Personal Programming

About The Authors

Carolyn LeCroy

Carolyn LeCroy is an award-winning film and video producer through her company Women in Transition, LLC.

She has worked with correctional institutions and non-profit groups working with inner-city youth. Carolyn conducts workshops and training, provides motivational speaking, and does consulting and film work for public and private correctional agencies, and non-profit groups.

Carolyn was named a CNN Hero in 2008 for her efforts and advocacy for these at-risk youth.

Ruth E. Clark, Ed.D.

Dr. Clark is a retired educator of nearly thirty-five years in education for the at-risk and special needs children in both private and public schools.

Dr. Clark is the author of award-winning children's picture books. Dr. Clark writes extensively on child development, parenting, parent-child relationships, grand-parenting, and related topics.

For More information

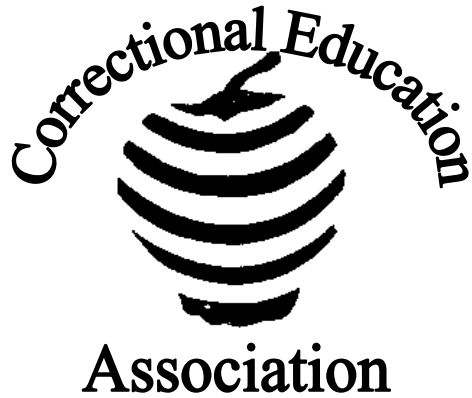
To find out more about The Messages Project, go to: www.themessagesproject.org.

To order *A Parent's Message*, go to www.aparentsmesssage.com.

Tell Us About Your Program
Email Your Article to:
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Editor's Message:

For families struggling to cope with the incarceration of a parent, holidays can be an especially difficult time because they highlight the families' social isolation and physical need. A parent's separation from the home can add to the emotional and financial stress that the family is experiencing. But the incarcerated parent can play a role in providing emotional support for the children and the caregiver.

To do so, the incarcerated parent needs to plan ahead because communication between prison and home can be delayed by prison policies and the postal service. Sharing personal thoughts with the children are often the most cherished gift an incarcerated parent can give during the holiday season. Here are some examples:

- Write a letter for your children to simply remind them that you love them and miss them.
- Make a personalized holiday card involving memories of past family holidays.
- Invent a game you can play with your child through the mail. Develop crosswords, word searches, or guessing games using words or silly phrases your family often used when you were all together.
- Send your children drawings you made to hang in their room and encourage them to mail you drawings and pictures that they made.
- Write a holiday story for your children. It may be a recollection of a past family holiday or a family holiday to come.
- If craft activities are available to you, make a personal gift for your children.
- If a parent-child book reading program is available in your institution, make a recording of a holiday book for your children.
- Call, Call, Call! Call as often as you can to keep the sound of your voice alive in their minds.

Holidays need not be so dark for prisoners' families. Sharing your thoughts and feelings can make holidays extra special for them.

Jerry

