

Parenting Connection

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Video Visitation: Promises vs. Evidence of Experience

With the video visitation trend quietly sweeping the nation's prisons and jails, authors Bernadette Rabuy and Peter Wagner of the Prison Policy Initiative set out to examine how the industry's fantastic promises held up against the hard evidence of experience.

In their Prison Policy Initiative report, *Screening Out Family Time: The For-Profit Video Visitation Industry in Prisons and Jails*, published in January 2015, Rabuy and Wagner found that while video technology like Skype or FaceTime can be a great way to stay together for people who are far apart, video visitation is not like Skype or FaceTime. Instead of being a high-quality, free supplement to time spent together, in-person, the video visitation that is sweeping through U.S. jails is almost the exact opposite. The authors found that, "In order to stimulate demand for their low-quality product, jails and video visitation companies work together to shut down the traditional in person visitation rooms and instead require families to pay up to \$1.50 per minute for visits via computer screen."

In their report, Rabuy and Wagner collected the contracts and the experiences of the facilities, the families, and the companies to:

- Determine how this industry works and explain the key differences between video visitation in jails and video visitation in prisons
- Hold the industry's fantastic promises up against the hard evidence of experience, including the industry's own commission reports
- Give hard data showing just how unpopular this service is
- Identify the patterns behind the worst practices in this industry, finding that the most harmful practices are concentrated in facilities that contract with particular companies

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- Analyze why the authors of correctional best practices have already condemned the industry's preferred approach to video visitation
- Review the unanimous opposition of major editorial boards to business models that try to profit off the backs of poor families, when we should be rewarding families for trying to stay together
- Identify how video visitation could be implemented in a more family-friendly way and highlight two small companies who have taken some of these steps

The industry and correctional facilities have largely focused on the promised benefits of video visitation, but reform advocates have long expressed their concerns. These pros and cons of video visitation are cited by the authors:

Benefits:

- Most prisons and some jails are located far away from incarcerated people's home communities and loved ones.
- Prisons and jails sometimes have restrictive visitation hours and policies that can prevent working individuals, school-age children, the elderly, and people with disabilities from visiting.
- It can be less disruptive for children to visit from a more familiar setting like home.
- It may be easier for facilities to eliminate the need to move incarcerated people from their cells to central visitation rooms.
- It is not possible to transmit contraband via computer screen.

Drawbacks:

- Visiting someone via a computer screen is not the same as visiting someone in-person.
- In jails, the implementation of video visitation often means the end of traditional, through-the-glass visitation in order to drive people to use paid, remote video visitation.
- Video visitation can be expensive, and the families of incarcerated people are some of the poorest families in the country.
- The people most likely to use prison and jail video visitation services are also the least likely to have access to a computer with a webcam and the necessary bandwidth.
- The technology is poorly designed and implemented.
- Technological glitches can be even more challenging for lawyers and other non-family advocates that need to build trust with incarcerated people in order to assist with personal and legal affairs.

Rabuy and Wagner found that while there are tremendous differences in the rates, fees, commissions, and practices in each contract, three significant patterns are common:

1. Most county jails ban in-person visits once they implement video visitation.
2. Video visitation contracts are almost always bundled with other services like phones, email, and commissary, and facilities usually do not pay anything for video visitation.
3. Unlike with phone services, there is little relationship between rates, fees, and commissions beyond who the company is.

While virtually no state prisons ban in-person visitation, the authors found that 74% of jails banned in-person visits when they implemented video visitation. Two of the industry leaders, Securus and Telmate, claim that in order to be economically viable, they must ban in-person visitation, but some of their competitors have found other, more reliable ways to stimulate demand.

The growth of video visitation has been substantial and now more than 500 facilities in 43 states are utilizing some form of it. Rabuy and Wagner believe, "Right now, while the service is still new and evolving, we have a unique opportunity to shape the future of this industry; lest its worst practices become entrenched as standard procedure. While this report identifies some clear negative patterns – namely the



frequency by which jails ban in-person visitation after adopting this technology – the diversity of practices in this market gives us hope that video visitation could be positive for both facilities and families.”

The report concludes by making 23 recommendations for the Federal Communications Commission, state regulators and legislatures, correctional officials and procurement officials, and video visitation companies on how they could ensure that video visitation brings families together and makes our communities stronger instead of weaker.

According to Rabuy and Wagner correctional officials and procurement officials should:

1. Explicitly protect in-person visits and treat video only as a supplemental option
2. Refuse commissions that drive up the cost to families which lead directly to lower communication
3. Scrutinize contracts for expensive bells and whistles that facilities do not want or need
4. Put some thought in to where the terminals are located so as to maximize privacy
5. Refuse to sign contracts that give private companies control over correctional decisions, including visitation schedules, when it is acceptable to limit an incarcerated person’s visitation privileges, or the ability of people in correctional custody to move within the facility
6. Refuse to sign contracts that bundle multiple services together that make it impossible to determine whether you are getting a good deal
7. Consider the benefits of providing incarcerated people a minimum number of free visits per month
8. Invite bids where the facility purchases equipment from the companies instead of requiring that all bids be submitted on a no-cost basis
9. Experiment with regional video visitation centers for your state prison system and remote jails
10. Insist on contracts where companies list and justify not just the cost of each video visit, but all fees to be charged to families.
11. If the facility allows the company to install any terminals for onsite visitation use by visitors, do not neglect basic issues like privacy partitions between the terminals and height-adjustable seats so that children and adults of various heights can see the screen and be visible on camera

In summary, Rabuy and Wagner conclude that there are several core problems with video visitation. The cost of video visitation can be a large burden on families who are already dealing with significant stresses. The cost coupled with bans on in-person visits can eliminate the possibilities for families to visit. They state, “Video visitation can add to the already significant trauma that children of incarcerated parents face, especially young children who are unfamiliar with the video technology.”

Rabuy and Wagner still have hope that video visitation can lead to positive outcomes for both facilities and families. Restructuring the system with regulations on cost and limiting bans on in-person visitation, while developing standards for quality can lead to increased access for incarcerated individuals and their families to visitations, which is a key factor in reducing recidivism.

The complete Prison Policy Initiative report *Screening Out Family Time: The For-Profit Video Visitation Industry in Prisons and Jails* by Berdadette Rabuy and Peter Wagner may be found at: http://static.prisonpolicy.org/visitation/ScreeningOutFamilyTime_January2015.pdf.

Need Help?

Do you have any questions or need some advice on starting or improving your parenting classes, parent/child literacy program, or parent support group for offenders?

We have an email list of experienced parenting educators who are eager to help. Just send an email to jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com with your question or request and I will forward it to our email list. Then wait a few days and the helping responses will be sent to you.



Website Offers Pen-Pals Plus Programs

When Adam Lovell started WriteAPrisoner.com in 2000, he never imagined that it would grow into a community that has reached literally millions of people. Lovell says, "WriteAPrisoner.com is largely based on what the prison ministries have been doing for years - encouraging people to communicate with inmates." By encouraging the general public to correspond with inmates, Lovell claims, "We have the power to transcend the walls, to promote rehabilitation, to restore dignity, and to champion human rights."

WriteAPrisoner.com is a social website dedicated to positive change for inmates and citizens, where...

- Pen-pals can offer friendship and encouragement to inmates
- Family members can reconnect with incarcerated loved ones
- Employers can provide job opportunities to inmates upon release
- The public can 1) help inmates advance education while in prison, 2) help inmates find housing upon release, 3) donate to prison libraries and educators, and so much more

Over the years, as WriteAPrisoner.com has been working to reduce recidivism by helping inmates receive letters and encouraging inmates and their friends and families, they have identified several critical areas of need and expanded their services to address those needs.

The Community Programs section of the WriteAPrisoner.com website describes these service initiatives:

Back to Work

WriteAPrisoner.com's employment profiles are free to post and free to reply to. With hundreds of thousands of inmates returning to society each year, lack of employment remains one of the main reasons many inmates end up returning to prison. This service seeks to reduce recidivism by helping these inmates secure employment upon their release. This program lets them post their skills and the area in which they hope to reside after release.

Books Behind Bars

There is a proven correlation between illiteracy and incarceration. This service encourages the public to donate their old books their books to correctional facilities. The criteria for donating books are listed on the WriteAPrisoner.com website.

Children Impacted by Crime Scholarship

The Children of Inmates Scholarship Fund and the Children as Victims Scholarship Fund award annual scholarships to students who are pursuing a college education. While the primary goal has always been to reduce recidivism, these scholarships also recognize the importance of prevention – preventing citizens from a life of crime and incarceration. The scholarship program emphasizes that education is a critical step toward a crime-free life.

Self-Help

WriteAPrisoner.com has developed self-help guides for inmates to use. These self-help guides have been developed to promote self-responsibility and self-betterment before, during and after incarceration. Pen-pals are encouraged to print and mail these guides directly to inmates. The Self-Help topics are:

- Back to School: Education Opportunities for Inmates
- Back to Work: For Inmates Coming Home Within the Year
- Credit Repair: Repair, Build & Maintain Good Credit While in Prison
- Going to Prison: For Individuals Facing Incarceration
- Parenting from Prison: For Parents in Prison
- Tips for Visiting Prison: For Individuals Visiting Loved Ones Behind Bars
- Welcome Home Guide: For Inmates Coming Home



Welcome Home Kits

WriteAPrisoner.com donates a portion of its proceeds to provide “Welcome Home Kits” to inmates who are going home. The kits contain various items for recently released inmates who likely have nothing to start with. These are not for inmates who are coming home to stay with supportive family or friends, but designed for those who have nothing and no one waiting. The contents of each kit may vary slightly, but are likely to include these basic essentials: duffle bag or backpack, flashlight with batteries, toiletries (toothpaste, toothbrush, soap, shampoo, deodorant, etc.), roll of toilet paper, pre-paid phone card, pre-paid food card, \$5 cash, wallet, Welcome Home Guide and Welcome Home Kit Cover Letter.

More information on all of these services is available at: www.writeaprisoner.com .

Ten Steps for Parenting from Prison

Among the self-help guides developed for inmates by WriteAPrisoner.com is *Parenting from Prison – For Parents in Prison*. Like the other WriteAPrisoner.com self-help guides, this guide seeks to promote self-responsibility and self-betterment before, during and after incarceration. *Parenting from Prison – For Parents in Prison* is designed to help inmates strengthen the bonds with their children and to help both improve on a bad situation.

Before using *Parenting from Prison – For Parents in Prison*, inmates are asked to make a reality check and evaluate if they were an involved parent prior to incarceration, if their own parents were good role models, and if they may be tackling “parenting from prison” with a lot of related issues. Instead of allowing issues to become excuses that keep the inmates from reaching out to their children, they are urged to embrace them as reasons to reach out.

Parenting from Prison – For Parents in Prison advises the incarcerated parent to take these steps:

Step 1) Reach out – If you are not currently in contact with your child, get in contact. Whether by mail, phone or third party, you need to establish contact. There are some cases where you may have been ordered by the court not to have contact with your child, and you must, of course, avoid contact if you have been court ordered to do so. These instances are rare, but they must be respected, or that can further jeopardize your relationship with your child.

Step 2) Stay in contact – Make note of important dates in your child’s life such as school projects, events with the family, etc. Send cards on birthdays and holidays. In some cases, you may need to make the cards if none are available to you for purchase. Do so. Your child will likely appreciate the gesture even more. Relying on artists around you (there are usually many), you may likely create an even more meaningful and personal card than you would have by just purchasing one. Maintaining contact is absolutely essential. Write letters. Be positive, and be consistent. Staying in contact won’t always be easy. Sometimes your child may pull away because of incarceration. It is up to you as a parent to make this work.

Step 3) Get along with family – Regardless of your relationship with the child’s caretakers (current spouse or partner, ex-spouse, grandparent, aunt/uncle, foster parent, etc.), respect the relationship the child has with this authority figure. Resist any urge to meddle, second-guess, or criticize. Model the value of respect. Respect the person caring for your child, and encourage your child to do the same. Create a support system either using family or pen-pals. It will be much easier to stay involved with your children if you have a good support system on the outside. A positive relationship with your child’s caregiver is essential. Keep them informed, and ask them to keep you informed. Let them know the positive progress you’re making in your life as well so it is reiterated to your child. Try to work as a team if possible. It will be important for your children to see that you and their caregiver have faith in each other and operate in unison for their benefit.



Step 4) Keep promises – If you make a promise, always keep it, and try to never make a promise you are unsure of. Your incarceration may prompt your child to question the confidence they once placed in you. Work to rebuild trust. Be honest.

Step 5) Know your child's interests – Focus on your child's hobbies such as music, sports, etc. Be aware when related topics are in the news so you can discuss these events or mention them in letters. Work with your social network outside of prison to find some after-school or weekend programs related to these topics in your child's hometown. Make a list of locations, days, times, materials needed, etc. and give them to your child. They will be thrilled to see how much you care, and they may feel empowered to see that you are capable of doing things just like any other parent could do. You do not need to go into detail on how you obtained the information. In some cases, you will find caring staff members who will help you do this. Suggest this to the prison as an actual option for other parents. If they won't help, ask a pen-pal or family member on the outside for help.

Step 6) Help with homework – No, you can't look over their math homework each night, but you can and should ask what they're studying, how they're doing, and how you can help. If they are older, ask them to share papers with you – stories or essays they've written, things like that. Give them specific praise and feedback. Learn the names of the teachers, administrators and coaches. Listen. If they are having difficulty in a subject, offer guidance. Since you can't study with them, encourage them to talk to the teacher, guidance counselor, coach, etc. Encourage them to find a tutor if necessary. Avoid talking negatively about the teacher or school. Encourage the child to take responsibility and learn to solve problems at school. Talk about the future – college and careers – and how being a good student now will lead to success. Encourage them to participate in clubs, band, chorus, sports or other extracurricular activities that will help keep them in school. Research shows that kids who are involved in at least one extracurricular activity are less likely to drop out. Always ask for copies of report cards. Discuss these with your child. Knowing you are interested will increase their motivation to do better. Don't criticize if they do poorly, but discuss with them how they can do better. Let them make suggestions. Listen, and offer guidance. Discuss issues such as tutoring or discipline with your child's caregiver. Be as involved with decision making as possible.

Step 7) Promote positive behavior – You are no longer in a position to be a disciplinarian, but you are in a position to reinforce positive behavior by praising your child. Thank and praise them for good behavior, focusing on school, etc., but being careful not to burden them with guilt or responsibilities that should not be theirs. For instance, don't ask your son to be "the man of the house" or your daughter to be "the woman of the house" (depending on which parent is incarcerated). Their job is simply to stay out of trouble and do well in school and to help at home the way all children should with regular chores and responsibilities – not taking on the role of an incarcerated parent! Don't make them feel guilty about things. They have enough to deal with. Be positive. Don't lose your temper.

Step 8) Invite them to visit – While visits may not be something you can do all the time, try to arrange to see your child as often as possible. Keep up appearances when you visit with your child. It is important for them to know that you are safe and doing well. Let them know what productive activities you do while in prison. Visiting time can grow idle sometimes. Prepare a mental list of positive issues to discuss. Talk to your prison about programs that may be available to parents. In some cases, they will let you record a book to tape or CD to send to your child. If your prison doesn't have such a program, suggest it to a caring staff member. Ask your prison to email us if they would like some children's games for the prison visiting room. We will try to send them some: general-information@writeaprisoner.com.

Step 9) Say, "I love you" – All children need to hear this. Say it on the phone, in letters, in cards, and during visits. Say it with your actions. Even if you did not have a positive relationship before you were incarcerated, it's not too late to build one now. Your child may be angry with you or even feel responsible for your incarceration. Regardless of your child's attitude today, consistently showing your love can make a long-lasting and positive difference.

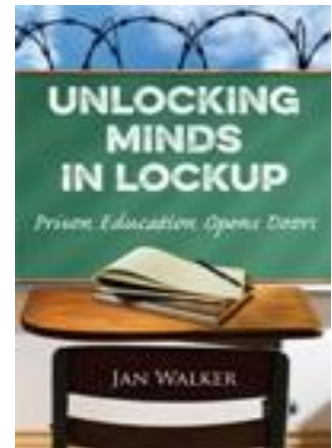


Step 10) Parent – Parenting is never easy even under ideal circumstances. Your incarceration affects not only you but your family as well, especially your children. Of everything you can do while in prison – furthering your education, working at a prison job, etc. – nothing is more important than reaching out to your child with love, respect, and consistency. Set a good example. Be positive. Communicate frequently. Address problems as they arise honestly and with a real desire to resolve them. Be a role model. Yes, even in prison you can be a role model. Show them that you take responsibility for your actions, that you don't blame others, that you can still better your life, and that you love them and intend to be there for them to the best of your ability. Don't shy away from the subject of incarceration with your child. Talk to them about what brought you to this situation and most importantly, how they are going to avoid it by learning from your mistakes. WriteAPrisoner.com has created CrimeFreeKids.com, a non-commercial site just for children impacted by crime and incarceration. Your child will find similar stories to relate to there. It is largely set up as a crime awareness and deterrent website. Provide your children with the opportunity to ask questions about your incarceration. Open the dialogue on the subject, and keep it open should they have more questions as they get older.

***Unlocking Minds in Lockup* Encourages Inmates to Become Involved Parents**

In her soon to be published book, *Unlocking Minds in Lockup: Prison Education Opens Doors*, Jan Walker uses the power of story to give insight into how women and men who spent time in prison to learn, think and prepare for release to their communities as contributing adults and involved parents.

Jan Walker is a veteran of 18 years of teaching men and women in Washington correctional facilities. She is author of *Parenting from A Distance: Your Rights and Responsibilities*, a parenting textbook that in its third edition and is widely used in correctional facilities. She has also written two fictional books dealing with correctional topics and three other fictional books. Jan has presented workshops at several state, regional and international CEA conferences.



Unlocking Minds in Lockup contains several chapters that specifically address parenting issue. Chapter titles include:

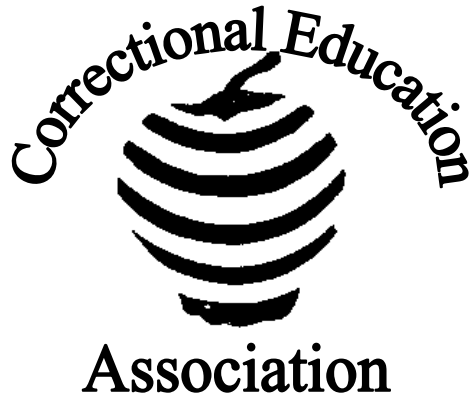
- Moms in Prison Parenting Classes
- Moms Facing Termination of Parental Rights
- Teaching Inmates the Meaning of Discipline
- Inmates Reparenting Themselves
- The Parenting Experiment
- Family Matters
- Parenting From a Distance
- Rebuilding Families

A review of *Unlocking Minds in Lockup* appears in the September/October issue of the CEA-Wisconsin newsletter. If you were not emailed a copy of the newsletter, it may be found at www.ceawisconsin.org.

To accompany her new book, Jan has created new a website: www.TeachInside.com. *Unlocking Minds in Lockup: Prison Education Opens Doors* may be preordered on the website. Jan is also preparing a set of Teach Inside activity pdfs and that can be used inside jails as well as prisons. They will be available for download and printing for \$1.95 each.



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Editor's Message:

Computers have become an important part of education and society making them essential for a household to have one. But as the front page article on Video Visitation notes, computer technology and internet service can be expensive and the families of incarcerated people are some of the poorest families in the country. The people most likely to use prison and jail video visitation services are also the least likely to have access to a computer with a webcam and the necessary bandwidth. Inmates who have been incarcerated for a period of time are likely to have had limited access to computers and if they have any knowledge of computer technology, it is likely to be outdated.

I have searched the internet for resources that give advice to incarcerated parents and their families on how to access computer technology and manage the cost of internet service. My search was unsuccessful.

If you teach inmates about these topics or know of a program that does, please send me information so I can use it in an article in a future issue of this newsletter. Or, if you are knowledgeable in this area, please consider writing an article.

Jerry

For past issues of the Parenting Connection newsletter, go to www.ceawisconsin.org

