



### Preparing to Go Home

You are looking forward to many things as you get ready to go home. Probably none is more important to you than seeing your children. Maybe even getting them back so you all can be together. Maybe it's been a while since you've seen them. Many women don't want their kids to visit them. They might feel shame, guilt, or jealousy. Other women get few visits because of long distances or other problems. Hopefully you have been starting to work to get back together through visits and staying involved in their lives. Now is the time to begin working toward reunifying your family.

First, you have to get stable with a job, housing, and sobriety. Getting your kids back too soon only to lose them again does more harm than good. As a parent, it is totally up to you to make the changes needed to safely care for your kids. Then – and only then – you can start working to get your kids back. Even if you don't get them back right away, you can make the changes and be involved in decisions about them.

#### Questions to think about:

- Am I ready to get my kids back? Am I stable and sober? Do I have a job?
- Will my prior history (abuse, neglect, multiple times losing them) stop me from getting my children back?
- Is a relative caring for my children or are they in foster care?
- How was guardianship given over? Were the courts involved or did I sign a "Caregiver Affidavit?"
- Have my parental rights been terminated?
- How involved with their lives have I been?
- Do I have a safe home and a job that will allow me to care for them?
- What groups can help me by being advocates and resources for me?

The Adoption and Safe Families Act says child welfare agencies must start ending a parent's rights to a child if the child is in foster care 19 out of the past 22 months. The good news is they do not HAVE to end a parent's rights. For example, if a relative cares for the child or if the agency finds a strong reason that ending a parent's rights is not the best thing for the child. Also, the law says the agencies must keep the parent involved. They must "make a reasonable effort" to bring the family back together. This includes things like visits, services to help you overcome problems preventing you from getting your kids back, and reviewing the case every so often (like every 6 months).

If guardianship for your child was turned over without the court being involved – by signing a "caregiver affidavit" – usually you can get your children back quickly. You should get help officially revoking the affidavit. If the court was involved, you will have to get the court's permission to get your child back. Will the court think your children will be safe living with you? You must do everything you can to make sure the answer is YES! Even if the first court date does not go your way, don't give up! This is a critical time for your family.

## “ 3 things I wished they had told me before I got released... ”

I should have gotten my act together when I first got home before trying to get my kids back, too. I was over my head with everything... looking for a job, reporting to my parole officer, finding a place to live, and trying to pull all the paperwork together, too. I just couldn't deal with my Mom who was tired of taking care of my kids and everything else at the same time... I started using again.

My mother-in-law was keeping my kids while I was locked up. Their father was locked up, too. She was fighting me about getting them back. She told me she didn't trust me to take care of them right when I still liked going out and hadn't even found a job yet.

It took me 3 years to be ready to get my kids back. They had heard it all before. So this time I SHOWED them I really meant it this time, and would not let them down again. It is still tough sometimes, but we have been all together again for over 3 years. Makes me proud of them and me.

## Before Your Release

You don't need to wait until you are out. You can do a lot before you leave.

- Stay involved with your kids! Arrange visits. Talk by phone. Talk to the caregivers. Talk to the child welfare agency caseworker. Ask about school and their life. Ask for report cards. Show everyone how much you care.
- Write them letters. If they are too young to read, draw them pictures.
- You have the right to attend all hearings about your child. Do it.
- Find groups that can work with you to help you get your kids back, and arrange visits. Look at the Resources section of this *Tipsheet*, and talk to your case manager and your child's caseworker.
- It is important for you to make a record of everything about your kids. Keep a folder and write down all days and times you visit and call. Write down all hearings you go to. Write down all the times you talk to their caseworker or a lawyer about them. This can help you prove to the court you care and want your children back.
- Ask for toll free calls and transportation.
- Talk to the child welfare agency caseworker and ask what you need to do to get your kids back.
- Attend any parenting skills classes offered by the prison. Ask the teacher for letters about how you did in the class.
- Take classes toward getting job and employment skills (read the *Employment Tipsheet*).
- Start thinking about where you will live and talk to your case manager about options (read the *Housing Tipsheet*).

## After Your Release

Once you are out, there will be more for you to do. But, now you can start your planning toward reunification. Start by doing these things:

- Find safe housing and a job to support your family (read the *Housing and Employment Tipsheets*).
- If the courts were not involved in turning over your kids, get help revoking the "Caregiver Affidavit."
- If you must go through the courts, get help from a group that works with parents to help reunite families. (Read the Resources section below.)
- Follow all of your parole or probation rules.
- Visit your kids as often as you can. Contact them and their caregivers often.
- Attend any parenting class offered. Again, ask the teacher for a letter about how you did.
- Write down all of the times you visit, talk to social workers, care givers, etc.

## Tips for Supervised Visits with Your Child

Supervised visits are an important step in re-building a relationship with your child, and showing you can take over day-to-day care for him or her. Here are some tips for making the visits work.

- **Do your best with your kids when you visit.** Pay attention to them. Do not make promises you cannot keep. Do not punish them physically. Understand they may have many different feelings about seeing you again, from happiness to anger. Talk to them about their feelings and try to understand them.
- **Support the Caregivers.** Cooperate with the caregivers. Do not speak badly about them. Try not to nit-pick the job they are doing. Allow them to make suggestions.
- **Be reliable.** Arrive on time. Try not to miss a visit. If you must miss a visit or be late, call right away. Tell them when you will get there, or reschedule for another day.
- **Be considerate.** Do not bring food without talking to the caregiver first. Do not bring anyone with you the caregiver has not approved.
- **No dangerous actives.** Never bring drugs, alcohol, or weapons.
- **Work with the caregiver on activities to take some responsibility.** Start caring for your child in small ways. Cook a meal or snack with your child. Wash or organize their clothes. Go shopping together. Go to church together. Make a scrapbook of your lives together. Have a birthday celebration.
- **Show you care.** Ask the child and caregiver about their day-to-day life. Ask about school. Ask for pictures and artwork.

## Resources

- **National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated** – Family and Corrections Network. This website is for the oldest and largest organization in the U.S. focused on children and families of the incarcerated and programs that serve them. It has clear links to a directory of programs, a library, and factsheets to help learn more. <http://www.fcnetwork.org>
- **HHS Administration for Children and Families** – This HHS site is about child welfare agencies and returning children home. It has resources that address family reunification in child welfare. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/permanency/reunification/>
- **TANF Laws by State** – You may have heard that there is a law that drug felons cannot get TANF. Actually, most states have changed that policy. Find out what your state laws really are: <http://www.lac.org/toolkits/TANF/TANF.htm#summary>
- **Child Welfare Information Gateway** – This site provides the state laws on what constitutes “reasonable efforts” to reunify a parent and their children. Also, when these reasonable efforts are not required. It also has links to many other child welfare related issues. [https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/reunify.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/reunify.cfm)
- **Family Preservation Services** – HHS site about services offered to help keep families together or bring them back together. Based on the idea that many children can live safely within their own homes when parents are provided with services and support that empower them to change their lives. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/supporting/preservation/index.cfm>
- **National Family Preservation Network** – An organization with the mission to serve as the primary national voice for the preservation of families. Their mission is achieved through initiatives in the areas of family preservation, reunification, and father involvement. <http://www.nfpn.org/>
- **Kinship Care** – Kinship care is when relatives or close family friends care for your child. Relatives are the preferred resource for children who must be removed from their birth parents because it keeps the children’s connections with their families. Kinship care is often considered a type of family preservation service. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/kinship/>