HELPING YOUR CHILD WHEN A PARENT COMES HOME

A Family Guide to Reentry and Reunification

What kids feel · Age-by-age guidance · Rebuilding trust · Support resources

A free resource from the Bulletproof Grace Foundation

From Survival to Purpose

Why This Guide Exists

When a parent comes home from incarceration, it's a huge moment — for the parent, and just as much for the kids who lived through their absence. Reunification is a process, not a single day, and kids often feel things they don't have words for yet. This guide helps the whole family navigate it together.

5M+
US children have had a parent incarcerated

39.2%
NM 3-year recidivism rate, FY2024

988
call or text — free crisis line, 24/7

1. What Kids Are Feeling — Even If They Don't Say It

- Excitement and joy, often mixed with confusion about how life will change
- Guilt — some kids blame themselves for the separation, even when it makes no logical sense
- Anger, sometimes at the parent who left, sometimes at the parent who stayed and held things together
- Anxiety about whether this time will be different, especially if there's been a prior return-and-leave cycle
- Loyalty conflicts — feeling caught between two parents, or between a parent and a grandparent who became a caregiver

The Most Important Thing to Remember

Kids don't need a perfect reunion — they need consistency, patience, and to not be forced to perform happiness they don't feel yet

2. Age-by-Age Guidance

Young Children (under 6)

May not remember the parent well, or may have complicated feelings about who counts as 'home.' Keep routines steady and let the relationship rebuild slowly through shared time, not forced affection.

School-Age (6–12)

Often have direct questions — answer honestly at an age-appropriate level. Avoid over-explaining legal details; focus on what changes for them day-to-day.

Teens (13+)

May be more guarded, especially if they took on adult responsibilities while the parent was gone. Respect that shift — don't expect them to hand back the caregiver role overnight.

3. Rebuilding Trust — For the Returning Parent

What Helps

- Show up consistently for small things before expecting trust with big things
- Let the child set some of the pace — don't force closeness on your timeline
- Acknowledge what was missed, without over-apologizing in a way that puts the child in a caretaker role
- Coordinate with the other parent/caregiver so the child isn't caught between conflicting rules
- Get support for yourself too — reentry stress affects your ability to show up for your kids

4. Talking to Your Child

Preparing a child before the parent comes home

"Mom/Dad is coming home soon. However you feel about that — excited, nervous, mixed up — is okay."

"This is going to be an adjustment for all of us, not just something you have to get used to alone."

Why it works: Names the range of valid feelings before they happen, so the child doesn't feel wrong for not being simply happy.

If the child seems angry or distant

"You don't have to act okay with me. I'd rather know how you really feel."

"I'm not going anywhere, even if it takes time for things to feel normal again."

Why it works: Removes pressure to perform reconciliation before the child is ready for it.

5. Resources for the Whole Family

Support for Kids

Manzanita Counseling Center (UNM) — fully free counseling clinic in Albuquerque for kids, teens & families

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — call or text 988, free, 24/7, talks with kids and teens too

Support for Returning Parents

NM Corrections Reentry Division & NM Reentry Center — case management, employment, and housing support

Nar-Anon / Al-Anon Family Groups — free peer support for the whole family, not just the person in recovery

A Note From BGF

Reunification is not a single moment — it's a relationship you rebuild day by day. Your family doesn't have to do that without support.

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