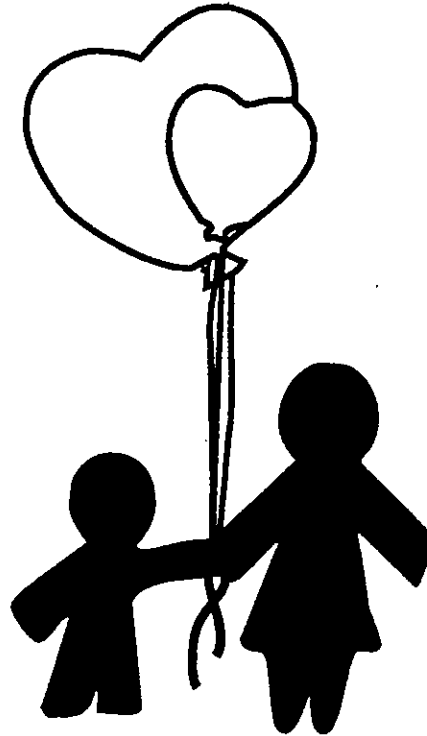


Parenting From Inside/Out  
The Voices of Mothers in Prison



The Children's Center  
Bedford Hills Correctional Facility  
Bedford Hills, New York 10507





Edited by  
Kathy Boudin and Rozann Greco

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The Children's Center  
Bedford Hills Correctional Facility

The Children's Center is administered by  
Builders For Families and Youth  
of Catholic Charities  
Diocese of Brooklyn, New York

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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to *Sister Elaine Roulet*, the Director of The Children's Center at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Without her dedication, support and belief in our children and in us as women and mothers, this book could never have come to fruition. Sister Elaine has encouraged and believed in our dreams, empowered us with knowledge of parenting through her numerous programs in The Children's Center. *Parenting From Inside/Out* is the product of all the sweat and tears, triumphs and joys of providing a sound environment to heal and grow as mothers so that our children can grow into their dreams. We thank you and applaud you, Sister Elaine, for 25 years of unconditional love and for your inspirational words "*I believe in miracles.*"

*To all parents in prison and their children.*

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to thank the following persons:

*Superintendent Elaine A. Lord* Your commitment to incarcerated mothers and their children played a critical role in establishing the Children's Center, and your belief in the capacity of women to develop their own strengths created the context for inmates to invent and implement new programs such as Parenting From a Distance out of needs they themselves define.

*Deputy Superintendent of Programs - Joseph Smith* Thank you for supporting the Children's Center Programs, not just with your signature of approval but by your genuine involvement.

*Theadora (Thea) Jackson* Our Civilian Coordinator - You believed so deeply in the importance of what we were doing for the women and for the children. You encouraged us when we were down, maintained a dialogue with us to clarify our thinking and pushed us over the many obstacles to finish this book.

*A Special Acknowledgment to all of the women who have been part of the Parenting From a Distance Program, who created a collective process of self-growth and connecting to our children, and whose voices, experiences, and hopes, created this book*

## FORWARD

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### CREATING A PROGRAM FOR MOTHERS WHO ARE PARENTING FROM A DISTANCE

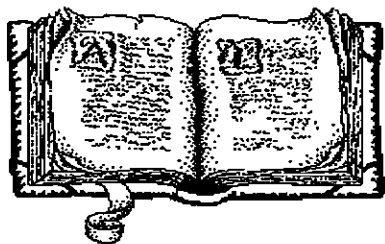
By Kathy Boudin and Rozann Greco

Our urge to develop The Parenting From A Distance Program came partly from our own experiences as mothers in prison and partly from challenges we encountered during years of work in The Children's Center under the guidance of *SISTER ELAINE*. We were both facilitators and participants in the program.



#### Rozann

I had been facilitating the Parenting through Films program. I also worked in The Children's Center Playroom and had the opportunity for daily interaction with incarcerated mothers and their children. I felt that many of the crucial issues of being a *parent from a distance* were not given the opportunity to surface and be explored in the limited time available in some of the other programs offered. The loss of my only child four years into my ten-twenty year sentence, further propelled me to become more intimately involved with my peers and their children. I yearned for answers to the many unresolved questions that haunted me.



#### Kathy

My son was fourteen months old when I was arrested. I have been building a relationship with him from prison for fifteen years. We have both worked very hard at it and we have a strong relationship which is very important to both of us. We had to create our bond, there was no prescription or model for it -- this grew out of who we both are, what we put into it, our circumstances. Because of my experience, I wanted to support and encourage other women in their efforts to be a mother from prison, to say this is not the end, it can even be a new start. I also wanted to try to answer the question that hovered over me -- how could it be that I loved my son so much and yet I got arrested? What was going on in my life? Inside Myself? My own personal questions also seemed relevant to other women with whom I worked. I had spent many years working with women whose children were in foster care or whose children were with friends and family, yet they could not get visits. I was involved in teaching, legal advocacy and counseling. Out of this I came to feel it would be helpful for women to take time to look at the factors that led them to end up parenting from a distance.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

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We decided to initiate an intensive parenting program. We considered an environment conducive for intimate storytelling among a group of mothers: rocking chairs, photographs of our children on the wall, and coffee or herbal tea, as much of a home-like environment as we could create in prison. As co-facilitators we worked together on a curriculum which included topics for discussion, movies, and poems to complement some of the broader issues and presentations. However, the real material for the program is the life stories of the women themselves. Those of us in the first Parenting From A Distance group decided to write this book for other mothers in prison. We wanted to share our own life experiences and the group process with the hope that it would help others facing similar issues. We are women and mothers, however, we hope that this material may also be useful to fathers separated from their children and be a model for them to document their own stories. We picked the major topics of importance that we discussed as chapters for our book - *Who We were as Mothers Before Coming to Prison and our Feelings Looking Back; Who Are We Now As Parents From A Distance; The Caregivers of Our Children; and Going Home*. We wrote a narrative about different themes and then put in our own personal experiences using our voices. Some of the voices you will read are those of women in later groups. The poems were inspired by the discussions we had. This book is meant to be a dialogue for you just as it developed out of a dialogue among those of us in the group. At the end of each chapter there are a series of questions and activities for you. We wrote knowing that you may read this alone in your cell. You can use the questions as a way to reflect by yourself on your experiences and feelings. Perhaps you will read it with a friend. You may want to ask each other the questions. Or you may be in a place where you can form a group. We found the group process to be highly beneficial. Going through this process either alone or with others will help you to improve your relationships with your children and their caregivers. We believe it will help you make sense of your past, cope positively with the present and nurture hope for your future.

## INTRODUCTION

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We write to you as mothers from prison. Eleven of us came together to participate in the Parenting from a Distance program. Its goal was to help women become more confident in themselves and in their ability to parent their children. We had in common enormous love for our children and at the same time feelings of guilt, anxiety and often a sense of failure. We all felt the painful stigma of being a *bad* mother. We were aware that often our lifestyles before coming to prison, and our absence due to incarceration took an enormous toll on many of our children. They suffer from negative feelings about themselves, anger, loneliness and sadness. Many of them experience problems at school, at home and in relationships and are at risk of one day ending up in prison themselves. They love us and need us because we are their mothers, but they also need us to be responsible parents. These are painful truths that are important to face. The Parenting from a Distance Program gave us the opportunity to safely discuss and reflect on ourselves as mothers. We worked hard at understanding our pasts and also at focusing on the present and on building stronger relationships with our children and with their caregivers. The tremendous benefits we gained from the three months we met together drove us to document our stories. Our goal is to support other women who are *Parenting from a Distance*. The purpose of this book is to help mothers in prison grow and change within themselves. We want them to believe in the possibility of playing a significant role in their children's lives, even from prison.

We began our group process by looking at why we each became mothers, how old we were and what our expectations and relationships were at the time. We talked about our pregnancies, deliveries and the months immediately after giving birth.

Not surprisingly, we learned that our own difficult childhood experiences profoundly affected our abilities as parents. We looked at memories of incest, a father not there, mother addicted to drugs, feeling like the black sheep of the family who failed among successful brothers and sisters. Often, just speaking for the first time about these experiences began both a healing and a learning process.

We examined connections to our young adulthood: addictions, the physical and/or sexual abuse we suffered, our varied relationships with men and women, our education and economic status, our ethnic and racial backgrounds, and discussed how these life experiences may have affected our relationships with our children.

We often felt like we were on a seesaw, we went back and forth between taking responsibility for the problems we caused our children to working through our own childhood legacies. As we listened to one another's life stories, it became clear how we ourselves had so many unmet needs. It was difficult to give our children the support they needed. We helped one another by supporting a review of our past lives and by insisting that our focus be on the children. Trying to put together the puzzle of our lives, we talked about our hopes and dreams as women and how becoming mothers was and continues to be an enormous challenge.

We were also a problem-solving group, working on day-to-day challenges for supporting our children in spite of incarceration. We discussed issues that came up during visits or phone calls; custody changes; relationships with caregivers; and how to tell our children where we were and why. We explored the challenges we would face in reuniting with our children once we were released.

Finally, we had a goal to create a written product to help others. So often in prison, we as inmates, are primarily defined as *the problem* - the people who need to be *helped* and who need to be *rehabilitated*. Yet, we know that a wisdom resides in our own life experience, and that we, too, have the capacity to help others. We were motivated by the idea that our group could give back to our community, to our children, and that out of the tragedies that surrounded our imprisonment, we could take something positive and know that we, too, had made a contribution to a better society. Out of this inspiration, we wrote this book for other mothers in prison.

## OUR PORTRAITS

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We chose to use pseudonyms instead of our real names. By now there have been five different sessions of the Parenting From A Distance. Although the majority of the writing was by the first group, some of the participants from other sessions contributed material. Their voices will also appear under pseudonyms.

Among us there is a broad diversity of age, culture, race, nationalities, numbers of children, length of sentence as well as past histories. This diversity contributed to the richness of our group. On the first day we introduced ourselves:

**B**OBBI



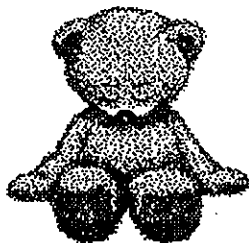
I am here for committing robbery to get money for drugs. I haven't had contact with my daughter for two years and I don't know where she is. I'm trying to find her. I raised her for nine months, gave her father custody because I was using drugs and then I got arrested and I haven't seen her since because he doesn't want me to. I want to take all the parenting classes that I can and learn as much as I can so that when I go home I will be able to be a good mother.

## Marilyn



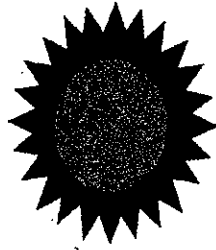
I neglected to parent for so many years. I have five kids: the oldest is thirty, two are in college, the middle one is taking care of the youngest. My mother, who is eighty-two has custody of the two youngest. I've been here four times and I've been through a lot of stages with my children, dealing with their reactions to me at different stages of their development and I've seen a lot. Like, at a certain point the two oldest just didn't want to be involved or responsible for my life any more and one of them went away, moved away. I'm in touch with him but I haven't seen him for several years. I want to be able to share with people all that I've seen.

## Jackie



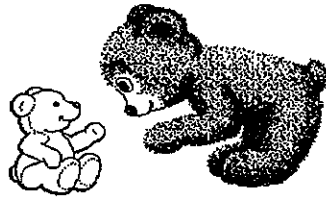
I have two sons, sixteen and eighteen and I've begun to go home on furloughs and it has been very hard to reconnect to them: it's like being away. We have to start rebuilding and I hope that the group can help me begin to do that. I hope to learn more about myself as a mother, the myths about the *bad* mother - *good* mother and about parenting.

**V**anessa:



I have a son and we're very close. He's now in foster care. I want to keep going with the relationship with him while I'm here and also I want to be able to connect with him when I go home. I want the group to help me do those things. He is six now. I am a parent from a distance and there are certain things I don't know how to talk about and feel. In order not to repeat this cycle I need a safe environment to express concerns and get feedback.

**D**ebra



I have one son. He's nine and I hadn't seen him for five years until recently. His father and grandmother don't want to let him visit with me. I want to be close to him and I have a long sentence. I joined this group to find out if other women are experiencing the same thing I am and to talk about feelings that I have kept inside for so long.



## Ronni

Most people know me, know that I had a daughter in prison and now she is one, and I know that Joni has built a relationship with her son while she is here; I want to be able to build a relationship with my daughter because I won't be going home until she is ten or fifteen, so I am here so that I can really work on my relationship with her, get ideas, exchange things.



## CANDACE

I'm here because I never really was a mom to my children. I used drugs, I used crack, and then when I finally decided to really begin to put some effort into it, that's when I caught this case and I feel like I want to be much more centered on my child than I was and I want to begin now. I hope this group will provide a place to share feelings held for so long about not being a parent.

## Wanda



I am a forty one year old widow, with three wonderful sons: teenage, ten and younger and they are being raised from a distance. Their grandmother has them and before I was arrested, for a moment I had a dream: I owned a restaurant and it all went down the drain. Since being incarcerated I feel that my life has taken its most devastating turning point. Prison took my pride and substituted it with much shame. It took four long and lonely years and a lot of praying to finally obtain a visit from three of my five brothers. Now, I am trying to work on being a mother from here, dealing with telling them where I am. I hope to find women with similar feelings and a source of support where I can grow and heal.

## Shauna



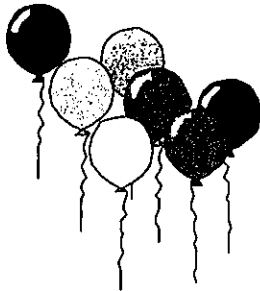
I am the mother of three children: eighteen, ten, six months. I'm working on trying to hold things together for the year and a half that I have to spend in prison. It's not clear that my sister can keep on with my six month old child; my eighteen year old is in college; my ten year old is with my ex-husband. I had everything together for a while, but right now I am going through a bad time when I have no contact with the six month old child even though my sister told me I would. My eighteen year old is angry at me for things falling apart. I hope to get some ideas and support for being a mother in prison.

**Janice**



My son was killed at age twelve and I'm not dealing with this reality, hopefully this group will help me with my grieving process.

**Joni**



I have a fourteen year old. I've been a mother from prison since I was arrested when he was one year old and all my parenting has been from here. I wanted to be involved with this program as a way of sharing my experience of being a mother from a distance, to encourage others that there are important ways for us to mother even from prison. And I wanted help in dealing with ongoing issues such as understanding better why I became a parent from a distance.

We met for three months, five days a week, two and a half hours a day. The sessions involved a very intense process of discussion. We shared many different experiences, both positive and negative, laughter and tears, disappointments and accomplishments, broken dreams and hopes for the future.

We are but a handful of the tens of thousands of women who are trying to parent from a distance; approximately eight out of ten women in prison are mothers. Every word in this text was written by a mother in prison. We hope that as you read our voices you will find your own voice and that it will help as you search for your truths and your own answers.

## SISTERHOOD

No, its not your blood  
    that runs through my veins.  
Nor your genes that are the same.  
Its not the texture  
    or color of your hair.  
Be it dark, curly, straight or fair.  
We do not share the same  
    Mother, Father, Sister or Brother.  
I have never set a foot in your house  
    nor have I ever had a chit chat with your spouse.  
I know not all your hopes and dreams  
    or for the matter,  
    what is your favorite flavor of ice cream.

### **BUT**

I shared with you the rite of birth  
    the givers of life  
    upon this earth.  
The makers of kings,  
    the makers of queens.  
The woman giver of life  
    to all human beings.  
Our common bond that unites us all.  
The hardships, the laughter, death and spoil  
    Sisterhood  
I have found that with you All.

**Roslyn Smith**  
10/27/94

## YOUR SELF PORTRAIT

*Take this opportunity to describe some basic facts about yourself:*

My name is

I am \_\_\_\_\_ years old.

My dream is

I work in/at

The things I enjoy doing to relax are

The important people in my life are

*Take this opportunity to describe some basic facts about yourself as a parent:*

I have \_\_\_\_\_ children.

Their names and ages are

I have been away from them for \_\_\_\_\_ years.

The people who are raising them while I am incarcerated are

Write a little bit about each of your children

These are the things that are hardest for me about being away from my children

In our group we decorate an entire wall of the room where we meet with photos of all of our children. Put photos of you and your children in the space below.





## CHAPTER I

# WHO WE WERE AS *MOTHERS* BEFORE COMING TO PRISON AND OUR FEELINGS LOOKING BACK

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Before we came to prison, many of us were already parenting from a distance largely due to our use of drugs, abuse, and/or domestic violence. Some of us had already lost or given custody of our children to someone else such as the grandmother or the father. These people were raising our children and we were seeing them only occasionally. Others of us were so dependent and involved in drugs that there was an emotional *distance* from our children even if we were living with them. Acknowledging this truth and understanding our childhood, adult histories and relationships was a central part of our work as we explored the realities of parenting from prison. Although going into depth about the details of each of our histories is not the focus of this writing, it was a focus of our sharing and growth. The material is painful--painful to remember and even more painful to live - but we believe that it is important to try to be real about the past, in order to have a strong foundation for dealing with the present and the future.

The loss that we all share in terms of being unable to mother and care for our children on a day-to-day basis is irreversible. We found that sharing and grieving that loss is important in finding a way to move on. But grief is only one of many feelings we experienced and shared.

*...feeling too young...*

## **D**EBRA

I was too young, too immature and just couldn't handle the responsibilities of being a mother. I felt inadequate to the task. I was too young to have a child at the time, but I knew that was what "I" wanted. No matter what, I was going to keep this child and bring him into the world of dysfunction and mayhem I was living. I never, at the time, looked at how it may have affected him or what the future held for me because of the way I was going. My life with my son only lasted a year and a half. Then I gave him to his father because "that was the right thing to do." All I was really sure of was that living with his father and grandparents was more than I could offer to him. And anything was better than that. When I think about how to answer "What was the impact on my life of becoming a mother?", it sounds like a car crash. That's a little what it was like. I'm not sure I felt like a mom. I felt like a baby sitter, a friend, a toy. I was his toy...he could squeeze my face. My life was a tragedy; my sense of identity was "Susie homemaker, junkie, mother."

*...feelings of guilt...*

## **J**ONI

I have a lot of guilt about having done illegal actions which left a completely defenseless infant parentless. How could I have been so irresponsible? When I look back at the time before coming to prison, I feel as if I lived a divided life. I chose to have a child very self-consciously. I loved my son, he was totally dependent on both me and his father. He was linked to me physically long after his birth, breast feeding for a whole year. Yet, at the same time I lived a life which put me at risk for arrest, and therefore put his whole stability at risk and ultimately led to my arrest. He was left without parents. Although I had vague ideas about who would take care of him if something happened to us, it was unreal. It was as if I lived in two separate worlds, not really connecting them, living in a state of denial of the real risks I was taking and what that meant for my son. Looking back with many years perspective I found it horrifying and painful to imagine having taken the responsibility of bringing a child into the world and then acting in such an irresponsible manner. Even today I do not fully understand it.

## JACKIE

Inside of me I just feel like my whole world has totally changed and reality has entered, such as the guilt I've had because I had my twelve year old son with me on one of my illegal runs that I made and I'm still dealing with forgiving myself for it. My son says, "it's okay mom, I'm not mad at you, I just want you to come home." But I still feel guilty.

*...Feelings of ambivalence about the responsibility of raising children because of our own needs to be mothered.*

## SHAUNA

I always wanted to have children, I grew up in a family with seven brothers and sisters. It was natural. But when I had my first child at eighteen, I gave her to my father to raise for her first three years. Why? My mother died when I was eleven and I was the oldest of seven. My father made me raise my brothers and sisters. I had to go upstairs and tell them our mother died and I was only eleven. My father earned the money and I cooked and cleaned and raised them. I wanted a family but I was tired of being a mother by the time I was eighteen. Really, I needed one myself.

*Feeling the weight of discrimination...*

## SHAUNA

I always dreamed of being a doctor but I knew that couldn't happen because I'm a black woman, so I settled for the idea of being a nurse. When I got pregnant with my second child, even then I wasn't sure, I still had hopes of being a doctor, but I was happier in my relationship and his father wanted a child and it made a difference having a partner to go through it with.

*...Feelings of ambivalence -- torn between children and personal dreams...*

## WANDA

I always wanted to be a mother since childhood but I didn't weigh it with other things. I had dreams, I dreamed of owning a restaurant.

## JONI

I waited a long time to have a child. I was in the middle of my thirties. Until then I was completely involved in my work, trying to create a better society. Then I felt the biological clock ticking. I wanted to be a mother, to give birth, to nurture, to give of myself to a child: This was a deeply personal choice, but I couldn't put it together in a way that worked with my social commitments. And I am still working on understanding why.

*...Feeling the need to be loved...*

## CANDACE

I think I had children because I needed someone to love me. I am thirty four years old, with two children that I have never been a mother to. I had my kids, mostly because I didn't want to feel alone. I thought I would have someone to love me, no matter what. I needed to have my child. Never once did I realize how much she would depend on me. I became a mother who didn't care. I put her through pain because I used drugs when I was pregnant. She needed me to teach her so many things about life. I wasn't there when she needed me most, when she got her first cold or when she was born and withdrew from cocaine.

## BOBBIE

I think my main reason for wanting a child was for him or her to love me. I have always doubted love from husbands, boyfriends, even parents. But this was going to be my child - it had to love me ...or so I thought. I could make it love me. It was supposed to. I was its mom. I needed to fill a void. All women are supposed to be mothers.

## EXERCISES FOR THOUGHT AND GROWTH

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### JOURNAL WRITING

#### Personal Journal Writing (Individual Exercise)

1. Which feelings can you relate to as an incarcerated mother?
2. Make a list of some of your feelings. As you are doing these - don't hold back the release of your emotions through tears. Tears are a good release of pain.
3. WRITE A LETTER IN YOUR JOURNAL

"Dear ..... When I look back at my decision to have children, when I think back to the decision to have children, when I think back to the decision (or non-decision to become a mother) I think... I feel....."

Address this letter to whomever is important to you about that decision; it might be your mother, the father of your child, yourself, or your child.

#### GROUP EXERCISE or DISCUSSIONS with a FRIEND

1. Ideal group sizes for exercises that deal with feelings and sharing are between 6-8 people.
2. It is recommended that group members read the section on feelings before the group meeting. Each woman should have a journal book.
3. As each woman introduces herself, she shares the issues she faces as an incarcerated mother; the issues that she hopes to work on in the group about her children, their caregivers and herself as a mother.
4. After each woman has shared her experience - the next question is:  
*What feelings do you share with the women whose voices you read in this chapter?*
5. Write in your journal your thoughts and feelings about the discussion.

## POEM

The want, the need, or lack of these, to house a soul  
within our being-

Our life before, our lives right now--can they conform  
to help our child - to understand to lend a hand  
to make of them the better woman? Afraid  
that inherited traits amiss, will rob them of  
a life of bliss.

The want, the need, or lack of these to house a soul  
within our being.

A common ground will we explore to wash away the pain  
before -  
to cleanse our wounds in one great pond - with  
shoulders close to lean upon.

The want, the need or lack of these, to house a soul  
within our being.

Afraid to know or even dare  
Look beyond a shallow stare  
Yet forced to see into those eyes  
our lives reflected by and by

The want, the need or lack of these - to house a soul  
within our being.

Achieved rewards do we reap - when we let go and get real deep,  
Yet knowing that it's just begun,  
having love of a self called one -  
the process hard, that took us back  
through nooks and crannies, crevices and cracks -

The want the need or lack of these-to house a soul  
within our being

For Right? For Wrong? the choice we made -  
The want, the need, or lack of these  
We have housed a soul within our being.

Roslyn Smith

## **THE IMPACT OF DRUGS**

Almost everyone in the group had used drugs. This reality permeated our life stories and made a major impact on our abilities to mother and on our children.

### **WANDA**

Where was I when my children needed me? I was...with a man, working, drugging...at the time these things took preference over my children and my drugging became my total existence. When the kids called out and said mommy, I felt nothing because my yearning within was for drugs. I cheated with everything that had any meaning in my life, and this was the cause of my destruction. Drugs were calling for me 24 hours plus, and it was more than I realized I could handle. I pretended I was super-mom. I worked and I maintained the house. I made sure the children were bathed and went to school, their homework done, their meals prepared, but today I realize it wasn't enough. I maintained, but I didn't function. I was totally dependent on my drugs. Coming to prison was my ultimate fall. I lost my children. I lost my husband. My family separated themselves from my existence, and I was now just a statistic. The reality of separation was so painful.

### **BOBBIE**

I've been in prison for sixteen months now. I'm a recovering addict. Prior to coming to prison I was parenting from a distance, I wasn't there. My daughter is being reared by her biological father. She is now three years old. For many years I dreamed of having a child, thinking being a mother was going to be the answer to all my problems, never realizing they would just be added to the list with the rest of them. It's funny, I used to hear the saying "Anyone can be a mother, but it takes a special person to be a mommy". You couldn't tell me I wasn't going to be a mommy or that I wasn't that special person. I really did have all the intentions. Somewhere, something went wrong. I saw it coming but I chose to take my first love; the one that has always been there for me...Heroin.

Some of our children suffered from our use of drugs and/or alcohol even before they were born -- when we were pregnant. Talking in our group made this painful fact unavoidable. First, we began to recognize the connection between our use of drugs and alcohol during pregnancy and our children's learning disabilities. Then, came the guilt and shame. Expressing these feelings moved us toward the next step: finding the courage to tell our children why they have learning disabilities and dealing with our fear of rejection.

## JACKIE

During my nine months of pregnancy with my son, I drank alcohol. I never felt as though I had a problem. I drank for fun, while at the same time I never thought about the consequences. When I gave birth to this little person, a seven pound eight ounce baby boy, he looked okay to me. The second morning I asked the nurse when they would be bringing my son in for his feeding and she told me he was having some tests done. Well, what had happened was my baby had fetal alcohol syndrome, but the doctor asked me later if I drank a lot and my reply was no! The doctor told me my son was expressing a nervous problem and would be fine in a few days. Today my son seems normal to me at age fifteen. However, things such as reading, writing and art are very difficult for him. He doesn't know the reason for this. I still haven't told him he was born with fetal alcohol syndrome but soon I will.

*"Drug Baby"*

## WANDA

When I became pregnant with my second son, I was so happy that joy showed in my life, and everyone kept telling me how great I looked. I was exceptionally happy the first three months of pregnancy, but then something happened. Today, sixteen years later, I cannot account for the dread that I experienced. I began to dip and dab with cocaine and then it became an everyday thing. As my pregnancy progressed, so did my habit. Pre-natal care was now twice a week as I was diagnosed with "Prolonged Pregnancy." With a lot of help, I delivered my son, but to my surprise, I never heard him cry as all babies do. When I looked I saw staff running with my baby and the doctor said, "knocked out."

Then I saw my husband come in. His face was ashen and I knew something terrible was happening. My husband couldn't speak, but his eyes were red. He had been crying. I said, "Where's my baby? What's wrong? Tell me." He stood up and held me in his arms and I began to cry uncontrollably. I kept yelling "What's happened? I want my baby. Where is he?" Then the doctor came in and said, "Take it easy. I'll try to answer your questions as best I can." Then I said again, "I want my baby." The doctor proceeded to explain that my son was born asphyxiated and he was presently on a respirator and that because of prolonged delivery and his size that the next 72 hours were critical. Then they wheeled me to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). There with what seemed hundreds of machines attached, my son lay motionless. All I could do was stare and say "Oh my God, please save my baby." I finally touched his fingers and hands, then his face and hair and then his tummy where very carefully in his naval a large needle protruded. The nurse came over and said "Don't worry, he doesn't feel any pain."

Later the doctor told me that after the baby was resuscitated, he had 3 seizures, back to back, and that he was on Phenobarbital to prevent any more. Later that night I went back to NICU to see my baby. They said, "No change." His condition was still critical. I stayed for a little while, then went back to my room and called my mother in New York City. I told her what the doctors said and told her that my son and I needed her to come. She immediately came to the hospital and went straight to her grandson. She stared at his poor condition and cried. When I came in and saw her, she hugged me and said, " I touched his fingers and he moved. The baby will live."

After she left us and went home to rest, I sat in my room and cried and asked God to forgive me, because only He knew that I was to blame for my son's suffering and condition. Today, my son is well and thriving as any young man his age. He's in Special Ed-classes because he has a slight learning disability due to his condition at birth. I never told him what I did when we were one. I will someday.

## SHAUNA

My son was born with terrible asthma. I smoked a lot of marijuana while I was pregnant with him. I don't know for sure if that is what caused it, but I think it was, because there is no asthma in my family or his father's. I told him that my smoking marijuana was probably the reason for his asthma because I wanted him to understand it and also understand the danger of drugs. Also, I worked with his teachers so that they could be alert and help him with his medication. I felt better being open about the whole thing with my son, with his teachers, and doctor.

## CANDACE

I dreamed of the perfect family, the Father Knows Best, the white picket fence, the perfect father, the mother, the house, the child. I couldn't get all those pieces together.

## BOBBIE

The husband, the happy home, the 2.25 children -- that was my idea, the values that were instilled in me. I was willing to try anything to be happy, but at whose expense? Now I want to be the parent I haven't been and I'm finding it extremely difficult, in fact, near impossible. My problem is I can't seem to find her. As I said, she's with her father, exactly where, I don't know.

## MARILYN

I never chose to become a mother..... I just became one.

Drugs were not our only addiction and we also made choices based on our own personal needs and "drives". These included: money, living on the edge, and the sense of power from carrying out illegal activities. Many of us were angry at ourselves when we faced the truth that our own needs were our priority, not our children's needs.

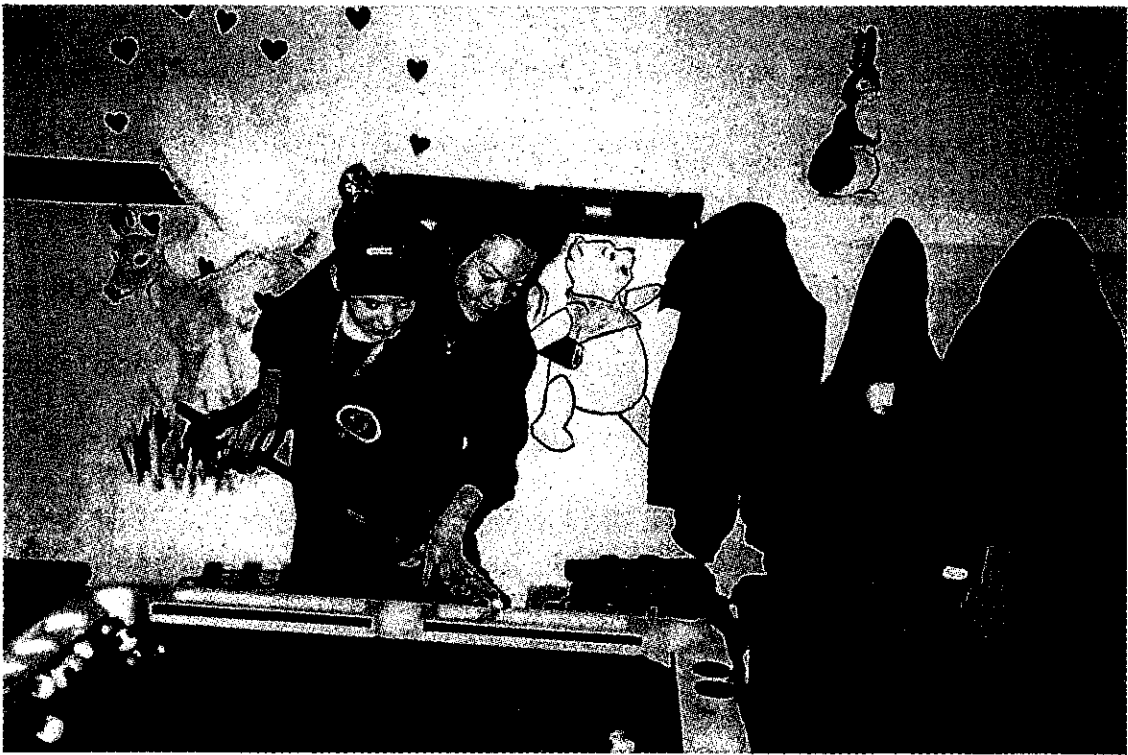
## JANICE

I was addicted to money. Like addiction to drugs, alcohol, or sex, it is a psychological disorder. My incarceration is the consequence of this affliction which has caused many problems for me, my family and most of all my child. This is how I became a parent from a distance. Money was a significant component of my life. I believed that I could not live without it, so I sold drugs, I shoplifted, I passed counterfeit money, fake jewels for genuine jewels and I used stolen credit cards, all in the name of feeding my hunger for the almighty dollar.

## VANESSA

No one could have told me that as a single parent I wasn't doing a great job. What wasn't apparent was that I had to steal to maintain my "upkeep". I stole and didn't think of getting caught and being separated from my son. This is what I felt I had to do in order to maintain. I thought that as long as my stealing didn't hurt anyone it would be okay. My son still never came to mind.

*Violence and abuse have permeated the lives of many of the women.* The faces are varied: emotional, verbal, sexual, and physical. Some, as children, were continually belittled and/or degraded as their parents compared them negatively to other siblings, or they were put-down because they were the wrong sex or their skin was too light or too dark. Women described incest during childhood by fathers and brothers. Others had their first sexual experience when they were raped as teenagers. Physical violence from mothers, fathers, lovers, and spouses was the most common. Many women were beaten while they were pregnant. Others were slapped and kicked in the presence of their children. Still others had knives put to their throats, guns to their heads, were strangled and/ or thrown down stairs.



For many of us, violence and abuse overshadowed every facet of our family life causing trauma and dysfunction which ultimately was passed on to our own children. Several of our voices recapture such experiences:

## **RUBY**

First he tried to cut my daughter out of my stomach when I was pregnant because he said "If you're leaving me, you ain't taking the baby". I didn't want to have the baby because of the abuse. Once he tried to kill me, choked me till blood came out. When the police came, he said "I love you", so they wouldn't arrest him. The next day I went to a battered women's organization. They said there is no shelter for battered women without children. It's not like I didn't fight back. Finally, I went to my godmother in New Jersey.

## **BILLIE**

I really don't know what led to it. I remember being a baby, and then I remember it all changed. I remember being beat for things that I didn't do. I guess as a parent I look back and I feel that some of the things were good from my mother and some weren't. I had a lot of beatings when I was growing up. In one of them I got my arm broke. My mother did it. I guess any other time after that when I got beat it didn't matter to me any more. I think that's when I became a little rebel. I just went off on my own way. I don't spank my son. I won't do that to him.

## IRIS

During my pregnancy I got messed up - punches, black eyes, put in ice. I didn't want my family to know. I could see it on his face before it happened, so I'd put the kids in their room when I knew I'd be hit. My parents kept saying, "Don't leave your husband". My oldest was old enough to know what was happening. My parents didn't hit me but there was a lot of verbal abuse. I only got violent back against my husband twice. Once I put a fork through his mouth and lips. My five year old was present. I didn't know what to do. I thought that bastard would kill me. I was tired. But my five year old loved him so much, he would cling to him when we had a fight. To outsiders, the women are at fault. My parents tend to support the men. I felt like if I turned against him, I would lose them.

When I was pregnant with my middle son, he beat me up with an ironing board and he raped me. I started spotting. Why did I stay? I loved him beyond compare. I thought without him I would die.

## NICOLE

He was everything and when he was good, he was wonderful. I wasn't there for my daughter, I guess, because I was too busy trying to make James change. He had asked me to marry him but then he started with the abuse about eight months into the pregnancy with his son, a week before he was born. I remember I made some sarcastic comment during an argument and out came the marine blade. He didn't cut me, but I was scared. I said, "Well if you're going to kill me just do it," and then he put the blade to my stomach. I was eight and half months pregnant then. I walked home in the middle of the night alone.

*When we became mothers, the children came into our lives...our lives just went on.*

## MARILYN

I am a black woman forty seven years of age, a recidivist (persistent felon), a recovering addict (with many cross addictions) and mother of five beautiful children; four sons and one daughter. Mothering or parenthood was never a decision well thought out or planned. It was something that happened and I recently realized this. Not only was I responsible for myself but for another life, my child. I took on this task by any means necessary, never thinking of what I had to sacrifice, how much my lifestyle would have to change nor did I think about whether I was willing to change for the sake of a child. So I proceeded with a lifestyle of crime and addiction which has had me parenting from a distance for the past fifteen years.

## JANICE

Growing up as the youngest and the only girl I was very much what one would consider a "tomboy". I had no interest or knowledge of what it takes to be a mother. I would always remark "I'm not going to have any children until after I am thirty years old." I almost made it. At the age of twenty seven I had a son. He was the creation of an interracial relationship. Though his father and I were not married, we lived together with our son - when one or both of us were not in prison. Over the years my son lived in a variety of cities with an array of related and unrelated caregivers. And each time I went to jail or prison, I would come home and resume mothering - or so I thought I did. Isn't being a mother the very role that I conceded that I knew nothing about? In 1988, my son was nine years old and I was sentenced to 10 - 20 years in prison for possession of cocaine in the 3rd degree. Meanwhile his father was serving a 5 - 10 year bid in Rahway prison in New Jersey. On April 5, 1992 my son was killed as he crossed a highway trying to get home. He never quite made it to be a teenager. It isn't until now that I have come to understand what it means to be parenting from a distance --- permanently!

## SHARING WITH OTHERS

Does it help to talk about the past? To talk about painful or shameful times? To share with others? Does it help us to develop inner strength? Does it help us with our children now? We have found that it does.

### **W**ANDA

I listened to other mothers, listening to them, knowing that I was amongst them, and being a person, feeling human again, talking about the skeletons in our closets. I feel that I'm not hiding as much. I hid all these feelings of shame and guilt, I didn't allow them to see me for who I was, but once I became more open it broke the barrier. I could relate better.

### **D**EBRA

Other people in the group would talk, saying the same things about themselves, negative things, things in their past that they needed to get out but they didn't have anywhere to tell it, and it made me feel like I wasn't alone. I'm walking around here, and people see me one way but inside I'm keeping hidden the real person that I was, and I never had a chance to get it out of me--you know, using drugs while my kid was in the house, having to give him away to his father--it helps me to talk about all the things I did wrong, come face to face with them. Now that I've shared, I will be able to deal with them better, because as long as they were inside I could pretend that it didn't happen, it wasn't real. By talking about it, I had to face it.

## DEE DEE

I always felt like my child and my family were the only ones who went through things like this because where I live mothers don't go to prison. It was as if there was a shadow over me all the time. But now I can work on my problems and what brought me here, instead of just feeling sorry for myself and my daughter and sulking all the time. I was really upset about being back here for something like drinking. Yet now I think I needed to come back. I can get the help I need, I can see a light at the end of the tunnel. I'm not afraid of everything as if something is going to be discovered. I feel really relieved, I feel like I saved my life and that gives me hope.

*For some of us, being real about the past meant an improvement in our communication and relationships with their children.*

## WANDA

I had a lot of shame and guilt, leaving the children with their father, remarrying, and not focusing on my boys' lives too much. I was afraid to tell them that I was on drugs, and the importance of drugs at that time in my life. It seemed that it was more important to get my drugs then, and I took it for granted that they were being taken care of. They were not my priority, I can see my priorities were not in order. But now, after airing this in the group, I was able to speak to them.

I became more confident with them and about where I stood in their lives. They told me that they could see, they knew I was on drugs. It drew us closer, confirming just their own feelings, when I could talk about what I was doing.

Some of us said that talking about the past helped us to see how much we were placing our own needs before those of our children. These understandings helped us to focus on our children's needs now and to be more responsive to them.

## ANNE

I didn't see how my drinking was affecting my children until the group. I pretended that everything was O.K., even though underneath I had a lot of guilt, shame, fear. Being able to talk about it means seeing how it really was, like, when they wanted to stay home with me and I said "no, you have to go to the babysitter" because I wanted to drink. I was supposed to go to a school fair with them and I didn't go. They weren't happy, but I just said, "Well, there will be one next year." Now I am trying to be more understanding of their needs. Like, I wanted the kids to come here so bad. I wasn't thinking about their mental status, their emotional needs. But when the therapist talked to me, I could accept that it's better that they don't come now. Maybe they will some day, but now I can accept not seeing them without anger at the therapists.

## BILLIE

I can see now that I wasn't a good parent. Just because you give birth to a child, doesn't mean you're a parent. Just because I gave birth to a little boy, doesn't mean that I'm a mother. A mother is there when the child wakes up in the middle of the night and comforts him. A mother is there to wipe the nose of the child when she has a cold, when he is learning to ride a bike. I wasn't there. Since I've been in this class I'm trying now to be a parent. and when he reflects back on this time, he's going to remember coming to jail and I hope he can see me as a parent. When I was home last time, I didn't spend as much time with my son as I should have. The one thing I did was take him to the park, but like he would want to go shopping with me and I would go alone. I left him in his room a lot and I didn't think it would affect him. But now I can see that it did. During the summer program I spent every minute with him. When I would go to the bathroom he would be waiting for me and he would say, "You didn't tell me where you were going." They used to call him my shadow. He was everywhere, underneath me, and I realized that I was a big factor in his life. He asks me now if, when I go home if I could be good because he doesn't want me to come here. Because he likes it a lot when we lived together.

For one mother in our group it helped to talk about the past because she could begin to understand why things happened.

## DEBRA

It made me realize that I wasn't ready to be a mother when I became a mother. When I got pregnant I thought "Hey, isn't this cool? This is great." It made me finally, somebody. I had such low self esteem that I didn't think I was anybody before and then I thought I would become somebody, but it was somebody I couldn't even be when it happened. It doesn't change the past but instead of always wondering "why, why, why." It made me understand what happened and it made me more mature. It made me realize that if I had another child, I would have to be more stable and have something to offer.

*Talking about our own childhoods* helped some of us become conscious of negative patterns or attitudes that we were passing on to our own children. Such realizations are a starting point for change.

## TAREMA

I grew up in a violent household. I lived firsthand with the experience of violence between my parents and was raped by my own father from the age of six years old to thirteen and a half years old. I still bare the scars that my father inflicted upon me as well as reliving the nightmares. From there, as I grew older and started dating, it seems the only guys I attracted were those who were abusive, one after the other. I became fearful of those men, lost my self-esteem and was always thinking it was me. From having a violent childhood I became a very passive woman.

The impact of the violence on my children is that one of them died because I tried to escape an abusive relationship and Carlos used my son knowing he was my heart. Before that, both of my children suffered because I was constantly beaten upon and had a gun to my head, knife to my throat and was beaten with extension cords while my oldest was forced to watch. Other times I was locked in closets like my father used to do to me. As for my ability to be a parent, it was hard because Carlos would ridicule me in front of my son but present himself as a devoted boyfriend to everyone else. Talking helped me to see I am not alone and there are places I can go and talk about being a 'battered woman.' It helps me to see that as a mother, whatever affects me will affect my son.

## MARILYN

Looking back at why I needed to have a child made me look at who I was at that time. In desperate need of unconditional love, I knew the only place to get it was from a baby. However, what I didn't realize was that need came from who I was as a daughter and the lack of love I received from my mother's household. My insatiable desire to have only boys, more or less equating a daughter with me and me with my mother and not wanting to relive that whole ordeal. I felt that having a daughter would make me live in constant fear of her turning out to be *just like me* and me turning out to be *just like my* mother.

*For some of us, looking at a painful past, made it possible for us to realize that we were not ready to mother, even now.*

## BOBBIE

I felt it was good for me because I was able to speak about things in front of other people and not feel like I was being judged, like not knowing whether I was ready to be a mother even now and maybe subconsciously I had thought about it but until I said it out loud, it wasn't really an option. I am not sure I am ready to take on the responsibility now. I want to see her, but maybe I can't be a mother to her.

## **Five Shining Stars created in the name of....**

And I sit and thank the heavens  
that the decision to not have any  
others shine, In the name of  
was mine.

No regrets. For with my five stars  
twinkling in my life,  
Each independent of the next.  
Yet so much one in the same.

As a whole we could conquer the world  
Love and live an eternity together.  
Me - hurting, caring, giving knowledge  
to those who are so very much a part of  
and reflection of my total existence.

My stars in a universe of our own  
Connected from the depth of my soul.  
And I smiled,  
wondering how those essence of perfection  
would grow in my oneness.

Holding hands I walked them  
through a universe of valleys of the unknown  
With hopes and dreams  
that all their energies would be released  
Creating new and exciting constellations.

I, exploring  
first all possibilities of making safe passage  
Tapped into the black hole knowingly.

What was dear to me  
connected in mind and soul  
was now separated in body.

They were left alone  
to face temptation, despair  
and undue hardships.

Silent screams of my broken heart  
left me to wonder.  
Now strong was our bond  
Inward tears forced to be stuffed.

I feared the Black hole  
would engulf them too.  
Nay, I prayed for  
although created in my oneness.

They saw too much,  
examined all possibilities  
and vowed not to be swallowed  
in the oppressions and depressions  
of their Blackness  
and absorbed the knowledge.

That it was not a sin  
falling short of their hopes and dreams  
but the sin would come  
they had none to fall short of.

My five stars still shining.

I sit and thank the heavens  
for even with my shames, guilt and fears  
with their anger, fear and pain.

Created in my oneness  
in the name of

They stand - shining five strong.

*Joanne Rosenshein*



## EXERCISES FOR THOUGHT AND GROWTH

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### JOURNAL WRITING

#### Personal Journal Writing (Individual Exercise)

Write in Your Journal.

It is hard to be a good mother under the best of circumstances. Sometimes because of certain circumstances in our lives, we are not the mothers we or our children hoped for. It can help to understand why this might have happened.

1. What events and experiences in your own childhood are you repeating with your children (drugs, separations, violence)?
2. Describe the things that you were up against in trying to be the mother that you wanted to be:
  - Emotions/Feelings about Motherhood
  - Relationship with your Children
  - Relationships with Others
  - Financial Resources
  - Family
3. Make a list of advice or support systems that may have helped you.
4. Describe how your drug/alcohol abuse affected your ability to parent or to provide for your child:

5. Describe one situation when you were *drugging* or drinking and your children saw you:
  
6. What do you think your children saw? How do you think your drug/alcohol use affected them and your relationship to them?
  
7. What behaviors or addictions or life style choices took you away from your children? How did it affect your ability to be a mother when you were with them?
  
8. Have you ever suffered from domestic violence or other abuse as a child or an adult? How do you think this experience affected your parenting?
  
9. How much violence have your own children been exposed to? Did they see violence between you and your partner? Was violence done to them?
  
10. How has this affected them? What kinds of help would you want them to have?

## WRITE a LETTER in your JOURNAL

Dear....

When I look back at my childhood, there are many things I want to say to you...

Write your feelings about your own childhood...positive, negative, what you want to pass on to your own children, what you wish had been different. Write it to your mother or your father, an aunt, to whomever was important to you in raising you.

You may want to write the letter for yourself or you may want to use it to have a conversation with the person to whom you are writing. You may even decide to copy it and send it.

## GROUP EXERCISE or DISCUSSIONS with a FRIEND

1. Ideal group sizes for exercises that deal with feelings and sharing are between 6-8 people.
2. It is recommended that group members read the sections on mothering, drug and alcohol abuse, childhood experiences, and violence before the group meeting. Each woman should have completed the 10 previous questions in her journal.
3. In the group or with a friend discuss the following questions:
  - a. Looking back in time, why did you have children? What made you want to have children and become a mother?
  - b. How did having children affect your life?
  - c. Who was helping you raise your children?
  - d. Were you separated from your children before this incarceration?
4. Write in your journal your feelings about the group discussion..... your insights into yourself.



Angelika's

DREAM



100

100

## CHAPTER 2

### WHO ARE WE NOW AS PARENTS FROM A DISTANCE?

#### *PARENTING FROM PRISON*

We all share the reality that we cannot play a day-to-day role in raising our children. That does not mean we are not involved in their lives but the roles are different and changing. We have to let go of old roles and define new ones. Each of us, in our own way, tries to reassure our children of our love, to reinforce their efforts, to support them through our approval and to connect to their lives as best we can, communicating values and developing mutual respect.

#### WHAT DO OUR CHILDREN CALL US?

What our children call us--whether they call us "mommy" or by our name-- has been an issue for many of us. Since many of us were incarcerated when our children were very young, we have not been the primary people raising them. We were not there to offer comfort when they woke up terrified by a nightmare. We were unable to accompany them as they ventured to school on the first day. Because we are not present on a daily basis, our children have become connected to other persons who could fulfill their needs. We, on the other hand, unable to be the mothers we dreamed of being, desperately want to be called "mommy". We want to validate our sense of identity as a mother.

# Debra

When he was little he always knew me as "Debra", because his father called me "Debra." I was the only one who corrected him about that. He kept calling me "Debra" until I gave him this look. Then, when I was finally able to get in contact with him after not seeing him for five years, he was almost eight years old. The first time I talked to him he acted like he didn't know who "Debra" was. But the second time when I asked him "Do you really know who this is?", and he said "No". I told him, "This is your mommy." He asked his grandmother (I heard him over the phone) "Who's my mommy", and she said "We'll talk about it later", and he asked again and she said "Debra is your mommy." He said to me, "You are my mommy. Mommy I miss you," and he started talking about all these memories. "Mommy, remember we had a cat, m....." When he was visiting, he made a Valentine's card for me and he wrote "To Mom" on it. Then he made one for his grandmom and in the process of writing "To Mom" on it for his grandmother, he stopped and looked at it like he was doing something wrong and I said "no, go ahead, is that what you call her?" and he said "Yeah" and I said "Then that's what you should write." I think as long as he calls me "mom", it's okay if he calls her "mom." It's important to me that he calls me "mom" because that's who I am, his mom, and I love him as a mother loves her child. I feel I deserve to be called who I am, at least.

# Joni

Just before my son began talking I was very anxious about whether my son would call me "mommy." I wanted this because I wanted to feel that he knew me as his mother and I wanted to feel myself as "mom". Even though I had lost that relationship on a day-to-day level, I wanted to feel that I hadn't lost it entirely. I talked about this with the people who were raising my son. They felt (and I agreed with this) that it was very important that he feel comfortable calling the woman who was becoming his *other* mother "mom" because he was going to be spending his entire childhood and young adulthood as a member of a family with other children. It was important for him to feel equally part of the family, and that there should be no distinction in how he felt toward his mother and father who were raising him.

They understood how I felt and we agreed to try to encourage him to call me "Mommy Joni". But, my son took his own path. He went through a period of calling me "Mama" but it was short lived. Soon he called me by my first name and he called her "mom". When he visited me at Bedford, and would call me "Joni", sometimes other children would ask him "Hey, isn't that your mom? How come you call her by her name?" He was always troubled by this and about once a year we would have a conversation about it in which he would ask me why he called me "Joni" and called his other mother at home "mom". I explained that he lives in a house with siblings who call her "mom" and that she is his mom. I also explained how we had all agreed that he would call her "mom" and call me "mommy Joni" but that he had just taken his own path. He would always refer to me in talking to others as "my mom". For example, if I call the house and a friend of his is there, he will say to a friend "I'm talking to my mom" or "I'm talking to my mom who is in jail," but usually when he calls me he will refer to me by my name.

One time after he asked me "Why don't I call you mom?", I asked him "Why do you think?". He gave me an answer that I felt was the deepest explanation I had heard. "Well, I called *mom*", he said "when I needed help like when my brother was beating me up or I needed my mom to hold me. I wanted to call you but I couldn't, I can't call you when I want, because you can't be there for me."

That explanation really got to me. A mom is someone who is there for the child, able to meet those immediate needs, able to comfort, to protect. The word "mom" has all those emotions in it. It's a real emotional word and when you're in prison, away from your child, that's not possible and there is someone else who fulfills that need - not a grandmother but a real mom. His explanation was hard but I felt it was the best explanation as to why he didn't feel entirely comfortable calling me "mom." I am his mother who gave birth to him, he feels a deep connection to me and his father who created him. He feels his relationship to our families as part of his roots, and he has a close relationship to both of us, his "mother and father who are in prison." At the same time he is a member of his family that has raised him and he will say things like "our family likes to do this or that.." or "my family is going on a vacation" because that is his day to day family. He identifies me as one of his mothers. He has two mothers with whom he has very different relationships, who have played very different roles. I am his mother in certain emotional ways and he has his other mother who mothers him in the day-to-day process of growing up. He has helped me to understand and to accept this.

## Ronni

My daughter is seventeen months old and not really able to communicate verbally. When asked "Where's mommy?" she points to my picture on the wall at home. When she comes to visit I ask her, "Where's mommy?" and she will look for the picture on the wall.

## Candace

Before, when I heard my daughter call my mother, "mommy" I used to go in a room and cry. But in all reality she had a right to call her "mommy" because my mother was there for everything. When she got her first cold, she was there; when she was withdrawing from drugs, she was there. I never was a mother, I never had the responsibilities of a mother. It is painful, but I realize I have to accept it. One day I was going to the park with my two daughters. My younger one who was four was calling me "Candace". I wouldn't answer her because I wanted her to call me "mommy". Then I overheard my older daughter, who was five years old explaining to the younger one that I was her biological mother, that I gave birth to her, that my sister who is raising her didn't give birth to her. At that point I explained to them that I was an addict, that I did things I wasn't supposed to do, that I had no stable place for them to go; and that when I had my youngest daughter I thought that my sister would be the best place for her. I told them that I love my sister and that my sister loves her just as much as I do, that I am her mother and that I love her but I couldn't raise her, and, in all reality, that my sister is her mother and its not that I don't love her but my sister could take care of her. Ever since that day she has always called me "mommy". She also calls my sister "mommy." It was important to me that they call me "mommy" because I felt like I was mommy and so that's what I wanted them to call me. It gave me a sense of worth, a pat on the back, a boost of my ego, I was mommy now, and yet it was just for a couple of hours. It gave me a sense of everything I wasn't.

## Learning To Be Mothers

Drugs, alcohol and other intense personal needs we had before we were arrested were often so primary that they affected our roles with our children. Sometimes we were not comfortable being the mother and so treated them as "friends" or "equals."

As we told our life stories, we learned that some of our own mothers had either not been there for us or they themselves had not felt comfortable mothering. When we began to see and understand these patterns we could begin to change our present interactions with our children.

### **Candace**

With my ten year old, I'm not so hard on her now. I know that I expected her to be an adult. I'm now telling her "it's O.K. to be the little girl. You don't have to worry about big people things." I don't tell her things that her little mind can't handle. Before I never hid anything from her.

### **Dee Dee**

It helped me learn how to talk to my twelve year old daughter. I was a teenage mom. Even though I knew how to take care of her on a physical level, I really was more like her friend, and the group helped me see myself more as her mother. You know, the time when Jessie said she was talking to her daughter on the phone, and her daughter kept saying "Yep, fine," short answers. Well, my daughter used to do the same thing and I used to just lose patience with her. I would just cut off from her. And I can see I was treating her as my equal. But after talking in group, I was able to work through that, instead of expecting the same thing from her that I would expect from me.

## **Talking To Our Children About Being In Prison**

One of the issues we face as parents from a distance is what we tell our kids about where we are, why we are here and how long we will be incarcerated. Some mothers may feel that it is better not to tell their children that they are in prison because it might scare them or because they feel that they will lose their children's love or respect. In our group, all of us told our school age children where we are. We did so because the children were old enough to know it themselves. We felt it was important to tell the truth to the children and because we felt it was important to reassure them that we were alright. Talking to them about our lives now was one way of doing so. In addition, although it is hard to admit to a child that as parents we have serious problems or make serious mistakes, children are able to learn that people are complex and even parents are not perfect. In sharing our experiences we learned that there was no easy way to have these discussions with our children and each mother had to figure out what was best for her situation.

## **V**anessa

Before I was incarcerated I was out on bail and had court appearances. I took my son with me when I went. Part of the reason I took him was to familiarize him with the people I had to deal with: judges, lawyers, clerks, the atmosphere of the court room. We sat waiting for my name to be called hand in hand. He was my security. The only one, yet a child, who supported me through each adjourned court date. He was like my magical charm, as if the courts wouldn't do anything to me while he was with me, and strangely enough, it worked. They allowed me to return home month after month to a "30 day celebration" of being together. When the sentencing date finally came it was my son, a six year old, who told me, "Don't cry mommy. You will be okay and so will I."

I often wonder whether I made the right decision dragging him along through the entire legal process. Was this too much for him to handle? Did I expect too much from a six year old child? I tell myself that I did it to help him, to prepare him slowly for our separation and to take away his fears. Yet, I wonder whether I did it more for myself, to give me the support I didn't have from any adult.

Since my incarceration I've had a few visits with him and on one of them I asked him how he felt about my being in jail. His response was that he was sad because we weren't together. About his being in foster care, sometimes he's happy and sometimes he's sad, because other kids go home to their moms and he wants to do the same. When people ask about where his mother is, he tells them that it's none of their business because everybody just doesn't understand.

## **D**ebra

On the second visit in five years with my eight year old son, when his father had gotten up and gone to the bathroom, I asked him about his Saturday Bible study teacher, because if he misses three Saturdays he gets kicked out of the class. I asked him if his teacher knew that I was in prison and he bugged out. He covered his ears and ran over to the candy machine saying, "Don't say that word, don't say that word." I didn't know what to do. So I figured I wouldn't try to talk about it.

But after talking in the group, I knew it was important to sit down with him and communicate with him, about me being his mother, why I'm here, letting him know that he can ask me things and that I will be able to answer him. At first it was kind of scary but then when I was able to be open with him, he began to be more open with me and we started talking. He asked me why I was here. He wanted to know what happened. He would tell me things about how his grandmother and father felt about me and that he felt different from how they felt. I was able to handle that because I told him, "it doesn't matter how they feel about me. What's important is how they feel about you because you live with them." Being able to talk made us closer than we were because I don't get to see him often. We formed a bond and we could talk about things that only he and I know.

## Jasmine

He said, "Ma, how long have you been in jail now?" I said, "Well, mommy's been in jail for about seven years and I'm going on my eighth." He asked, "How long will you be here?" and I said, "Well, I have my paper work in the courts and we'll see. But I don't think it's no time soon."

I could see that his face had dropped. I felt like I didn't know what to say because I didn't know what his father had said to him. This was the first time I had actually told him the truth. In the past I always said "soon." And I was thinking about the class and how we had talked about it.

During the summer program he said to me while he was changing his clothes after swimming.

"Ma, I know why you're in jail."

I said, "why?"

He said, "Because you killed an innocent person for no reason."

I said, "How do you know?"

He said, "Because me and Shana were looking out of the window when they were taking you away. Why?"

I said, "To get drugs, money for it. How do you feel about that?"

He said, "Well, I still love you."

My daughter said, "I don't like that. You didn't have to do that and go away."

Then I got a card from my daughter. She wrote,

Dear Mom,  
I hope you're feeling better.  
You're the only mother that I ever had.  
I hope you get out of jail soon.  
I love you.

I felt low about myself because of what I've done, and to not be out there with them. But it made me feel better that I was able to share a lot of things and that there were people in the group who would hear me out. If I hadn't been in the class when they asked all these questions, I don't think I would have been prepared to answer them. I might have lied. I used to find myself going on to something else when they asked about why I'm here, why I did what I did, because I didn't know how to talk about it with them and I know I can't just keep on doing that.

I think Shana is going to keep asking me because she's the one who said I didn't have to do it. I'm afraid when they want something they may use it against me, like if I don't give them something they want. I worry about that.

## Janice

Telling my son that both his father and I were in prison was never an issue for us. We led a life of crime (selling drugs and boosting), so incarceration was not an unfamiliar phenomenon to him. We never explained it, we just assumed he understood.

When my son was born, June 17, 1979, it was Father's Day. Coincidentally, his father was in Auburn Correctional Facility in Auburn, New York. I took my son to visit his father in many prisons throughout New York State and New Jersey. He also visited me in the county jail and here at Bedford. Therefore, going to prison to visit his parents was as common an occurrence for my son as was going to school.

## Ronni

My child was born while I was incarcerated. When she is old enough to talk and relate to me I'm sure the issues will arise of why I'm in prison. My daughter will have only known me in "Prison." I don't think that she will have such a hard time dealing with a mother incarcerated because she also visits aunts, uncles and friends of her caregiver who are incarcerated. In the community that she is growing up in, many people know someone or have relatives who are in prison.

## Jackie

I live in a rural area and my kids would never tell people where I am. It's embarrassing to them and I feel embarrassed about it myself. I don't want to tell people either.



## Dealing With Crises As Parents From a Distance

One of the hardest things we have to cope with is a crisis in our children's lives. In some cases we are able to deal with crises that occur. In other situations we hear about them as they are unfolding but cannot do anything to make a difference, or we learn about the crises after they occur. The helplessness that we feel can lead to frustration which in turn can get us in trouble. Sometimes we can actually help our children if we draw on the support system of the Children's Center. The Chaplains and counselors in different programs can also help as can inmates who are friends or support groups such as *Parenting From A Distance*.

### **Shauna**

When I called home my ten year old cried for the first time, saying how much he misses me. That's the first time that has happened because he is with his father and he had been doing well. Recently it seems like he was being left alone from 2:00 in the afternoon (he gets home from school at that time) until 10:00 at night. His father changed shifts because it's more convenient for his life but he didn't make any arrangements for my son. He has the money to hire someone to take care of him. I panicked. My son was crying and it's dangerous for him to be alone all those hours. It's also lonely. I wrote my son's father a letter. I was very hard on him and said if he doesn't change the situation I don't know what I'll do, but I won't let my son stay there. [It was a long week of waiting but her son's father worked out. a good arrangement after he got the letter from her.]

## Jackie

In parenting from a distance, I feel as though the hardest thing to have to live through is a family crisis. My youngest son tried to commit suicide by hanging himself. My parents came home and found him. I found out about this incident when I telephoned my mother's house where my son lives. Some say that teenagers go through this, but in my heart I know that my son is or was going through a very tough time dealing with my being away. I only wish I could have been there for him. My oldest son plays a big part in mothering my youngest. What can I do being locked up in here? That's what I say to myself out of anger.

My feelings are of helplessness. As their mother, I should be there for them both. I try to tell them both "things will be okay and I'll be home soon, just hang in there. " Being a single parent and then your children end up losing their mother, how do they know everything will be okay?

## Janice

When my son's father was released from Rahway prison in October of 1991, I would have bet my last dollar in commissary that he would bring my son to see me soon. After all, hadn't I brought our son to a number of prisons across two states to see his father. Weeks passed and I didn't see my son. Transportation was the main excuse.

I was receiving reports that my son's father was *out of control* and that my son's well-being was in jeopardy. I was considering having my son removed from that environment. The situation worsened and I was out of my mind with worry. I was totally aware of the crisis building around me. The feelings of hopelessness and helplessness overtook my ability to reason and rationalize. I pleaded with my brother and a close friend to consider taking custody of my son. Afraid of reprisal from his father, they denied my plea. I was Frantic! A few weeks later I was told my son was hit by a van and killed instantly. To this day I have never forgiven his father for my loss. But what right do I have? Didn't I make a choice to parent from a distance? I never wanted to stop stealing or stop selling drugs - because that's what I do.

# Marilyn

My son suffered from renal kidney failure when he was sixteen years old. I was incarcerated at the time. When I was notified I was informed that he also had a disease called Odin's which means there was not enough oxygen in his body. My son was rushed to the hospital in a coma. Preparations were made and I was taken on a death bed visit to my son. When I arrived, he was attached to a kidney dialysis machine and on a respirator. I was told he had a 50/50 chance to survive.

The excruciating pain and helplessness I felt as I watched my son barely surviving on a thousand different machines, the helplessness of not being able to stay and comfort my child and the fact that at any given time I could be awakened in my cell to the realization that my child had passed. As the officers walked to my side and said " It's time to leave." I became angry and wanted to strike out at these officers who were making me leave but I was not angry at them, I was angry at myself for had I not been in prison parenting from a distance, no one would have been at my side telling me I had to leave.

One crisis above all others stands out in my mind. I called home only to find out my daughter had been in a fight and her face was cut. By the time her brothers reached her she was bleeding profusely. They rushed her to the hospital and she received 27 stitches. While my son was at the hospital with my daughter, his kidney was rejecting and he was rushed to the hospital and flown from New York to Pittsburgh to a special kidney unit. I felt a great sense of helplessness, thinking that had I been home, none of this would have happened. What do you say to your daughter whose face has been cut? *How do you comfort from a distance?*

My fears were not only that my daughter would be scarred for life, but that my five children would retaliate against my daughter's attacker and I would have five children sitting in jail along with their mother?

Then my fear of my son being in another state by himself. I utilized every support system possible. I knew I could not go to Pittsburgh but with the help of the advocates in The Children's Center I was allowed to call the hospital, keep check on his medication, talk to the doctors regularly and basically talk to him.

*We used the group to support our children in facing the serious problems that they were experiencing.*

## **Kaiesha**

Many years ago, when my daughter was about five, my boyfriend at that time touched her sexually. When I found out about it, not only did I immediately take her to the hospital, but I beat him up--badly, really badly. It hurt so much what he had done, but I thought I had dealt with it. It was over. He remained close to me, and went through my abuse with my daughter's father. He then became the father of my second child and hung in there with me while I was drugging and then when I got arrested. Even when our relationship ended he remained part of our family, the one steady man in my children's life.

Then just this month, my daughter, now eleven, started talking about what he had done to her when she was five. She told her caseworker. The hurt and pain for my daughter and her memories, my own fear that I might be punished and lose my daughter, my caring and concern for my friend who stood by me through so much and now has become almost childlike and dependent from a permanent illness--I felt like I was going to blow apart.

I brought this to the group, a place where I talk. Talking helped a lot. Everybody gave me some support, nobody downed me or knocked me. They helped me focus on what my daughter's needs were and also let me talk about how bad I felt for my friend. I handled the situation as best I could. I decided that my friend was not to see my daughter. I had a visit with her and told her that. I told her that I would not allow him to see her. When BCW (Bureau of Child Welfare) visited me a few days later I told them what I felt was right. They agreed that until he goes to counseling he can't see either of the children. I think my daughter was more open with me since she saw that I protected her and that I didn't want anything to happen to her again and that I love her. She sees that I'm incarcerated and that even so I'm still able to take care of situations for her.

*Our relationships with our children are as varied as our situations. It is hard to generalize. We listened to each other's stories. Two of us were struggling with building a relationship with infants who were born in prison:*

## **Ronni**

I was separated from my daughter when she was six weeks old. She went home to my best friend. This was a decision that I was comfortable with and it was discussed prior to her birth. When my daughter left me I did not see her until 2 weeks later - in between this time I would call everyday and ask about her - what she did, ate, how long she slept, her bowel movements and all other related issues. I was constantly worried that she wouldn't adjust to being separated from me but to my surprise she adjusted very well, it was I who found the separation hard. Since she was an infant was it easier on her but harder on me. I would lay awake at nights wondering if she was happy - knowing that at her age all her needs were only food, love and a diaper change which she had plenty of. Now that I look back on it I'm happy that she left at such an early age and although one side of me still would have liked to keep her with me the entire year that the prison allows a mother to bond with her child in the prison nursery. The other, logical side says that it was better because she had a chance to bond with the people who are going to be in her everyday life. That at her young age she didn't realize that she was being taken from me so she didn't have to experience the emotional pain of separation that I did. I was fortunate to be able to call everyday and imagine the little things she would do. Looking back now - it has helped me but wasn't necessary for her.

The next time I saw my daughter was a very uncomfortable situation - I was so excited to see her and how much she had grown in two weeks time. As soon as she came into the visiting room I ran over to her and grabbed her from my friend's arms and she burst out crying - I was in shock and felt betrayed that my daughter didn't know me anymore. After several minutes of trying to calm her down - bouncing, cooing, walking, singing - I gave up and returned her to her caregiver - she instantly stopped crying - another blow to my new found identity of motherhood.

She continued to do this to me throughout the visit but allowed me to feed her, hunger overpowered her urge to cry because I was holding her and she went to sleep in my arms. I left that visit emotionally and mentally defeated by an eight week old baby - my baby. My feelings were that each visit would be like this and that my one and only child didn't like me. I phoned home to talk about these feelings only to be told I was overreacting and to "stop it" because she (my daughter) doesn't know any better - but yet in my mind I was hearing something totally different - that when my daughter was with me she never cried, that I was her main source of protection, love and food, how I stayed up nights when she was constipated and crying- How I loved her so and what about mother - child bonding? Didn't that take place already? So what's wrong with this situation? I informed my friend that she would have to bring my daughter up to visit at least once a week. She had to promise me this and she did. Well, for several more visits my daughter reacted the same way. As soon as I touched her, she would wail like there's no tomorrow. I came to terms with it and would joke to my friend that she was crying because she felt sorry because I was in prison and couldn't be with her. Then as she became older a new problem arose with the caregiver. My daughter and I were finally bonding--at least in my eyes we were-- and every time I would change her diaper or rock her or sing to her-whatever I did, I heard "she doesn't like that" or "Don't do that this way" or "Here let me show you," on and on. One day I just blew my top and screamed, "I'll do it whatever way I know how. This is my daughter." I felt bad afterwards but it's so annoying to be told what to do with your own child. When I only get to do these important things once a week and did not want to be told I was doing it wrong. This made me realize that there would be a lot of dissension between me and my child's caregiver. My best friend. I wanted my child to respect me and how can a child respect someone if they are constantly hearing that they are always wrong or being screamed at. So I would come back from visits feeling less than a mother once again. I talked to a friend about the situation and came to the realization that it happens but I didn't want to lose my friend or my child's respect. So I talked to my child's caregiver and explained that I'd appreciate it if she would let me be the mother and nurturer for those few hours we had together and if I couldn't control any situation I would ask what she does or let her intervene. It took several more visits and phone calls before this actually happened but it did and now my daughter knows that I am a place of security for her also and I feel good about our visits together.

## Shauna

My daughter went home at 3 days old with my sister who is her primary caregiver. I can remember hugging her, cuddling her and trying to stuff a lot of love in those three days. I thought I was prepared for her to leave. In essence, I wasn't. I cried for the next two weeks and then some more. The next time I saw her she was three months old. I'll never forget that day. Rushing down the hill to the visiting room, wondering who it was? When I opened the door my sister was standing there with my baby. When I took her in my arms she snuggled right into my breast and looked up into my eyes. After this I saw her three months later and she was alright as long as my sister was in sight, which left me with feelings of jealousy and many doubts. Then I saw her in January and when my sister gave her to me she screamed and cried for my sister. I became so frustrated and cried and tried to quiet her down. She stopped crying and looked at me crying. I have had my doubts and fears concerning my relationship with her and what place I will have in her life when I go home, which will be soon. I know that not only is she my child but also my sister's. Communication was bad since I'm from Upstate, there are blocks on the phone, and I have poor writing skills, but through The Children's Center and a children's advocate, I have managed to bridge some of the gaps with tapes, phone calls, and simple letters. But most of all, women who have had or are experiencing similar circumstances in my group helped me emotionally. I still have jealousies at times and fears, but I now deal with it one day at a time and I thank God for allowing my sister to be there for my child.

## SEPARATED

You came into this world a product of love  
formed from two souls that united to create  
I, the woman encased you within the depths of my body  
we were one, yet two,  
you hidden from the world.

We shared everything  
my body produced  
for the nourishment of two.

You knew the rhythm of my voice before

I knew your cries.

Yet I felt the rhythm of your touch  
before you felt mine

Your birth a surgical procedure,  
Not the way nature intended it to be

Knife and scalpel - slicing through the mound  
that protected you.

I filled with tears of joy spilling from my fountain  
as I saw your wrinkled body  
straight out of my belly.

Eyes puffy - skin so ruddy, voice so strong  
yet you - so frail  
not even a minute old.

Our first glance at one another,  
our first shared word,  
our last moment of being one.

**Roslyn Smith**

One woman who knows she may be in prison until her nine year old son is no longer a child, spoke about her struggle to redefine her role with him into that of a friend.

## Debra

One day I woke up and felt terrible and I came to the *Parenting From A Distance* Group and said, "Maybe I shouldn't bother him and keep insisting on the visits. It's a burden on him and it's such a long trip and he shouldn't have to suffer from me being here." Then I wished he wasn't even born at all. I felt those things because I was angry because he needs to have his mother home with him and he doesn't and he's a baby still and babies need to be with their mothers. But then, when I do see him, it's like everything is alright, this is the way it should be, this is the way it's supposed to be. I just want to be his friend, to be someone he can talk to, be someone there to give him advice, the best way I can from everything I've learned. I didn't see him for my first five years in prison-from when he was three to eight. Now, in the past two years I have seen him three times and talked to him several times each year. If I could have my fantasy: I'd see him once a month, have trailer visits with him every three months, there would be no block on the phone and I'd call every other day. I would have contact with his teachers and get his report card and his father would encourage him to have contact with me and I'd get along with his grandmother.

As one woman prepares to go home, she is coping with the possibility that her older children have survived the separation by creating new lives. It is not clear whether they will be living with her when she goes home:

## Shauna

I miss my eighteen year old daughter and ten year old son, but my other sister has made the communication very strong. My son, when I first was incarcerated about eight months ago, he was very hostile, rebellious and had a lot of problems in school and with other children. Through my family, the services of The Children's Center, tapes, phone calls, summer program... we worked things out and stayed in constant contact regarding many things in his life. Our bond is secure. I never really realized how much my being away/incarcerated affected my eighteen year old daughter until recently. On our visit she became very emotional and afterwards wrote me a letter, asking why God had condemned her by taking me away. I really felt like less than a mother at this point. By being open and honest and explaining all the circumstances which brought me to this point. By reassuring her, we were able to come to a certain level, Trust Hope, Love for each other. My daughter wrote a beautiful essay about me for her 12th grade English class entitled "My Hero".

I have much guilt and shame for the things I've taken my children through. Even though I maintained a job, home, and made sure they were physically taken care of, I still neglected them and put them through a lot. That is the past, all I can do is be a better mother for them in the future and be there for them if they need me, especially my two oldest who have established new family circles.

I won't make them choose, the two oldest. I'll just be there for them. It will be their choice. My baby, I am going to eventually take her, but I will make sure that my sister and her husband are a definite part of her life. I know the transition is going to be rough, but I have confidence.

Out of all of this madness, I'm truly thankful to God that my craziness didn't turn my children in the wrong direction. I truly do have a lot to be thankful for! I also would like to say thank you to Sister Elaine, Rissa and all the children's advocates. All my parenting from a distance sisters, my family and all The Children's Center staff at Bedford.

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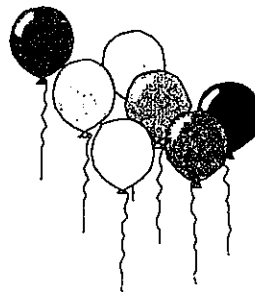
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## **FEAR OF REJECTION BY OUR CHILDREN**

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As mothers, we already feel a lot of guilt about having left our children and being in prison. We want them to love us, we want to have a good time with them in the short time that we have during visits. Sometimes it is hard for us to do things that we know we should for fear that they will reject us.



## Joni

It's hard for me to discipline my child when he visits. There were some visits that he acted out, ran around the visiting room, even threw things at people. I remember feeling guilty that it was my absence that made him act like that and it was hard for me to discipline him and I also didn't want to make him angry at me by being strict with him because I so much wanted him to feel good about me, to leave the visit on a good note.

## Jackie

I want to tell him that it was my drinking when I was pregnant with him that may have led to his learning problems because he feels bad about school. He doesn't understand why he is always held back in his class; why he can't read well; why he doesn't comprehend things like other kids? In my heart I want to tell him it's because of my drinking, fetal alcohol syndrome. I guess the reason I haven't told him is that he hates alcohol and my coming to prison has hurt him a lot. I'm afraid that I may be pushing him further away from me and I truly don't want that. I myself don't want the rejection from my child. I know it will hurt, but he's old enough that I pray he will understand.

I can only say that drinking has sure taught me a big lesson and has also taken a lot from me and my family.

Don't drink and drug while pregnant because it can destroy a child's life. A child doesn't ask to be born.

# Wanda

## *Why Haven't I Told Him?*

Maybe because of fears of rejection. Maybe the fear of losing his love and him hating me. I've been the cause of my child's entry into the world and suffering. My greed for drugs didn't give me awareness of the consequences my child would endure. The enormous amount of pain and tests he went through drained his eyes of tears. All of my son's physical and mental problems were *mom related*. I was the cause of his limitations. He used to cry because he wasn't allowed to do a lot of what many children his age were doing. He used to say "Why am I so stupid?" My son tells me today how much he loves me and because of that I've been a coward to admit my faults... until now. Soon, I know that we will begin sharing quality time together and I've made up my mind that it's time to be honest and tell him the truth. I pray he will forgive me.

If you are expecting a child, please read my story. Don't start drugs or continue drugs while pregnant, as very often infant mortality is a reality. If you're lucky that your baby doesn't die, know that pain, guilt and shame will accompany you as you witness a helpless baby enduring paddle-shock, asphyxiation, and endless pricking by painful needles. If you begin your pregnancy drug free and with "love", your child will have a chance to live a normal healthy life. In the name of love let's begin this process of "with child", without shame. I hope my story will help someone not make the same mistakes I did.

## ACCEPTING OUR CHILDREN'S ANGER

Group discussions helped many of us to understand that it is normal for our children to feel angry at us. We left them. It is healthy for them to be able to express their anger. We don't have to take their anger as total "rejection," or as meaning they don't love us. They can feel angry and also love us. We worked at being able to accept their anger and to help them feel safe to express it.

### Dee Dee

I remember how Joni described her son telling her he was mad at her, that she was stupid to leave him. Then not long ago my thirteen year old daughter did the same thing. When she yelled at me, I could feel her hate for me. I said, "I know I haven't always been there for you." The first time, when she said angrily, "I know," I argued with her saying "what's that supposed to mean?" But the second time, I let her just say it. I gave her space to say it. I let there be silence instead of just cutting it off. I wasn't afraid of her anger.

### Candace

I feel less tense talking to my daughter. I used to be scared talking to her, even though she's only eight, I used to feel she would be saying to herself, "I don't want to talk to her" because of the fact that I'm gone. I know she's mad and that she keeps it in herself. But listening to the way the others talked and seeing how their kids reacted to them gave me a little hope. Now I can see it would be normal if she did get angry. In a way I would be glad if she did get angry but I also hope she can express it better than I used to do.

# Wanda

I went for five months with my 16 year old son refusing to talk to me. Every time I called to speak to my other two sons I asked to speak to him, but he always told them to say he wasn't home, he was busy, he had nothing to speak to me about. So during those five months, I self focused and realized how unfair I had been to him and his own needs and feelings. I also wanted to do something special for him so I made him a blanket, something I've never done. And it kept me going because I knew that the end result was that he would feel my love through this. And I wrote him constantly, every week. He never answered any of my letters, but I wanted him to know that I never stopped loving him.

Then one day I called and I said, "Is Jimmy home? Can I speak to him?" And he came to the phone. And I was just smiling, just listening to him ask me how I was, how were things going. And I was just smiling and he said, "Why aren't you talking to me?" And I said I was just awed by listening to his voice and we laughed. He said he was sorry he hadn't come to the phone to speak to me, but he was feeling really angry at me. He was upset that in the five years that I've been in prison, he's never heard from me why I'm here. He heard bits and pieces from family. And then he was very angry at them for even discussing me, so his way of getting back was to isolate himself from all of us--because it was too much, too painful and it was hurting. He told me a little about what he's been doing, about some of his plans for the future, and he told me that I've just laid all this responsibility on him where it wasn't his responsibility to take care of the children. He told me that I had the nerve to call him and keep reminding him of the responsibility for the younger ones. For example, I used to tell him "Make sure when they go out they have their scarves and hats and are buttoned up." And he told me he wasn't their mother, that was my problem and they weren't his children and he got tired of doing what I was supposed to be doing and that this interfered with his growing up. I took his anger. He was right. I told him that I was very sorry for being out of his life and for placing all this responsibility on him, and he said he was going to visit me. That he was going to blow me out of the water. He said he isn't saying this to hurt me, but that he just wants me to understand what he feels. He just wants me to look at him as the young man that he is, with his own mind and own feelings. He isn't being disrespectful, and just because he's my son, doesn't mean that he feels the same way that I do.

## **PARENTING FROM PRISON**

It was helpful to talk with others about different ways we can communicate with our children from prison. It was clear that the stronger we felt within ourselves, the more we were able to give to our children. The more open we are with our own feelings and the more comfortable we are in being real about ourselves, the more we are able to help our children be open emotionally.

### **Anne**

I express my love to Annie now more than I ever did on the street. I even feel different about her. It's like I want to reach out and hug, I want her to be with me, I encourage her a lot now. I can't see them but I assure them all the time in letters, cards, phone conversations, gifts that I make. I can't hug them but I can write it and express it. I'm doing better because I can express my love more easily.

### **Vanessa**

I let him know of mistakes I still make sometimes in reference to an error he has made, just so that he gets a sense that it's *okay* and to move on...learning from it. Now he's seeing a therapist once a week and the feeling I got from that was that he felt bad because he has to see one. When I let him know that I have to see one twice a week, his whole attitude changed. He wanted to know what we talked about, did I like it, how I felt etc. I answered each question honestly and when it was all over, he stated he likes his therapist and told me about the things that they talk about.

We are fortunate in this prison to have different opportunities to express our love to our children: a special Children's Center for day visits and summer and overnight visiting programs; trailer visits; story corner where we read stories on tape and send them along with the books to our children; a card shop to make cards for special holidays; advocates to help us to connect with our families. But some of us have to overcome a real lack of confidence about ourselves as mothers and our relationships with our children. This is especially true when we get very few visits and can't talk to them easily.

We encourage each other--not to give up, no matter what, even when things seem hopeless or when a breakthrough or having more contact seems impossible. We have learned to keep trying, and that a change will come. Even if we don't have a lot of contact, our children need to feel our love. One woman who almost never sees her daughter who lives in the south felt very insecure about her daughter's love for her. She says,

## Nicole

I send her Christmas cards and I try to write her every week. I read on a tape every week for her and send her the books. Her grandmother doesn't have a tape player but I make the tapes anyway. Then she wrote me on Monday. She said she was listening to the tape and that she was crying because it sounded like she was right next to me. I used to sing to her and her brother or she would hear me singing by the radio. She finally got to listen to one tape in a car tape player, and it had me singing for her on it.

Women were amazed to discover that their children are so bonded to them in spite of the separations of time and space, and their own feelings of failure as mothers. Both mothers and children figured out creative ways to connect across the distance: One woman has only seen her ten year old son three times in the seven years of her incarceration. She says:

## Debra

I got copies of a picture of me, wallet size and I sent him one. The first time I talked to him he hadn't gotten it yet. When I asked him if he had a wallet. He said, "no." When I called him a week later he told me he had gotten the picture and he had told his dad to go out and buy a wallet. He told me he carries my picture with him wherever he goes.

Another woman has been in prison for most of her youngest son's six years. She doesn't get to see him a lot, but she does speak with him and she told this story.

## Wanda

My six year old son told me yesterday on the phone that he was going to have a lot of fun today, that he was being baptized and that he made a list of all the people who are coming and I am included. He wanted me to tell the people here that I need to be at the church at 9:00. He told me, "Don't worry about what you are going to wear, grandma is bringing a dress, and don't worry, because grandma is paying the priest five dollars so that you can have a seat right in the front." When I told him that I couldn't come, he said, "Of course you can, don't worry, I'm going to call the prison and tell them you have to be at the church." I told him I would go to church here at the same time. So I went to church here and I sat in the front, imagining my son's baptism. When I called him today, he said, "Did you go to church?" and I said "yes, I was in the front and thank you for the seat." While we are in prison we see the passage of time most clearly in the growth of our children. It can be hard to accept their growing up. We remember them as they were when we left, and we wish we hadn't missed all those years.

## Vanessa

I've never been one to go to church or to be religious, but letting my son know that when in need I go to a *higher power* and that he's always there for me, kind of gives him a sense of not being alone...like since we're praying to the same God, he's joining us together from a distance.

## Wanda

When I got here I thought "my babies, my boys" but life doesn't stop. My boys were growing up without me. Eddie's interests are basketball, school, friends, girls, and of course I feel a little jealous. I have to struggle with my feelings. Why are all these things more important than mommy? How did this group help? When we started envisioning our children, it was mainly in my head and I saw them as babies and mommy had to be there. Then we spoke about Shauna, and how her baby was born here and she had to let him go. That helped me to look at my boys and realize that I also must let go and let them become men, that they already are doing this. At one time I just wanted to hold them as babies forever, yet when they came on the next visit I could see Eddie had a mustache, Josh was older and bolder and the baby was no more in pampers. A Mother always loves her children, but I like these guys, I like them, too.

## EXERCISES FOR THOUGHT AND GROWTH

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### JOURNAL WRITING

#### Personal Journal Writing (Individual Exercise)

1. What do your children call you? Write how you feel when your children call you by a name instead of "Mommy, Mama, or Mom."
  
2. Do you treat your children as "little adults"? How will you give them permission to be children?
  
3. Talking To Your Children About Being in Prison
  - A) Where do your children think you are?
  
  - B) If they don't know that you are in prison, why did you decide not to tell them?
  
  - C) Do your children know why you are in prison?
    - C.1 What do you tell each of your children about why you are in prison?
  
    - C.2 Why do think this is a helpful explanation?

C.3 What are the hardest things to explain to them?

C.4 What are your fears or feelings about their reactions to your explanation?

4. Crises

A.) What crises with your children have you had to deal with while you were incarcerated?

B.) Write about that experience:  
How did you cope with it? What were your strengths?

C.) What kind of support did you have?

5. Your Children and Their Separation From You

A.) How do you think your children are experiencing the separation from you?

B.) Who are the people from whom your children can get support from?  
...teacher; .... a special relative; ..... a friend; ...a counselor; .....

## WRITE A LETTER IN YOUR JOURNAL

Dear *Child's Name*:

You have asked me many questions about my life: what did I do that took me to prison; why did I do it; when am I coming home; what is my life in prison like? I want to try and answer your questions in this letter . . . ."

Write a letter to your child. If you have several children you may want to write a different letter to each of them because of their different ages and what is appropriate to say to each one.

## GROUP EXERCISE or DISCUSSIONS with a FRIEND

In a group setting choose any of the items above to discuss after each woman has had the opportunity to write in her journal and process everything individually. After group discussions, allow the group members to write their feelings and opinions about the meeting.

## TAKING ACTION

### *STEPS TO TAKE*

Think of someone who can be a special support to your child. Get in touch with them, start a dialogue with them to lend support to your child.

### *EXPRESS YOUR LOVE TO YOUR CHILD: WAYS TO CONNECT*

Visits

Telephone Calls

Make tapes reading a story and talking or singing to them

Crochet or Knit a blanket, slippers, sweater, stuffed animals

Read the same books your children are reading in school and share reactions

Watch the same movies or videos

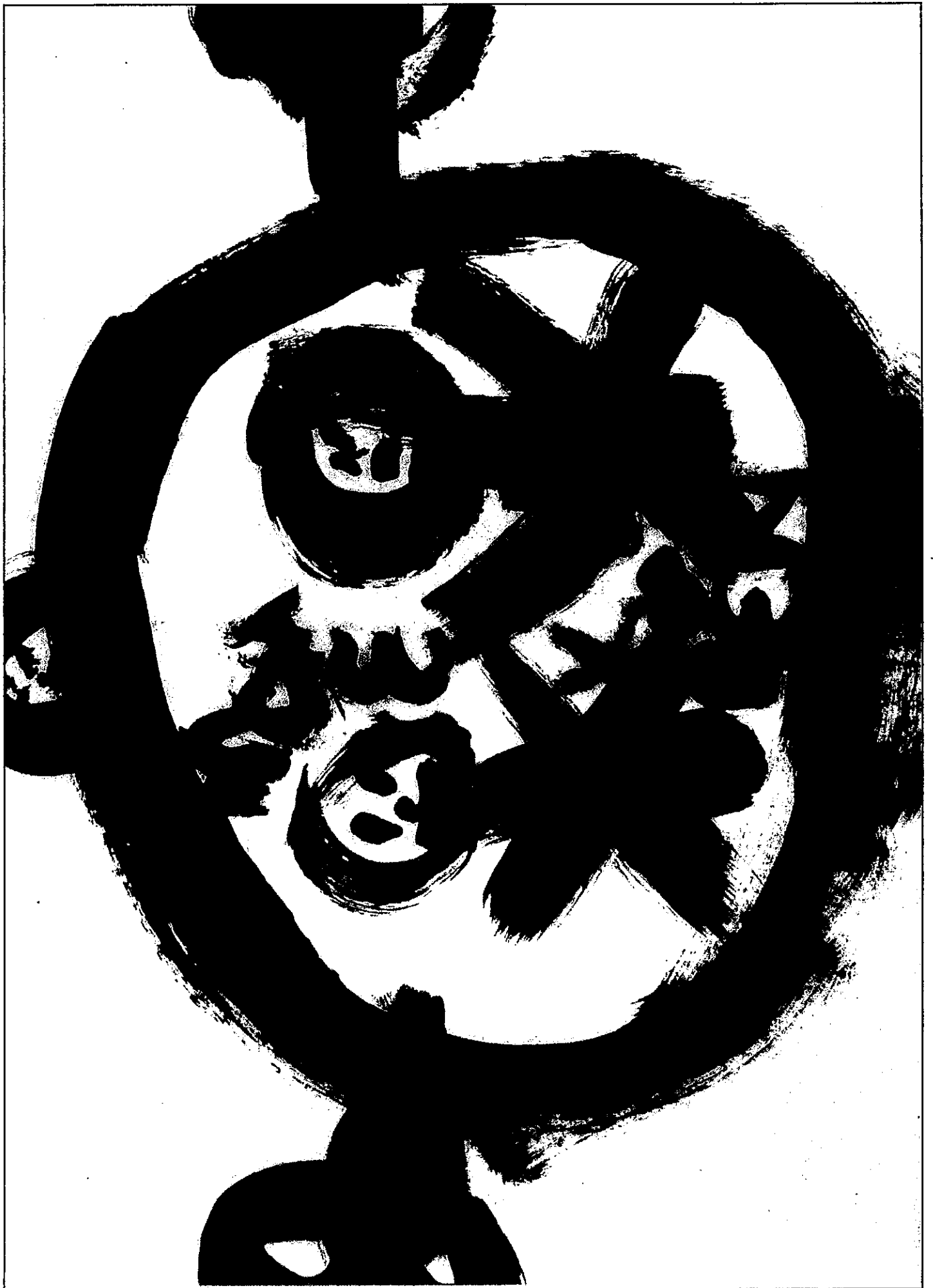
Write a little story using stick figure drawings about something that they do such as going to the beach, going shopping . . .

Remember to connect on the special days: birthdays, first day of school, graduations, holidays;

On your child's birthday tell them the story of their birth on tape, in a letter;

Even if you have no contact right now with your child, keep a journal of your thoughts about them--someday they will read it and it will make a difference in their lives.

In your journal, write other ways to connect with your child.





## CHAPTER 3

### CAREGIVERS

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One of the major facets of parenting from a distance is working with caregivers who are raising our children. In some instances the word caregiver is misleading, since the people who are raising our children are not merely temporary caregivers but have, in fact, been our children's day-to-day parents. Whose children are they raising? Are they ours? Theirs? Are they ours and theirs? This very complex reality is what leads to difficult issues which our group talked about a great deal.

The primary area of conflict between caregivers and mothers who are incarcerated is how often we get to see our children. This issue led us to express enormous frustration and often anger at the children's caregivers because we did not get to see our children as often as we hoped. As we talked and struggled with our feelings we came to see another part of the picture. We began to appreciate much more what the caregivers do as they take over our responsibility for raising our children. We also began to look more clearly at our children's needs. Their day-to-day life limits how often they can come. Their activities and involvements with families with whom they are living define their lives. As we struggled with our own needs to have meaningful relationships with our children, we also tried to be more understanding and appreciative of the burdens on the caregivers. Often the anger

and frustration that we directed at the caretakers was really about our own pain over the loss of being the mother we dreamed of being. When we could get to that fact, face the loss, and acknowledge the grief, it helped.

## Shauna

When I first came into the group I was furious with my sister. I made a decision not to put my baby in the nursery here at Bedford because I felt she would be better off with my sister. It would be a more normal situation. My sister agreed to take her. Now, I don't even get to see my daughter. I thought I would have regular contact with her. True, my daughter lives upstate and it's a long drive, but I thought I would get to see her. I know she's bonded with me and now she can't come but every couple of months. After I let my anger out, I began to listen. People in the group helped me see that I made a choice about where it would be best for my baby to be, and I don't regret it. My sister just can't drive down here much. I have to accept that, and I am grateful that she took my baby, days after she was born and is taking care of her. Then I listened to the other mother who had just sent her baby home. She made me realize that my baby wasn't bonded with me; she's bonded with my sister. She can't know me because she's only five months old and I've only seen her a few times. I need her but she really doesn't need me right now. It's hard to accept all this, but it's what's real. When I called my sister on the phone, instead of attacking her with my anger and frustration, I just broke down and cried, and she cried, and we shared our feelings about how hard it is. It's hard but this group helped me to let go and to accept being a parent from a distance. I feel more at peace.

We face different kinds of obstacles when we try to have contact with our children.

In some cases the distance between where we are incarcerated and where the children are living presents difficulties particularly when they live in upstate New York, in other states or in other countries. For some of us, telephone contact is not easily available. Some of the caregivers put blocks (restrictions) on their phones. Usually this is because they need to cut down on their telephone bill; but sometimes

it is because they want to keep a distance from us. Whatever the reason for the block, it is very hard to be completely cut off from contact with our children.

## **Marilyn**

The worst feeling in the world is when you are in prison and the caregivers of your children have a block on the phone. In my case it's my mother and for the past five and a half years, there has been a block on the phone. It leaves you with the feeling that you are cut off at the knees. Helplessness sets in because there are times when you just want to reach out and touch, only to hear an operator say "telephone company restricted." I needed to talk to them, to hear their voices, to assure them, really myself, that everything was alright. There are moments of crises when the phone becomes your lifeline, and you pray that next time when your motherly instinct sends out a warning alarm that it will not be because you have lost someone close to you.

The caregivers judge us by our past. We feel like we've changed. We hope that we've changed, and we want to have a relationship with our children, now. But the caregivers are angry with us for who we were in the past and they don't trust us now.

## **Debra**

She's the one who doesn't want me to see him. She thinks coming here is too traumatic for him. She says I wasn't there before for him, when I was not in prison, so why do I suddenly want to be involved with him now? Is it just because I'm bored? But I feel now that he deserves to know who I am. He's living with a lie, not knowing and wondering about me, his mother, who he has a right to know. They still have a picture of me as this negative person who lies and steals. So many times I said I would change but I didn't, so now they don't believe I've changed. But I want to be part of my son's life now even though I wasn't in the past.

In some situations the caregivers of our children didn't want to let the children have contact with us. In such instances, it is important to work with the Parenting Center's children's advocates. An advocate can call the caregiver and act as a mediator and often that can help.

## Wanda

Before I saw the Advocate I had only one visit, five months after I arrived, even though my boys live only 45 minutes away. Since then I have gotten three visits. Had she not intervened, I would not have gotten those visits. The advocate called and she was very sensitive to my situation. She took into account my mother-in-law's age. The advocate represented some kind of authority to my mother-in-law, and she let her know that I had some legal rights. The advocate assured her that the prison visiting room was safe. She described The Children's Center in detail, what activities take place, what is offered to the children, that physical contact is allowed, not through a telephone like my mother-in-law saw on T.V. By breaking down the barrier, I was able to get those visits, even though they were sporadic. Still today, any problems I may have with the children, I can go to the advocate. She plays a neutral role between my situation and the children, and she is very persistent about how much a mother needs to be with her children while the mother is in prison. Because of this I was allowed to see the children and she is very supportive of both me and the guardian. Sometimes we have differences of opinion. We go through quarrels at times because she is raising them and I am the absent parent; but the end result is that we both want what is best for the boys and we both have learned to cut corners.

*In some cases a mother has to go to court to compel the caregiver to bring her child for visits:*

## Debra

When I first put in my petition to court, I hadn't seen him for three years because his father didn't want me to see him. I did see him in the county jail for the first nine months. Then his father cut me off. I couldn't call because there was a block on the phone. I thought I'd never see him again. I heard that when my son asked why can't I go see my mother anymore, his father told him I had died. I finally pushed myself to go to the law library. I did the work in the law library on my own, and I filed a petition for visitation. It took almost two years to go to court and have a trial. His father was opposed to my son seeing me, and he argued my time, (25 to life), against me, saying I was civilly dead and therefore shouldn't see my kid. The judge made the decision and I won my rights to see him. It took five months after the court decision to see my son and I've only seen him 3 times since the court decision which was September of 1992. I get to talk to him about 4 or 5 times a year. It makes a big difference because if he didn't forget me from ages 3 to 8, he's not going to forget me from ages 8 to 18. He knows where I am.

But even getting visits doesn't solve the whole problem. Our prior histories with the caregivers can put the children in an awkward situation, putting them in the middle of conflict or turning them against the people they depend on for love and support--the caregiver or the mother - can be very destructive.

## Billie

When our own parents have our children, there are different issues. I hold a lot of bitterness towards my mom, which I shouldn't for my son's sake. I always felt that my own mother didn't love me--not just the beatings, breaking my arm once with a board, - but how she was toward me. But now I have to overlook things with her because no matter what, my son loves his grandmother. I realize that I have to make a relationship with her, for him, and also if she didn't love me, she wouldn't have my son with her. He could still be in the foster care system. My son loves his Nanna, loves her a lot. I realized the hurt I still have. Once I could let it out, I like to brush subjects, not comb them or rake them but hold them in, then I just reacted. The group made me cry. It was something I needed. Once I could feel the hurt, I

could begin to deal with it. I had wanted to block it out, but the group made me bring it out. I used to say "I'm going to court to snatch him". I realize now that I have to make a relationship with her, for him.

*Our children get caught in the middle of the tangled history. The caregivers may not always realize how tension between us puts the child in a destructive situation:*

## Debra

Whenever my son does anything wrong, they always say to him, "You're going to end up just like your mother. Your mother's a criminal." But I don't think you're supposed to talk to a child like that. It makes them feel bad. And whenever he visits me, his father refers to me as "the jerk" in front of him.

## Marilyn

One encounter which is still very painful and very vivid is a letter I wrote to my mother about my children, trying to make amends with her for my wrong-doings, trying to make sense of a life which went totally out of control. However, the letter was not received as a "letter of amends," but a letter of "See, I told you your mother's no good", to enforce what she has been preaching to them for all the years I've been in and out of prison. It was her intention that infuriated me. I feel subconsciously she thinks that because she's been there, through good and bad times, sickness and in health, that their loyalty, devotions and love should rest solely with her. However, what she failed to realize was that before prison, I had a life, and very special bonding with four of my children that neither time nor distance will ever take away.

*Sometimes we put our children in the middle of the conflict.*

## **Wanda**

I argued with my son's grandmother--my mother-in-law--about limiting my visitation with the boys. Then she threw at me that it was a lot of pressure dealing with me and dealing with the children and that's the reason she couldn't come up. And, she wouldn't let them come up without her, even though my oldest son was seventeen. So when I brought it to Jimmy's attention, my oldest, I guess I was just dealing with my own selfish reasons and not taking into consideration his feelings about having to come to prison to visit me. What were his emotions? His own hurt? So I told him that I wanted him to talk more to her about visiting. And he told me that it was up to grandma. I said very nastily, "I feel that if you pressure her, she might come up and bring you and what are you doing, taking her side?" Then he yelled and said he wasn't taking sides. He was tired of all the arguments and that he had something to do, too, in his life. So we yelled at each other and I felt betrayed, like my children were abandoning me. When I called back the next week, it was the beginning of a five month wait to speak to him.

*Sometimes it helps if we understand the caregiver's anger and can let them express it.*

## **Debra**

The conflict is between me and his grandmother (his father's mother). She's raising my son. I have a lot of bad feelings about her and I know that she puts me down and says bad things about me to my son. I wouldn't say anything bad about her to my son because he's supposed to like his grandmother and she's raising him. Even though we don't get along, I guess I still owe her a lot because of everything she's done for my son. It's like if you're drowning and your enemy comes and saves you.

I had spoken to her one time on the phone. She tried to make me feel bad for everything I was in the past while I was just trying to thank her for everything she's done for my son and she told me "You're a drug addict. You're not a good mother. You just left your son for someone else to take care of. You're never going to

change." I tried to just accept it. I said "Well, I understand. You're right and I just want to thank you." In the end her attitude changed, like she got to vent. I was pleasant. I acted the way she wanted me to act. She had the power she wanted over me and she said, "You're right. It is important for you to know how he's doing in school." After that things changed a little bit. Recently she even sent me photos of him at his birthday party. The design on his cake they took from a card I drew for him.

The frustrations, the anger, the past history are all there. They can't be wiped away.

We called on different approaches to help improve our situations: first, being more aware, ourselves, about how conflict affects our children; working with advocates to build better relationships with the caregivers; understanding the anger of the caregivers, using the group to help vent our anger.

### **When the Caretakers Are Foster Care Families Whom We Don't Know**

Even though many people put down foster care (especially when it isn't kinship foster care with our own family) sometimes it is the best option.

## **V**anessa

I was upset with having to place my son in foster care. I didn't like the idea of having to *drop* him off at the Child Welfare Administration's (CWA) office and leave him to be placed. I had fears of him being abused and crying for me to help him, or him just missing me. These feelings tortured me nightly. So I placed him with *friends* to avoid all of that. It didn't work as planned. Friends treated him badly. They wouldn't bring him to see me; they wouldn't allow me to talk to him when I called; they never corresponded. I was forced to ask for CWA intervention.

This brought on a whole new set of worries: how would he be moved; would I know where he is; how is he or is he adjusting; what type of family is taking care of him? Now that he is in foster care, I am at ease. I get to see him monthly. I receive mail from him and feel that we are keeping in touch better now than before. The fact that the State also has a responsibility to my son and that I have someone - his social worker - who can answer my questions and ensure his safety while in foster care is also a help.

When our children are in foster care with families we don't know, the problems are different. Instead of being tangled up in a personal history, we have no shared history. This requires us to reach out, to overcome the passivity that our disconnection makes us feel, to connect to the foster family even though we don't know them. It's hard but it's worth it.

## **A**ne

I've been trying to communicate with the foster care family about my children's history. My older daughter, is having some health problems right now. I wrote down, all the way back since she's been eleven months old, everything that I did, what she's had, where I took her. She had a problem when she was ten months old. I gave them a run down on her health and behavioral problems. I've written about what I went through, when the temper tantrums started when she was about ten months old. I've lost memory of my youngest for at least four years of her life. That was period of my worst drinking.

## **V**anessa

I think caregivers need to understand what the parent is going through as well as understand the adjustment the child has to go through. I say this, because if you can understand what led a parent to do whatever was done, or if you know and understand the parent, when the child comes with anger, resentment, and questions, they can be answered with understanding instead of just saying "I don't know" or something negative or even something so extremely positive it borders on a lie.

What I am doing now is letting my son's foster mom "know" me. She is getting to know me through the things I do for my son. On many occasions I have written to her expressing gratitude and concern for my son. I feel by doing that I am not so much of an incarcerated mother but a mother who made a mistake and is incarcerated because of it. Every month I send a special letter, i.e., season or holiday theme, pictures I draw and color, activity books and stories that I recopy and send, or projects that he can do. I feel these things make my child feel closer to me, make things easier on the caregiver and opens another door to who his mother was/is and, in turn, who my child is.

## Conflicts Over How To Raise Our Children

One outcome of children being raised by other people is that conflicts usually arise over how to raise the children.

### **Ronni**

Sometimes I feel that certain situations in my daughter's caregiver's home will affect her in a negative way and then at other times it doesn't bother me. This ambivalence is constant. One day while I was talking to my daughter's caregiver, I heard my daughter yelling and screaming and I'm asking, "What's wrong with her?" "Oh, she does that all the time," her caregiver told me. I know that her caregiver yells all the time. She yells at everyone. That night I worried myself silly about the adverse effects this would have on my daughter. I talked it over with friends and felt worse. My daughter was going to be loud and boisterous--that was then. Now, I don't worry about that. I worry about her asthma which was diagnosed after a four day visit with me. I kept insisting prior to this that something was wrong because she would wheeze all the time, only to be put off with "It's a cold and the last time she was at the doctor they didn't say anything was wrong."

*If our children are being raised by our own mothers, differences bring back feelings about our own childhood.*

## Candace

Out there (before incarceration) it was my rationale that it was good that my mother had my child, not foster care. It made me feel that I didn't lose her. Sometimes I worried about the things my mother might have said about me when I wasn't around like "I wonder when that damn girl is going to get herself together." But mainly I felt better that she had them. But there are problems in having my mother raise my child because I feel that she is doing some of the same things with my daughter that she did with me that I think didn't work; like, I want my children to know where I am at. I want them to know that they don't have to do what I did. When I was a child, I was in the dark about a lot of things and I feel like if I had known more, if my mother had told me more things, maybe I wouldn't have ended up in the situations I did. But my mother hasn't told my daughter where I am, and maybe it's because of how my daughter used to get sick when she got upset. My mother doesn't feel like it's healthy for her. She does actually know where I am. She knows from coming here on Family Day, and knows that I can't come home. My younger daughter, on the other hand, would just go to school and tell everybody I'm in jail. On the next visit I'm going to talk to them. I am going to tell them, because I think they need to know. They already know.

Many of our mothers are older, some are elderly and still responsible for our children. We know we are in the wrong and that they are doing our job, but still we get frustrated.

## Marilyn

"What worries me most about my mother being the caregiver of my youngest son is that she is eighty-two and he is fourteen. The energy she has given my older children she cannot possibly give to him. He's smart, witty, curious and is bursting with energy. She, on the other hand, is a lot slower. I feel that she cannot give him the attention he needs at this most crucial stage. He is at the age where most boys can go either way, and without the discipline, the close scrutinizing of his activities, he may break under peer pressure.

I've tried to communicate my concerns. However, what I hear is "you didn't worry about my raising your other children, why should you be concerned about him?" I'm concerned because with my older children I was able to spend quality time with them and, by the grace of God, they made it past the "Black Hole".

No matter what the relationship is with caregivers, there is a process of letting go to a very large degree. This is both difficult and painful. We are not there day-to-day to make the decisions, to raise our children, to watch them grow.

## Ronni

I internalized from talking and listening to the other women in our group, that at a certain point I have to let go of my child and that there are many things I'm just not capable of doing from inside. I've already experienced this with my daughter and her caregivers. I've learned not to always express my negative feelings pertaining to what they do or don't do with her. This includes doctors, teaching her manners, talking to her as if she's an alien such as not pronouncing words correctly - *baby talk*, her health and nutrition, clothing and potty training. I've learned that I can influence her in certain things via telephone, visits, trailers, by being what I think is right for her as parent.

Sometimes there is so little contact that we don't even think about raising an issue about how are children are being raised. This happens in foster care situations where you don't have direct contact with the foster care family and it can also happen when family or friends have your child.

## Debra

With his grandmother and father raising him and with me having as little contact as I have, I don't even know what childhood illnesses he's had, did he get the chicken pox or mumps, or how he does in school.

## **Joni**

I remember when my son was younger I used to get upset because it seemed like he ate a lot of pasta and not enough of other things, or he didn't sleep in his own bed every night but sometimes slept on the floor. But I knew to leave it alone. My concern couldn't be for things like that because he was part of their family. I really let go of those kinds of things. The big things we see similarly.

## **Ronni**

At times I feel as though my daughter's caregiver doesn't take me seriously enough when it comes to issues related to the health and well-being of my daughter. I would insist that she tell me what happened at the doctor's office, how much she weighed, or if she needed vitamins, and she would shrug it off by saying "Oh, I can't remember." I would feel so bad inside as if she were saying to me, "What difference does it make. You can't take her to the next doctor's appointment, so why should you be bothered with these details? "

And one woman, even though she didn't know where her child was played out worries and differences in fantasy.

## **Bobbie**

I worry that he isn't toilet training her right, or that he won't teach her the ABC's; or I wonder if he holds her hand when they cross a street. All those things and more.

The family life of the caregivers determines the day-to-day lives of our children. The family may plan a vacation for a particular time, celebrate holidays in a certain way or arrange activities for the children. Children have commitments and

relationships which define their schedules. Yet we want to see our children and we feel it is important that we see each other. How we can get a good perspective on our children's needs and also meet our own needs is an ongoing concern and is a major part of our discussions.

## Joni

The hardest time for me was when my son's family moved to another city. "How could they move", I cried out, "I'm not going to be able to see my son easily." But they moved because it worked for the life of their family in terms of jobs and other personal decisions. In fact, I have been able to see him a great deal and I have a very close relationship with him. But it took me many years to work out my feelings. How much do the people raising our children have a responsibility to do a good job raising our children and how much do they have a responsibility to organize their lives so that we get to see our children? I feel so needy in wanting to see my child that I constantly have to struggle to keep perspective and realize that he has pulls in his own life and that his family has plans and needs. Who does he spend Mother's Day with, me or his family? He has traditionally spent it with his family and I accept that because it allows for them to feel a unity as a family, but it's hard. It is hard for him, too. When he was younger, and the family went to the country for the weekend and he visited me, he always felt like he was missing something that his two brothers were doing. He felt torn and it was hard for him. Now that he's older he has a job and parties and often he has to make a choice when he visits me, and that is hard. But it's also part of life for him and me. And I know that it's part of the growing up and separating process for every parent with their child, not just for those of us in prison.

No matter how much we appreciate what the caregivers are doing, no matter how much we have accepted our responsibility and what we have lost as mothers, still deep inside we wish things were different and we often develop feelings of competition with or jealousy of the caregivers.

## Wanda

It's something I never felt I could admit, but I was very conscious it existed as part of my being. As a mother, I established a closeness with my sons as individuals and saw their needs. When I came to prison, I wondered if anyone would see their needs and attend to them. After finally having my first visit, my oldest son was the only one who showered me with love. My middle son hugged and kissed me but went over to Grandma and sat near her, holding her hand. My baby wouldn't acknowledge me and just sat under the table staring at me. This left me feeling sorry for myself, as I felt I lost my children to Granny. I was jealous, and I resented the feeling. I was very angry with resentment towards her and tried very hard to conceal my emotions. When my baby first called his Grandmother "mommy," I felt like a beam had fallen on my head, and it hurt real bad. As time went on, I learned that I had to be grateful to her as she was very responsible to all their needs. I learned to put my feelings and needs aside and look at the reality with much gratitude.

## Joni

I want my son to call his other mother, *mom*. She is his mother and I'm also his mother. But when I'm on the phone with him and I hear him say "Just a second, I have to ask my mom something, Hey mom, ....", it hurts. I can't say it doesn't. My heart usually skips a beat, and I feel a wave of sadness. It reminds me of what I lost and it makes me feel jealous. It makes me feel envious, even though I know its fine. It's right and that's his life. Thank God it is as normal as it is.

## Ronni

I have been extremely fortunate in seeing my daughter a great deal since her birth. My daughter's caregiver brings her up at least twice a month. Although these visits are enjoyed and welcomed, they are not as enjoyable as when she stays at her God mother's house near the prison and I get to see her 4 days in a row with just the two of us.

I can't begin to explain how it feels having her all to myself. When she cries she reaches her little arms up to me, to pick her up and comfort her. When someone frightens her, she runs to my arms, and, if I attempt to leave The Children's Center area, she is right in tow behind me.

To interact with her this way and to know that she knows I'm an important person in her life, if only for the few hours that we spend together, gives me the greatest joy in my heart that I could ever ask for.

Changes in the relationships between mothers and caregivers is ongoing. As our children progress through different developmental stages, new situations develop and new answers are needed. For example, when children become teenagers, the caregivers are confronted with the challenging behavior of adolescence and may look to the mother in prison for additional support.

## Wanda

Prior to this time, my visits with the children were sporadic, once or twice a year, so my dealing with the children was very limited. As they have grown and gotten into the teenage years with girlfriends, wanting to go out, spending more time with friends, it seems that my mother-in-law (the children's guardian) is having a problem controlling my oldest son with his friends and their friendships. When I called home, she was always telling me everything is fine, the kids are doing great, and there are no problems. Then she starting to tell me later that she was very upset with my oldest son. He was hanging around and coming in late. He has these girlfriends and she doesn't know who they are or what kind of habits they have. When she questioned him, he gave no answer. This is when she involved me in his life, and asked me to help get a grip on things. Then she brought him on two visits and during that time she would say, "So go on. Tell your mother the truth. Tell her that you're coming in late, that you're not listening to my curfew." My son would just look and smirk at her. So I would take him outside and try to talk to him, and he would tell me "mom I'm not having the problems that she's talking about. She's imagining half of the things. She's just old."

It seems that because she's older and she's set in her ways, she yells a lot. So my son never involves her with his friends and she is always questioning him and assuming he is doing wrong when he goes out. So he just doesn't tell her where he is going and he keeps his friends to himself. I began to get involved with him and come to find out that the girl he is seeing is a very nice young lady. She goes to school. She doesn't have any drug problems.

*We see ourselves change, able to understand and even support developments that seem impossible to accept--for the good of our children.*

## **Candace**

My self-esteem has risen. I am now able to accept life for what it really is, not for what I perceive it to be. My children have been coming along just fine, even though my mother is planning to move down South. When I first found out, I went through all of the normal feelings and I thought to myself "Why is she leaving me and taking my children with her?" But as I thought it out and used some of the tools of the group, I realized that it was best for my children and for me not to accept it would be very selfish. I now take my children's feelings into consideration and not just my own. Without the group I may not have been so open with the relationship with my children.

One thing we can be sure of no matter how weak or strong the relationship is between the mother in prison and the caregiver there will be changes!

## EXERCISES FOR THOUGHT AND GROWTH

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### JOURNAL WRITING

#### Personal Journal Writing (Individual Exercise)

1. Who is raising your children while you are incarcerated?
2. Make a list of the issues that come up between you and the caregivers of your children: (visits, how to raise the children, how they feel about you, how you feel about them).
3. Pick one of the issues that you listed and write about it in detail. Make a suggestion about how to improve the situation.
4. The things that I most like about the caregiver of my children are.....
5. The things that I wish that they would do differently are.....
6. Make a list of the different feelings that you have toward the caregiver of your children.

## WRITE A LETTER IN YOUR JOURNAL

Write to the caregivers of your children.

"Dear . . .

I want to write to you about you raising my children. . . . ."

Tell them your feelings about their raising your child: you may want to express your appreciation as well as your sadness or envy, the difficulties or differences, and thoughts for cooperating more effectively with them.

You can write the journal letter for yourself just to release and clarify your feelings and thoughts; you may also decide to copy it and send it to the caregiver.

## GROUP EXERCISE or DISCUSSIONS with a FRIEND

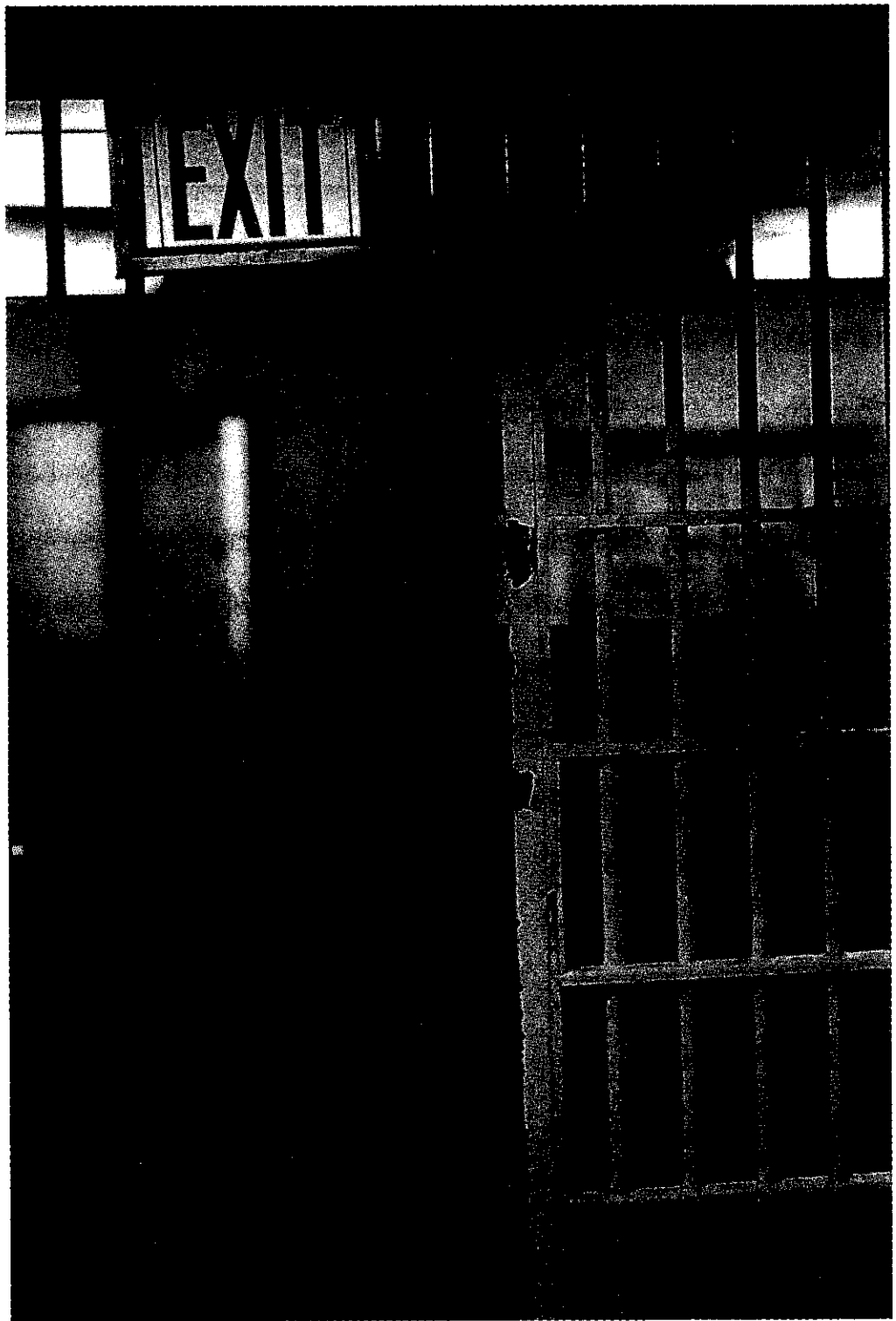
If you have a friend who is reading this with you, ask each other the following questions or these questions can be answered in the Group.

1. What do you think caregivers need to effectively parent your child?
2. How can you help the caregivers of your children?
3. How do you think raising your children has affected the caregiver's own life?
4. What is your child's relationship like with the caregiver?
5. What is your relationship like with the caregiver?
6. If your child is in foster care, what is your relationship like with the social worker?

## TAKING ACTION

*Write A Letter To The Caregiver of Your Children.*

Now that you have read this chapter, in your journal write a letter to the caregiver of your children with your thoughts, feelings and suggestions.



## CHAPTER 4

### GOING HOME

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We all await anxiously the day we will be released from prison, yet going home can be a frightening experience. Having been absent for a period of time, we want to resume our lives as mothers, but situations have changed. How can we reconnect with our families? What role do we play in our children's lives now that we have been parenting from a distance? What are our options for career choices, taking care of family, taking care of self? How do we deal with the stigma of being an ex-felon? How do we start life as a new person, using what we have learned inside to our benefit outside? How do we deal with the urge to get high or to engage in other illegal activities? What resources are available to assist us in meeting these challenges? These are just a few issues that arise upon preparing to go home.

#### Furloughs

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We experience brief glimpses of home life when we have the opportunity to go home on a furlough. These visits may last anywhere from three to eight days. Although having furloughs is a privilege, many women do not seek or get them. A furlough can cause tremendous anxiety in us, or extreme joy, or a combination of complex and even conflicting feelings. There may be trepidation because you don't know what to expect out



there. Once you're there, you're in another world where you're free. Then you have to come back and become a prisoner. You have to go back and forth between both worlds. It's hard, but that's why it is such an important step. It's a bridge between two worlds. The hardest part of a furlough is having to return and leave your children once again.

## Jackie

I have gone home on four occasions after being in prison for four years. My first time out on furlough was very hard. I was afraid of the rejection that I would get from my sons. My seventeen year old accepted me, but my fourteen year old was very distant and wouldn't talk. I just felt like a total stranger. I didn't quite know what to expect and definitely didn't know it would be so hard to try to be a parent/mother. I heard things from my youngest son such as, "Sure, you're home now, but you're leaving us in a few days. Big deal." It really hit the pit of my stomach. This last time I went home for Christmas, and it was the greatest time we've had in four and a half years. Nevertheless, the day before I came back I got the feeling that our lives had changed and that my sons, are now experiencing their own sense of life and, in a way, don't really need me. I can't explain it, but I don't feel like a mother anymore to my sons. I feel more like their big sister or a lady who's just there sometimes.

### TRYING TO FIT IN

Upon going home we are faced with many troubling questions. Where do we belong in our family setting? How do we create a sense of belonging? Will our past continue to condemn us? Can we forgive ourselves and move on taking one day at a time? Can we accept new responsibilities without the negative aspects of the old self - such as relapse? Then there are the feelings our children may have towards us. "You're not my mother"!

"I hate you!" "If you loved me you wouldn't have ever left me!" You could possibly hear from your children any and all of these statements. Feeling and hearing the children's point of view may be the hardest thing mothers have to experience upon release from prison. Even worse, some children may be unable to verbalize any of their feelings, and you could be faced with a hostile silence, a *don't care attitude* or acting out in school. How can we tell our children, "This is mommy", when the child doesn't know us as "mommy"? Is it possible to recapture the lost years? How can we express our love and offer reassurance to children who have felt abandoned and alone? And then the biggest question of all for some of us may be: "Am I now in a position to take on a full time parenting role? Am I prepared to be a mother?"

## Bobbi

Lately I've been resisting the urge to write. The conflict between wanting to be a parent and not wanting to be a parent has become extremely difficult. I have not seen my daughter since she was one year old. She is now three and a half. Since I've been incarcerated, I've made every diligent effort to try to find her and her father, but so far every possibility has been exhausted. I become angry and sometimes I want to give up, for fear I might fail once again because I still enjoy living on the edge.

I'm afraid I'm going to have so many demands placed on me from myself, from my parole officer, from my employer. Can I cope with them all without reverting back to the past? I'm not even sure I want to. The lifestyle I led, I led for eighteen years. I'm comfortable with it. I know how to do it well. What do I know how to do legally? Who is going to want an ex-felon working for them at a decent job? I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up.

The house I was planning on getting paroled to is not one of the healthiest environments. I feel I have no support from my family. They have gotten so fed up with my "BS" that they won't even speak to me now. "When you get yourself together, maybe, give us a call." But why can't they be there for me now, when I need them most?

I feel as though everything I'm writing is an excuse to go back to what I was doing prior to coming to prison. I feel the *Incompetent mother* stigma. "Oh, she must be an awful mother. That's why the father has her child."

## **Making a decision to take... or not to take... the children into our home right away**

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In making our lives right again, we have a need to prove that we can be the "good mother" by immediately taking our children back into the home. However, this may not always be in the child's best interest. Questions arise around many issues such as: giving the child a chance to get to know you again; your current financial situation; whether the child wants to live with you; and if you are willing to accept these new responsibilities. The situation may be overwhelming, not only because you are dealing with the children, but because of a combination of issues, such as parole, parole requirements such as community services, employment, and so on.

## **Ronni**

Upon my release from prison, day one, I won't have a job or a place of my own. I will be living with someone else and be dependent on my family for all my needs and wants. As far as my daughter is concerned, I plan to leave her in the household that she is in. I'm not going to run and take on the responsibility of raising and caring for a child when I know I can't even do that for myself. I will see her on a daily basis and eventually have her spend nights at my house. My daughter will be old enough to decide what she wants to do about living with mommy. I'm not going to force her to this, albeit I would love to have her with me, but it will be her choice. My life is going to revolve around what's comfortable for my daughter, because for so many years her life sort of revolved around coming up to visit mommy in prison.

I know it's not going to be easy, but throughout the years I plan to discuss these issues with her, and whatever happens, it will be something comfortable for both of us.

## Shauna

I know I can't take my children right away; I have to get myself together and deal with my drug problem. My ten year old is with his father. I hope that he will come back with me. We were always together before I came here eight months ago, and we are close, really close, but I don't know, maybe he'll want to stay with his father. I guess I have to let him decide. I don't think his father will want to keep him, because his father's girlfriend doesn't want kids, but I'm not certain. As for my baby, she's been with my sister since she was born eight months ago. It's hard for me to admit, but I know she doesn't really know me. She only knows my sister. I will be getting out this year and I plan over time to take her, but I know that she will still be part of my sister's family-life. As for my daughter who's in college, the choice is hers. I've explained to everyone that I have to create a stable situation for myself before I can feel good about taking them. But I believe it will work out.

## Janice

The decision to resume my role as mother and primary caregiver to my son after serving twenty seven months in prison was not an issue for me. I never addressed the issues that brought me to prison, and it never crossed my mind to try to get myself together so that I would not become a statistic as a recidivist. Nor did I bother to ask my son if he wanted to come back and live with me, on the roller coaster to disaster. I just assumed that my life would resume "business as usual" upon my release... It did, and I did become a statistic!

## Going Home To Adults

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Having spent so much time away, we are faced with the reality that many of our children have grown into young adults, without us.

## Jackie

I've been in prison for four years. When I go home, my children will be young men. At the time of my arrest my sons were thirteen and eleven years old. Since my incarceration I guess my thoughts of them were that they would still be the same two small boys that I left, but, boy, what a surprise! The years just kept going and now the boys have grown into two young men. As of April, 1995, my oldest will be eighteen and has already enlisted in the Marine Corps. I am very happy for him, but at the same time I'm losing him for another four years. As for my youngest, I just pray that he finishes high school. He doesn't care at this point about his education or anything else.

## Joni

My son will be in college or finishing college by the time that I get home. I have a fantasy that I will follow him around the country just to live near him. As he is experimenting in his life, having different jobs, moving into different relationships, there's going to be me, in my sixties, trying to be with my son to meet my needs, to make up for the lost childhood, while he is rightfully wanting to get away from parents and *parenting* and to become an independent adult building his own life. Then I laugh at myself, because I know it is just a fantasy.

## Wanda

When I came to prison, my oldest son had just become thirteen. Yesterday was his birthday and he is seventeen now. When I leave prison he will be twenty five. Where does this leave me as far as parole is concerned? On my son's door step! There's no doubt, I'll still be "mom," but I'll be paroled to him and under his roof, not mine. Of course, I'll still be in charge of cooking, cleaning and everything else that calls for mom's attention, but my problem in reality becomes knowing that I'll be the one giving account to my son of my whereabouts or what time I'll be home or whom I'm with. What if he doesn't agree with my decisions, leading to family quarrels, and what if he should just ask me to leave because my being paroled to him is a hardship or burdensome? What then? Where do I go? I believe all incarcerated parents should consider other alternatives than being paroled to their children. It's enough having been separated from them without placing the responsibility of parole on them, too. Although my son says he wants me to come live with him when I come out, we've got to realize that things aren't as we left them. Everyone changes and *so do we*.

## Going Home Alone

### **J**anice

I am getting short - I only have three years left of my ten years sentence. I have many ambivalent feelings at this time. Two of the strongest feelings are apprehension and terror. I feel apprehensive because I can clearly visualize myself experiencing a pity party and turning to some vice in my attempt to conceal or eradicate my sense of loss, uselessness, helplessness, and hopelessness. I am also terrified about coming to terms with my only child's death. The only tangible evidence of his mortality is the mausoleum which I am petrified to visit.

One woman captures the essence of the dilemmas women face in going home from prison to their children. She writes about the experience of going home, again and again and again . . .

### **M**arilyn

My first experience with parenting from a distance began when my five children were ages 15, 11, 7, 4, and 3 weeks. The separation was devastating, for they not only lost their mother but their father as well. They were taken to live with my parents, who were both retired at the time. Fortunately they were willing to keep them all without splitting them up or placing them with different family members or in a foster home. My parents were 67 years old at the time. My first separation lasted four and a half years during which time my father made sure I saw my children every week. I saw my baby at least three or four times a week. I maintained a closeness with them and, by the grace of God, when I returned home, I was able to step right back into their lives (with very few complications).

I thought I was this rehabilitated person who had seen the error of my ways and was going to be the best mother yet. The children were now ages 19, 15, 11, 8, and 4. However, I never considered the turmoil they went through while I was gone, and I never asked. I wanted to forget that episode and act like it never happened. I justified every step of the way that my acts of negligence were for my and their survival and this had been the only way I could provide. Then I dwelled in self pity and blocked out by having an excuse to get high. After all, they had been left in good hands - my parents - why would I even question the turmoil? They did a good job raising me didn't they?

My children were eager to leave my parents, eager to be with their mother. Oh, how they missed me, oh, how they loved me. Naturally, I psyched myself into believing this and returned to my perfect lifestyle of crime and addiction with one added piece - WORK.

After two years, I once again was arrested. This time taking me away from my children for two more years. Their ages were then 21, 17, 13, 10, and 6. They returned to my parents home with great resistance. The arrest was quite different from the first, for I was not as close to home. I was shipped to Albion, nine hours away. Previously, my father and five children visited regularly, but this was now narrowed down to my Dad and two children visiting. My oldest, who was 21, and my 13 year old. For a year I did not see my 17, 10 or my 6 year old. I wrote letters and they answered and I called home often, but I did not hear their cries. "Don't you hear me?" I did not understand. What could possibly be wrong? They are with my parents?"

Not only was the arrest different but the children were growing up; This time, not before my eyes, but at a distance. They were hearing things that they never knew about their mother. They were questioning the validity of these statements. But who could they ask?

They overheard and were told of my drug addiction and several other derogatory comments. They were told I never would be a dependable person in their lives, and that I did not love them, because if I did, I would not leave them constantly, and that my track record spoke for itself.

Their fears of telling me these things were that it would hurt my feelings and they would be forced into spending the rest of their lives with my parents.

I came home after two years to very angry children, who could not tolerate my parents and let it be known. They were treated differently and they felt it. The things that I provided, my parents would not, which forced the oldest into a situation where he was working to buy his brothers and sister things that they were accustomed to. My parents

now were 73 years old, set in their ways and not willing to bend. My oldest son took on the role of the children's father and nurturer and nurtured them in the way that I as a mother had not. I recently heard this from my daughter. She said, "My brother, my mother." Why had I not seen this back then. Oh, what an injustice have I done to my oldest child, for today, at the age of 30, he is a very angry man whom I have not seen in almost five years and who does not want any children. Now we communicate by phone which still is extremely difficult sometimes. What do you say to a man who heard things when he was younger that he would have fought someone for when they talked about his mother only to find out that some of the remarks were very valid. Their anger was "legit" but I refused to address their issues, and once again they stuffed their feelings. My anger was real also. Had anyone told my children that I was a child of the times, a bright black woman who had dreams of being an engineer or an architect who would build masterpieces that would live forever? Did anyone tell them that my dreams were demolished by the reality that, in that day and age, black women were not supposed to dream the impossible, for it was a man's world and such things were unmentionable? Did anyone tell them I was an achiever who could have been anything I wanted to be but instead rebelled, because my ideas were not supported and no one bothered to ask what my ideas were? Did they tell my children that choosing to escape was a way I could become anyone I wanted to be? That, for me each day was a Hollywood production and I was the leading lady and the addiction made it my excuse and my reality.

Did anyone tell this to my children? Neither did I.  
So my return was more difficult, because I was filled with so much garbage.

This time I came home to a situation I could have never prepared myself for. I came home to a father who was dying.

In my efforts to run away from the inevitable, my life style became my existence. I hustled longer and harder and made excuses that I was doing it for my children. They would be away from my family, so they would not be around the rivalry of my own siblings when my father finally passed. The last thing I remembered my Dad ever saying was "Do not get in any trouble, because I'm dying and no one is going to help you or do your time with you." Being a non-believer, his final statement did not even deter me from my life of crime. Once again I was arrested. This is the arrest for which I am presently serving time. Parenting at a distance is now one of the toughest assignments I ever tackled. My children are no longer babies. Their questions are from the depths of their souls.

There's a need for them to find the missing pieces of their lives.

There's a need for them to understand my addictions which are not limited to drugs.

There's a need for them to express their anger.

They want to know when am I coming home.

Am I going to be this responsible person?

My answers are truthful and painful. My reality.

## EXERCISES FOR THOUGHT AND GROWTH

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### JOURNAL WRITING

#### Personal Journal Writing (Individual Exercise)

1. What are your anxieties about going home?
2. How long after getting home will you take custody of your children?  
What are the reasons for your decision about this?
3. What do you feel you need to do before resuming full responsibility for your children?
4. What do you think your own personal needs will be when you go home?
5. What support will you draw on to help you when you go home?

### Write a Letter in Your Journal

Write a letter to your children about your thoughts on coming home.

"Dear Child,

Soon I will be coming home. There is so much for us to figure out and to talk about. I want to begin in this letter to you....."

This may be a letter that you use for yourself to begin to think about going home. It may help you to talk to your children and you may even want to send them.

### GROUP EXERCISE or DISCUSSIONS with a FRIEND

1. Has anyone had the experience of going home to children after being separated from them due to previous incarcerations, foster care or drug rehabilitation programs?  
If so, share what issues came up for you and for your children as you resumed the role of mother living with them.
2. Discuss what you imagine will be issues for your children in accepting you as their day to day mother. What feelings might they have and what are ways that they might express them.
3. What will be issues for you and the caregivers when you go home. Think about both your relationship with the caregiver and the relationship between the caregiver and your children: How will your coming home affect this?

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*We want to thank the mothers and children whose drawings, photos, and letters appear in this book.*

## *Photo Credits*

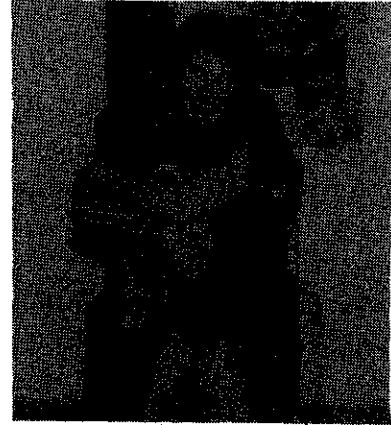
Marjorie Berman  
Mary Reichers  
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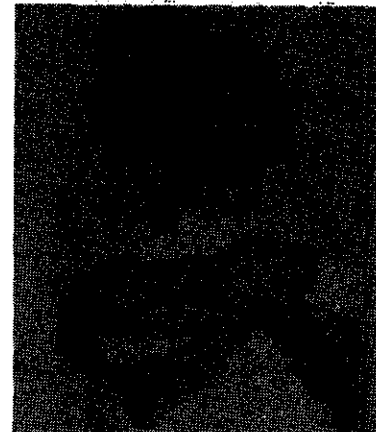
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# *P*ERSONAL *A*CKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Rozann,* Marco, (my beloved son) - it is almost 5 years since your untimely departure. I want you to know I traveled through the prism of pain and loss with many mothers who parent from a distance. At last I am beginning to accept your spiritual presence and experience some peace. I LOVE YOU!

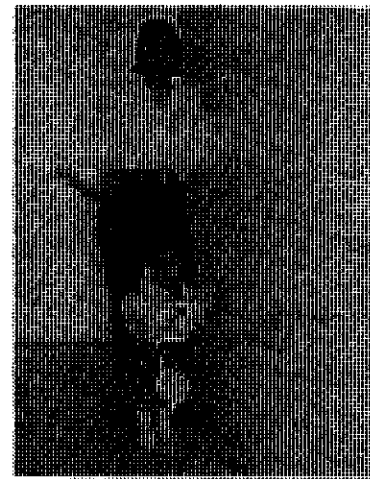


*Kathy* I want to acknowledge my son, *Chesa*, who has given me so much joy and who has been the center of my love.



*Roslyn* To my precious jewel *Anastasha Tiana Smith*. You have inspired me to achieve and believe in miracles - I love you always.

*Roslyn Smith is presently co-facilitator of Parenting From a Distance.*



*Each week new women arrive at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Inmates who staff the Children's Center carry out an orientation for the new women about the programs which are available to help them and their children. This is the written information which is handed out to the newly arrived women.*

## **The Children's Center Resources**

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We are sorry you are here at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. We at The Children's Center would like to extend our support to you during this painful time. We offer a variety of services to help you maintain a relationship with your child/children during this time of painful separation. Some of the services offered by The Children's Center include:

The Children Center in the Visiting Room is open 365 days a year. Various games, toys and art projects are available to be used by you and your child/children.

**Children's Advocates:** To assist you with contact with your children who are with friends or family members; to assist you with contact with your caseworkers and the foster care agencies; to help your children with issues arising in school, in their families, and to help you support your children in different ways;

**An Overnight Program:** Children come up for the weekend and spend the night with approved families, but spend the day with you. Age limit 5 and up.

**A Summer Program:** Children come up for 5 days during the summer, spend the day with you and nights with approved families.

## Parenting Programs

Parenting Thru Film Classes

Choices and Changes

Parenting From a Distance

Breaking the Cycle

Foster Care and Child Custody Workshops ( in English and Spanish)

Parenting Program in Spanish

Pre-Natal Classes

Parenting Classes for Mothers in the Nursery

**The Nursery:** Women whose babies are born while incarcerated may keep them at Bedford for up to one year. If the mother will be paroled by the time the infant is 18 months old, the infant can - with special permission - remain with the mother.

**Sponsor A Baby:** Pregnant women who are leaving or sending their babies home can receive necessities for their babies, ex: food, crib, car seat, etc.

**Story Corner:** (English and Spanish) You can tape yourself reading a story to your child. The tape and book will be mailed for you to your child.

**The Card Shop:** You can make cards for your child and loved ones.

**Evenstart:** A six month program for mothers to learn adult literacy, parenting, and to help their children with reading.

**Transportation Clinic:** Helps with transportation to bus stops or the facility if there is no other available transportation.

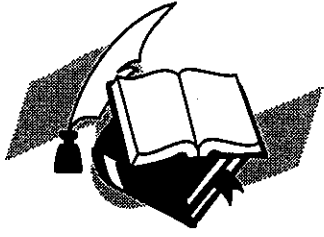
**Monthly Buses:** From New York City and the Upstate areas.

**A Birthday Cake:** May be provided for you child during a visit.

Please note that Bedford Hills is the only prison in the country that allows children to come without an adult escort. The civilian worker in the Children's Center is the responsible adult for the child/children.

Anything we can do to help you during this time, please write to The Children's Center, c/o Sister Elaine Roulet, School Basement. Remember we are here for you.

*Your Sisters at The Children's Center*



# *Notes*

For additional copies or information  
please contact:  
Sister Elaine Roulet, Director  
The Children's Center  
Bedford Hills Correctional Facility  
Bedford Hills, New York 10507  
(914) 241-3100

