Sometimes even parents make mistakes

Millions of children know what it’s like to have an incarcerated parent. The characters in these books know just how it feels.

Ask your Librarian for more suggestions.
A Terrible Thing Happened
Margaret M Holmes (Author), Sasha J Mudieff (Author), Cary Pillo (Author, Illustrator)

Sherman Smith saw the most terrible thing happen. At first he tried to forget about it, but something inside him started to bother him. He felt nervous and had bad dreams. Then he met someone who helped him talk about the terrible thing, and made him feel better.

ISBN 978-1557987013

Far Apart, Close in Heart:
Being a Family when a Loved One is Incarcerated
Becky Birtha (Author), Maja Kastelic (Illustrator)

How can a family stay intact if a parent is incarcerated? This tale follows children as they deal with bullying, isolation, fear, guilt, and uncertainty. In one scene, Xavier has his face down and is worried because he needs to keep his father’s incarceration a secret while he is surrounded by happy children playing outside. Later on, Xavier is able to talk to his father on the phone and stay connected—where “he doesn’t have to keep secrets from his dad”. The multiple story lines show the breadth of emotions a child may feel, as when Raphael is still angry and continues to avoid talking to his mom on the phone. This important picture book functions as a conversation starter for such a sensitive issue that impacts nearly 3 million children in the US.

ISBN 978-0692525586

Waiting for Daddy
Jennie Lou Harriman (Author, Photographer), Kylie Ann Flye (Author)

This is a story about a young girl, who wants more than anything to be with her father, but cannot because he is in prison. She discovers many ways to cope with her loss through creative expression, the natural world, and play.

ISBN 978-1456518622

When I Visit My Daddy
We Dance
Joseiah Webber, John Webber, Ramona Wright

This is a book of hope and encouragement for children with parents that are incarcerated, guilty or innocent.

ISBN 978-1503397804
Ages 5-10

Almost Like Visiting
Shannon Ellis (Author), Katrinka Tapper (Illustrator)
Almost Like Visiting aims to provide feelings and emotions children with an incarcerated parent may experience before, during and after visiting their parent in prison. The book primarily focuses on one wall as a backdrop for video visits. This book is a great resource for the population experiencing an incarcerated loved one and also serves to provide valuable information to their peers.
ISBN 978-1089917833

Ages 5-10

Deena Misses Her Mom
Jonae Haynesworth, Jesse Holmes, Layonnie Jones, Kalihya Ruffin, Leslie Pyo (Illustrator)
Lately, Deena has been getting angry. A lot. She acts out in school and keeps getting in trouble. Everyone is surprised because she used to be very calm, but that was before her mother went to jail. Her dad, her grandma, and her best friend Josey all do their best to help her out, but Deena doesn’t want to talk about it. Will a day at the carnival with her Dad help her open up?
ISBN 978-1945434075

Ages 5-10

Knock Knock: My Dad’s Dream for Me
Daniel Beaty (Author), Bryan Collier (Artist)
Every morning, I play a game with my father. He goes knock knock on my door and I pretend to be asleep till he gets right next to the bed. And my papa, he tells me, “I love you.” But what happens when, one day, that “knock knock” doesn’t come? This powerful and inspiring book shows the love that an absent parent can leave behind, and the strength that children find in it. This powerful and inspiring book shows the love that an absent parent can leave behind, and the strength that children find in it. This powerful and inspiring book shows the love that an absent parent can leave behind, and the strength that children find in it.
ISBN 978-0692470435

Ages 8-12

From the Desk of Zoe Washington
Janae Marks
Zoe Washington isn’t sure what to write. What does a girl say to the father she’s never met, hadn’t heard from until his letter arrived on her twelfth birthday, and who’s been in prison for a terrible crime? A crime he says he never committed.
Could Marcus really be innocent? Zoe is determined to uncover the truth. Even if it means risking her life and her investigation from the rest of her family. Everyone else thinks Zoe’s worrying about doing a good job at her bakery internship and proving to her parents that she’s worthy of auditioning for Food Network’s Kids Bake Challenge. But with bakery confessions on one part of her mind, and Marcus’s conviction weighing heavily on the other, this is one recipe Zoe doesn’t know how to balance. The only thing she knows to be true: Everyone lies...
ISBN 978-0060571875

Ages 5-10

Visiting Day
Jacqueline Woodson (Author), James E. Ransome (Illustrator)
A young girl and her grandmother prepare for a very special day—the one day a month they get to visit the girl’s father in prison. “Only on visiting day is there chicken frying in the kitchen at 6 a.m. and Grandma in her Sunday dress, humming soft and low.” As the little girl and her grandmother get ready, her father, who adores her, is getting ready, too, and readers get to join the community of families who make the trip together, as well as the triumphant reunion between father and child, all told in Woodson’s trademark lyrical style, and beautifully illustrated by James Ransome.
ISBN 978-0147516084

Ages 5-10

My Daddy’s In Jail
Anthony Curcio
There are nearly three million adults in the U.S. alone that are in prison or jail. Many of these being parents that leave behind unanswered questions with their children: What is jail? Why did this happen? Is it my fault? Is my daddy (or mommy) bad? Do they love me? My Daddy’s in Jail is a story of two bears who have a father in prison. The book is narrated by a very odd cockroach.
ISBN 978-0692470435

Ages 8-12

Anna’s Test
Whitney Quinn Hollins, PhD (Author), Kiki Kitty (Illustrator)
Anna is an awesome student who looks forward to her spelling test each week so she can show her parents. Her dad is especially proud of her. When she goes to visit her dad in prison, Anna can’t wait to share the good news with him! Written and illustrated by directly impacted individuals, Anna’s Test is a book that fosters conversation and allows children with incarcerated parents to see themselves represented in literature. While Anna’s story is not the story of every child with an incarcerated parent, it can serve to facilitate a much needed conversation about parental incarceration. Aiming to decrease the secrecy and stigma that is attached to parental incarceration and highlight the goodness of these families, Anna’s Test focuses on positive family dynamics despite obstacles.
ISBN 978-1072977759

Ages 5-10

The Night Dad Went to Jail
Melissa Higgins (Author), Wednesday Kirwan (Illustrator)
When someone you love goes to jail, you might feel lost, scared, and even mad. This colorfully illustrated book lets children know that they are not alone in this situation. It offers age appropriate explanations to help with difficult conversations.
ISBN 978-0692470435

Ages 8-12

Silver, Sing, Midnight!
Emily Ridge Gallagher (Author, Illustrator), R. P. Pollock Jr. (Illustrator)
Mays is one of the nearly two million American children with an incarcerated parent, and she has a question for her Daddy, “Who takes care of you?” A simple question with an unexpected answer. Sing, Sing, Midnight! celebrates finding your voice, singing out loud, taking care of one another, and family.
ISBN 978-1533246103

Ages 8-12

My Daddy’s In Jail: Story, Discussion Guide, and Small Group Activities for Grades K-5
Janet M. Bender
Resources including stories, small group counseling activities, and a discussion guide—for helping children cope with the incarceration of a parent or loved one.
ISBN 978-0692470435

Ages 8-12

Sing, Sing, Midnight!
Emily Ridge Gallagher (Author, Illustrator), R. P. Pollock Jr. (Illustrator)
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ISBN 978-1533246103

Ages 8-12

All Rise for the Honorable Perry T. Cook
Leslie Connor
Eleven-year-old Perry was born and raised by his mom at the Blue River Co-ed Correctional Facility in tiny Surprise, Nebraska. His mom is a resident on Cell Block C, and so far Warden Daugherty has made it possible for them to be together. That is, until a new district attorney discovers the truth—and Perry removal from the facility and forced into a foster home.
When Perry moves to the “outside” world, he feels trapped. Desperate to be reunited with his mom, Perry goes on a quest for answers about her past crime. As he gets closer to the truth, he will discover that love makes people resilient no matter what home they come from... but can he find a way to tell everyone what home truly means to him?
ISBN 978-0062333476

Ages 8-12

Clarissa’s Disappointment: And Resources for Families, Teachers and Counselors of Children of Incarcerated Parents
Megan Sullivan (Author), Daniel Jay (Illustrator)
Clarissa Pettaway has waited five years for her father to come home from prison. When the day finally arrives, her mother makes a special dinner, and her father calls her his favorite names: Oh, Clarissa, Sissy, Sassafrass Girl, I’m never gonna leave you again. Soon, however, Clarissa discovers it isn’t all that easy for people who have been incarcerated to reconnect with their families and reenter society. Clarissa has to learn to cope with the reality of her father being out of prison, and all of the confusing, conflicting emotions it creates in her. Two books in one, Clarissa’s Disappointment combines a moving children’s story with resources to assist the families, teachers and counselors of children of incarcerated parents.
ISBN 978-0986159758

From the Desk of Zoe Washington
Janae Marks
Zoe Washington isn’t sure what to write. What does a girl say to the father she’s never met, hadn’t heard from until his letter arrived on her twelfth birthday, and who’s been in prison for a terrible crime? A crime he says he never committed.
Could Marcus really be innocent? Zoe is determined to uncover the truth. Even if it means risking her life and her investigation from the rest of her family. Everyone else thinks Zoe’s worrying about doing a good job at her bakery internship and proving to her parents that she’s worthy of auditioning for Food Network’s Kids Bake Challenge. But with bakery confessions on one part of her mind, and Marcus’s conviction weighing heavily on the other, this is one recipe Zoe doesn’t know how to balance. The only thing she knows to be true: Everyone lies...
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Ages 8-12

The Graham Cracker Plot
Shelley Tougas

Meet Daisy Bauer and her sometimes best friend, Graham, who are determined to break Daisy’s dad out of prison in this hilarious middle-grade debut. No one believes her, but Daisy Bauer knows her dad has been wrongfully imprisoned and that it’s up to her to break him out of jail (aka Club Fed). She has a plan that’s she’s calling the Graham Cracker Plot because it was all Graham’s idea. She just needs a miniature horse, a getaway truck, and a penny from 1919—the idea coin.

This funny, nail-biter of a novel is about friendship and admitting you’re wrong. Debut novelist Shelley Tougas balances humor and warmth against themes of family, broken trust, and an unconditional love against all odds. ISBN 978-1089817833

An Inmate’s Daughter
Jan Walker

In the summer between 7th and 8th grade, Jenna MacDonald does the dumbest thing ever. She tries to save a little girl from drowning. Jenna’s family has a secret and her mother wants it kept. Jenna’s father is in prison for murder. “Prison reflects on wives and families, not on children,” Mom says. Keeping the fact of prison secret is made more difficult when the newspaper runs a story about Jenna’s “Good Samaritan” rescue at the McNeil Island Corrections Center. Jenna is mad, and Jenna just wants to fit in. “He may be in prison, but he’s still my dad,” Jenna says. As she writes in her journal, the children of prisoners are doing time too. Like more than two million children in the United States, she’s found her first true-blue friend—her best friend, Graham, who are determined to break Daisy’s dad out of prison in this hilarious middle-grade debut. No one believes her, but Daisy Bauer knows her dad has been wrongfully imprisoned and that it’s up to her to break him out of jail (aka Club Fed). She has a plan that’s she’s calling the Graham Cracker Plot because it was all Graham’s idea. She just needs a miniature horse, a getaway truck, and a penny from 1919—the idea coin.

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An Inmate’s Daughter
Jan Walker

Ruby on the Outside
Nora Raleigh Baskin

Eleven-year-old Ruby Danes is about to start middle school, and only her aunt knows her deepest, darkest, secret: her mother is in prison. Then Margalit Tippes moves into Ruby’s condo complex, and the two immediately hit it off. Ruby thinks she’s found her first true-blue friend—but can she tell Margalit the truth about her mom? Maybe not. Because it turns out that Margalit’s family history seems closely connected to the very event that put her mother in prison, and if Ruby comes clean, she could lose everything she cares about most.

ISBN 978-1442485044

Ages 10-14

Welcome Home: Mommy Gets Out Today
Jananath Williams Watson

When Bernice and her favorite cousin, Malaika meet Mother Olivia - Bernice's mother - for the first time; the girls share similar emotions while forcing themselves to understand society, familiar and gender issues. Written primarily for students in grades 1st through 3rd, this story aids young girls who are experiencing the return of a parent who has been incarcerated.

ISBN 978-1514312131

The Year the Swallows Came Early
Richard Dyches

This story - which helps children understand and cope with losing a parent to incarceration - is about an eight-year old dreamer of a boy, who imagines himself in a series of fantasy adventures as he tries to find out why the police have taken his dad away and explores his relationship with his mother, sister, grandmother and classmates.

ISBN 978-0982920305

The Year the Swallows Came Early
Kathryn Fitzmaurice

Eleanor “Groovy” Robinson loves cooking and plans to go to culinary school just as soon as she’s old enough. But even Groovy’s thoughtfully-planned menus won’t fix the things that start to go wrong the year she turns eleven—suddenly, her father is in jail, her best friend’s long-absent mother reappears, and the swallows that make their annual migration to her hometown arrive surprisingly early. As Groovy begins to expect the unexpected, she learns about the importance of forgiveness, understands the complex stories of the people around her, and realizes that even an earthquake can’t get in the way of a family that needs to come together.

ISBN 978-0525515142

Growing Up on 21st Street, Northeast Washington DC: A Memoir
Bryant R Mayo

This book tells the life story of Bryant Mayo, a young man growing up in Northeast Washington DC. It is an autobiography that describes his teen years. It is about growing up without a father. The book tells an honest story about his family, his friends, and his challenges.

ISBN 978-1511629898

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One for the Murphys
Lynda Mullally Hunt

Carley uses humor and street smarts to keep her emotional walls high and thick. But the day she becomes a foster child, and moves in with the Murphys, she’s blindsided. This loving, bustling family shows Carley the stable family life she never thought existed, and she feels like an alien in their cookie-cutter-perfect household. Despite her resistance, the Murphys eventually show her what it feels like to belong—until her mother wants her back and Carley has to decide where and how to live. She’s not really a Murphy, but the gifts they’ve given her have opened up a new future.

ISBN 978-0142426524
Queenie Peavy
Robert Burch

Queenie Peavy is the worst troublemaker at school and the best shot in Georgia—why shouldn’t she be angry? But Queenie wonders what would happen if she tried to behave herself, just for one day. ISBN 978-1511629898

The Only Bright Spot in Angel’s Existence is the Star Man, a friendship, friends, and family that support children with Angel Morgan needs help. Daddy is in prison, and Mama has abandoned her and her little brother, leaving them with their great-grandmother. Grandma is aged and poor, and doesn’t make any attempt to care for the children—that’s left up to Angel, even though she is not yet twelve. The only bright spot in Angel’s existence is the Star Man, a people—living with are taking bigger and bigger risks. And girls — they only seem to be adding to his problems. Everybody wants something from Tyrell. His father wants him to go back to being a child. His little brother wants his help. The guys he’s staying with are pushing him to start dealing. And the girls he’s talking to want his time, his money, his attention, and his love. Tyrell’s got too much pressure, too many choices. He’s got to figure out fast what he’s going to do next — before he gets in so deep he can’t get back out again. ISBN 978-1511629898

Everyone Makes Mistakes: Living With My Daddy in Jail
Madison Strempek

Take a heartwarming journey with 10-year-old author, Madison Strempek, as she shares personal stories along with tips and tricks she’s learned while coping with the challenges of life away from her father and in a single-parent home. With this book, Anyé aims to motivate and inspire children who have parents in prison. She wants them to know that they can overcome the shame and embarrassment they may feel. She also aims to help the single parents and extended family members, who are raising other children with incarcerated parents, gain a better understanding of the challenges their children face. Anyé offers her book as a guide for teenagers, like her, who are determined to succeed in life no matter the circumstances. ISBN 978-1543938159

Bronxwood
Coe Booth

Tyrell’s got a lot going on. His father just got out of jail. His little brother is stuck in foster care. The decision he’s living with are taking bigger and bigger risks. And girls — they only seem to be adding to his problems. Everybody wants something from Tyrell. His father wants him to go back to being a child. His little brother wants his help. The guys he’s staying with are pushing him to start dealing. And the girls he’s talking to want his time, his money, his attention, and his love. Tyrell’s got too much pressure, too many choices. He’s got to figure out fast what he’s going to do next — before he gets in so deep he can’t get back out again. ISBN 978-1511629898

Teen Guide to Living With Incarcerated Parents: A Self-Help Book for Coping During an Age of Mass Incarceration
Anýe Young

At 16 years of age and as a rising senior in high school, Anýe Young offers a glimpse into her life as a teenager coping with life while her father is serving a 12-year prison sentence. She shares personal stories along with tips and tricks she’s learned while coping with the challenges of life away from her father and in a single-parent home. With this book, Anyé aims to motivate and inspire children who have parents in prison. She wants them to know that they can overcome the shame and embarrassment they may feel. She also aims to help the single parents and extended family members, who are raising other children with incarcerated parents, gain a better understanding of the challenges their children face. Anyé offers her book as a guide for teenagers, like her, who are determined to succeed in life no matter the circumstances. ISBN 978-1543938159

Tyrell
Coe Booth

Tyrell is a young African-American teen who can’t get a break. He’s living (for now) with his spaced-out mother and little brother in a homeless shelter. His father’s in jail. His girlfriend supports him, but he doesn’t feel good enough for her and seems to be always on the verge of doing the wrong thing around her. There’s another girl at the homeless shelter who is also after him, although the desires there are complicated. Tyrell feels he needs to score some money to make things better. Will he end up following in his father’s footsteps? ISBN 978-0439838801

Romar Jones Takes a Hike
Robert Burch

Meet Romar Jones, 15 ½, basketball player with months to go before the next season and no one who cares about him since Granny died. His dad’s been dead for two years. When his 9th grade language arts teacher says pay attention to the poetry unit or take a hike, Romar opts for the hike, leaves Roseburg, Oregon, and embarks on a journey to find his mother. He knows she’s in prison in Washington. He shrugs on his dad’s trail-guide backpack, and sets out, heading first to the coast to leave some of Granny’s ashes. Within minutes of first chasing waves on the ocean beach, he encounters a derelict man he dubs Meth Mouth. Five days after leaving school he stops at Vesta’s by the Sea near Yachats. Could have been good luck. Could have been Granny steered him there and had a hand in all that happened after. ISBN 978-0988480021

An Uninterrupted View of the Sky
Melanie Crowder

It’s 1999 in Bolivia and Francisco’s life consists of school, soccer, and trying to find space for himself in his cramped yet boisterous home. But when his father is arrested on false charges and sent to prison by a corrupt system that targets the uneducated, the poor, and the indigenous majority, Francisco and his sister are left with no choice: They must move into prison with their father. There, they find a world unlike anything they’ve ever known, where everything—a door, a mattress, protection from other inmates—has its price. Prison life is dirty, dire, and dehumanizing. With their lives upended, Francisco faces an impossible decision: Break up the family and take his sister to their grandparents in the Andean highlands, fleeing the city and the future within his grasp, or remain together in the increasingly dangerous prison. Pulled between two undesirable options, Francisco must confront everything he once believed about the world and his place within it. ISBN 978-0147512505

Where the Dead Sit Talking
Brandon Hobson

With his single mother in jail, Sequoyah, a fifteen-year-old Cherokee boy, is placed in foster care with the Stout family, literally and figuratively scarred by his mother’s years of substance abuse, Sequoyah keeps mostly to himself, living with his emotions pressed deep below the surface. At least until he meets seventeen-year-old Rosemary, a troubled artist who also lives with the family. Sequoyah and Rosemary bond over their shared Native American background and tumultuous paths through the foster care system, but as Sequoyah’s feelings toward Rosemary deepen, the precariousness of their lives and the scars of their pasts threaten to undo them both. ISBN 978-1641290173

What Will Happen to Me?
Brandon Hobson

What if life for a child who has a parent in prison? This book brings together photographic portraits of 30 children whose parents are incarcerated, along with their thoughts and reflections, in their own words. As Taylor says, “I want other kids to know that, even though your parents are locked up, they’re not bad people. And I want them to know that we’ll get through it. As long as we have someone there to help us, we can get through it. It makes you stronger.”

The material in “Will What Happen to Me?” has been gathered and written by two nationally-recognized experts. Howard Zehr is known around the world as the “grandfather of restorative justice.” He lectures and consults internationally on that topic and related issues. He is currently a member of the Victims Advisory Group of the U.S. Sentencing Commission.

ISBN 978-1561486892

When They Call You A Terrorist
Benee Knauer

From one of the co-founders of the Black Lives Matter movement comes a poetic memoir and reflection on humanity. Necessary and timely, Patrisse Khan-Cullors’ story asks us to remember that protest in the interest of the most vulnerable comes from love. Leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement have been called a threat to America. But in truth, they are loving women whose life experiences have led them to seek justice for those victimized by the powerful.

In this meaningful, empowering account of survival, strength and resilience, Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele seek to change the culture that declares innocent Black life expendable.

ISBN 978-1838855208
Sing, Unburied, Sing: A Novel
Jesmyn Ward

Jojo is thirteen years old and trying to understand what it means to be a man. He doesn't lack in fathers to study, chief among them his Black grandfather, Pop. But there are other men who complicate his understanding: his absent White father, Michael, who is being released from prison; his absent White grandfather, Big Joseph, who won't acknowledge his existence; and the memories of his dead uncle, Given, who died as a teenager.

His mother, Leonie, is an inconsistent presence in his and his toddler sister's lives. She is an imperfect mother in constant conflict with herself and those around her. She is Black and her children's father is White. She wants to be a better mother but can't put her children above her own needs, especially her drug use. Simultaneously tormented and comforted by visions of her dead brother, which only come to her when she's high, Leonie is embattled in ways that reflect the brutal reality of her circumstances.

When the children's father is released from prison, Leonie packs her kids and a friend into her car and drives north to the heart of Mississippi and Parchman Farm, the State Penitentiary. At Parchman, there is another thirteen-year-old boy, the ghost of a dead inmate who carries all of the ugly history of the South with him in his wandering. He too has something to teach Jojo about fathers and sons, about legacies, about violence, about love.

ISBN 978-1501126079

Wild And Crooked
Leah Thomas

In Samsboro, Kentucky, Kalyn Spence's name is inseparable from the brutal murder her father committed when he was a teenager. Forced to return to town, Kalyn must attend school under a pseudonym . . . or face the lingering anger of Samsboro's citizens, who refuse to forget the crime.

Gus Peake has never had the luxury of redefining himself. A Samsboro native, he's either known as the "disabled kid" because of his cerebral palsy, or as the kid whose dad was murdered. Gus just wants to be known as himself.

When Gus meets Kalyn, her frankness is refreshing, and they form a deep friendship. Until their families' pasts emerge. And when the accepted version of the truth is questioned, Kalyn and Gus are caught in the center of a national uproar. Can they break free from a legacy of inherited lies and chart their own paths forward?

ISBN 978-1547600021

Of the approximate 2.7 million children in the United States with a parent who is incarcerated, almost 100,000 are right here in Arizona. Ranking 4th highest in incarceration rate in the United States (Casey, 2017), close to 13% of Arizona children have experienced the incarceration of a parent, leaving them among the most vulnerable of being adversely impacted.

As the host of the National Children of Incarcerated Parents Conference, we have heard from those with lived experience about the stigma and shame children and caregivers may feel. This is why the ASU Center for Child Well-Being developed Empathy Through Literacy, which includes a list of books for all levels of readers featuring justice-impacted children.

Through reading, children and youth can realize that others are also dealing with the feelings and emotions that accompany parental incarceration.

The goals of Empathy Through Literacy are to:

1. Reduce stigma and shame by helping children know that they are not alone,
2. Provide caregivers with tools to help them communicate with children about their parent's incarceration and their associated feelings, and
3. Increase empathy for children and families experiencing the incarceration of a parent through shared understanding of its impact.

The ASU Center for Child Well-Being promotes access to these books in public libraries, schools, clubs, and other places where children and youth congregate. Where funds are lacking to purchase the books, CCWB helps raise funds to donate them.

This is where we need your help! Consider partnering with us to help reduce the stigma of incarceration through literature. Your donation goes straight toward the purchase of books that will be delivered to schools and libraries across the state.

Learn more about the Empathy Through Literature Program at www.childwellbeing.asu.edu/cipbooks