

Stages of Re-Entry for Children of a Parent Returning from Prison

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1. Celebratory/Honeymoon

Children are initially excited with the presence of their parent in the home or community, and out of the prison. Heightened expectations need to be lowered for all, parent, child, and caregiver. Danger of parent “celebrating “ if drugs were part of the lifestyle, or becoming depressed and suicide as they run into the multiple barriers. All family members need to be watchful for signs of depression ; close supportive services are needed.

2. Velcro

Children begin to experience the old anxiety about the parent leaving and may become clingy and regressive. Parent needs to be advised and supported in Parenting After Release programs or other supportive services, that this is a stage and will pass, but the parent must be patient and tolerant. Parental separation now will often trigger the past loss of the parent and leaving at this early stage is very hard, especially for the under 8 group of children.

3. Suspicious; Anger

Children, especially the older ones, may display signs of suspiciousness with the parent, as they may be anticipating a return to the “old ways” of drug use or criminal activity. Their attitude toward the returning parent can be edged with their suspicion and the parent needs to anticipate this and be provided with the tools to be good listeners and recognize this as a reaction to the parental loss and not get angry. It is normal and will come to an end. The only exception is when the parent has been incarcerated numerous times throughout the child’s childhood and they may have simply “given up” on their parent changing.

4. Testing the Limits: (Children can begin to release their internalizing and isolation during this stage)

Children are our best limit testers, with growth and development stages often transitioning with limit testing, and this is especially true when a parent has been away in these circumstances, including during incarceration, foster care placement or military deployment. As Ann Adalist-Estrin aptly describes in her stages of re-entry, the child is manifesting their concern and conflict with their behavior, sang “Can I show my feelings, ask the questions that no one would answer or I was afraid to ask while my parent was gone, or should I keep them to myself?”

5. Resolution/Adjustment

If the re-entry and reunification are moving along well, feelings of the children are beginning to surface, with question-asking by the children, unfolding many of the secrets that were maintained during the parent’s incarceration, roles are developing, hopefully, new ones, resistance to change may be experienced but supported by ARV, and children can risk re-attaching.

6. Re-Testing

Depending on the length of separation and the age of the children, after things may be progressing relatively well, the parent may experience a recurrence of the Testing the Limits stage. This recurrence is predictable for children who have endured multiple separations and simply a request for reaffirmation of that the parent will not be leaving again.

