I. The Need for a Clear and Accurate Explanation.

Children need to be accurately informed about their parent's condition. They need to know where their parent is and why. They need to know the concrete details of their parent's life and be reassured as to their parent's safety and well being.

Often adults will try to hide the facts from the child fearing that he will not understand or will react with distress. Often parents worry that if their child knows they are in prison, the child will stop loving and respecting them.

In fact, children understand the notion of wrongdoing and punishment very well. In their world people are always doing things they have been asked not to, and frequently get punished as a result. Problems arise when the child feels the parent's separation is somehow his fault and interprets the parent's separation as a rejection. Unless given information to the contrary, a child is likely to think that a parent left because the child himself was naughty; perhaps he didn't eat his dinner or go to bed on time. Even if told that the parent had to go away because the parent did something wrong, a child might believe that somehow, he too was at fault.

Often adults will offer false explanations for their absence saying that they are away at school or in the hospital. However, such explanations create more problems than they solve. For example, if a parent is away at school why can't she come home on weekends, holidays or birthdays? If Mom is in the hospital, why doesn't she get better and come home?

The best course of action is to tell the child the truth, taking into account his level of understanding.

For example, a child can understand that his parent is being punished for "taking something that didn't belong to him" or "that he got into a fight and hurt someone." Each circumstance is different, but with some thought the child can be offered an explanation that represents the situation with accuracy. As the child matures, and raises questions, more information can be offered.

The very best person to explain the circumstances of incarceration is the parent himself. Indeed, other adults may not know what happened, or may be invading a parent's privacy if they offer an explanation without the parent's consent. However, once an explanation is offered, other significant adults can follow the parent's lead and be available to clarify confusions and answer questions.