

Talking with Preteens (Ages 11–14)

When a Parent Goes to Prison

Preteens understand more — and feel shame, loyalty, and confusion at the same time. They may hide the truth from friends or blame themselves. They need honesty without being overwhelmed.

Key Biblical Truths

Hard questions belong before God (Psalm 13, Habakkuk).

Sin has consequences, but people are not disposable.

Jesus draws near to the hurting (Hebrews 4:15-16).

How to Talk with Preteens

Give age-appropriate truth. Explain where the parent is, how long it may last, and that rules exist for a reason.

Normalize mixed feelings. They may love their parent and feel angry or embarrassed — both can be true.

Help them plan what to tell friends. A short, honest script can reduce anxiety.

Watch school, sleep, and mood changes. Withdrawal or sudden anger may signal they need extra support.

Connect them with a trusted mentor, youth leader, or counselor.

Shame and Secrecy

Many preteens hide a parent's incarceration out of fear of judgment. Remind them their worth is not defined by a parent's choices. God's love for them does not change.

What to Avoid

Avoid using the incarcerated parent as a weapon in conflict, sharing court documents they are not ready for, or expecting them to become a "little adult" at home.

Preteens need adults who tell the truth and stay close. Your steady presence can help them carry a weight no child should carry alone.