Tips on how to help children trust authority figures

Helping children trust authority figures is important if we want them to believe and feel confident that their family member in jail is safe.

If children witness authority figures behaving in an aggressive or what they think is an unfair way it's really hard to try and build an alternative image for that figure. Similarly, if children go to the prison to visit their family member and a prison officer turns them away, this can be a very traumatic experience for a child who's waited weeks, months or years. That authority figure will remain in the child's mind as a dark force and can grow into resentment and rebellion if not addressed.

If someone you love goes to jail and you're the parent or carer left to care for the children, there are lots of emotions you can feel. These feelings come and go and some will be stronger at times. One of these feelings might be anger. You might be angry at everything, angry at the system which seems impossible, angry at how hard it is to get to the jail, angry at the police for taking your loved one away, angry at the jail officer that has turned you away.

You have every right to these feelings and they are normal, but don't forget, if you are feeling down or having a hard time, then your children will be feeling even worse. The whole experience is even more frightening and confusing for children.

Remember:

- Give careful thought to what you say when children are around. Sometimes they are listening when you don't even think they can hear you.
- It's best to discuss the downside when children are not around.
- Children take on attitudes about things. If adults badmouth and act as if the police and jail officers can't be trusted , then that's what the children will think too.
- Show children that even though setbacks and difficulties are unpleasant, they happen to everyone. Acknowledge their feelings, teach them how to get through the difficult times, it will have a much less negative affect overall.
- Be the best example you can be for them.

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