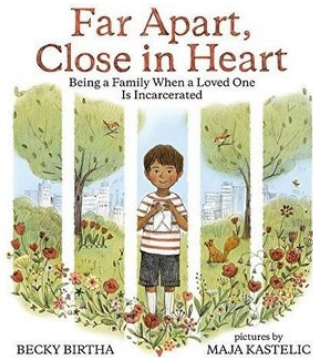


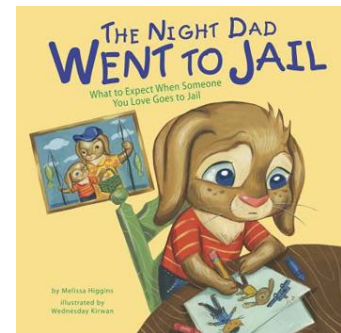
CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS AND BOOKS

In February 2023, Casey Family Programs reported that according to the U. S. Department of Justice, approximately 1.8 million individuals were incarcerated in state, federal, or local facilities in 2020. These incarcerations included parents or guardians of an estimated 4.9 million children. What impact do such incarcerations have on children? Can books play a role in helping children cope with and understand feelings and events surrounding the imprisonment of a parent or guardian? The following titles are examples of books that might make a difference for children who have or have had an incarcerated parent or guardian. The North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation does not endorse or promote content in this article.



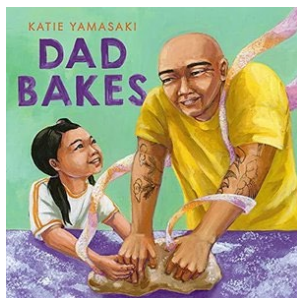
Published in 2017, [*Far Apart, Close in Heart: Being a Family When a Loved One Is Incarcerated*](#) by Becky Birtha is a picture book for ages 4-8. Kirkus Reviews describes the book as "A racially and ethnically diverse sampling of children exemplify the grief and discomfort that come with losing a parent to incarceration" and "...this book is a necessary one" (2017).

Melissa Higgins's book [*The Night Dad Went to Jail: What to Expect When Someone You Love Goes to Jail*](#) follows a young rabbit as he works through the feelings he experiences when his father is arrested and removed from their home. This picture book, for ages 3-10, was published in 2013.



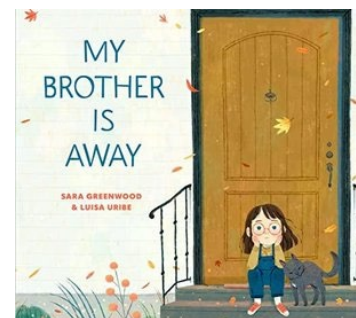


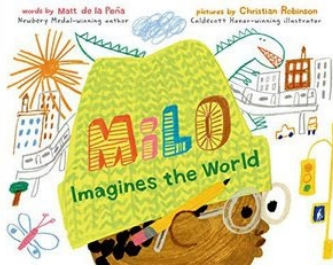
[See You Soon](#) by Mariame Kaba is a children's book for ages 4-8. Queenie lives with her mom and Grandma, but when her mom is incarcerated, Queenie's life changes. Queenie worries about her mom and learns that even though they are separated, a mom's love expands beyond walls. This book, published in 2022, is rated 4.8/5 on Amazon.



[Dad Bakes](#), a picture book written by Katie Yamasaki for ages 3-7, was published in 2021. In it, a young child's dad rises early and walks to work in a bakery. The author's note hints that incarceration played a role in her past. The author dedicated the book "...to families affected by incarceration and the organizations helping them to rebuild their lives" (Kirkus Reviews, 2021). This racially diverse book received a star from Kirkus Reviews.

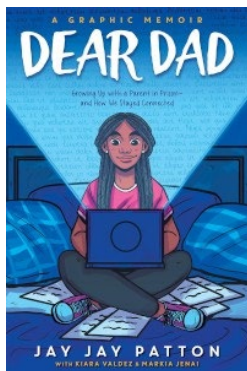
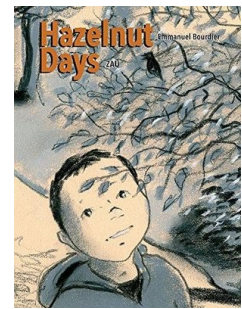
In her book, [My Brother Is Away](#), Sara Greenwood, narrates the story of a young girl missing her older incarcerated brother. The child deals with questions from classmates, anger, pain, and embarrassment as she deals with his absence. The author, who grew up with an incarcerated brother, offers reassurance to her readers. Kirkus Reviews says this book is "An accessible, validating narrative about the impact of incarceration within families (2022). Picture book for ages 4-10.





[Milo Imagines the World](#), a 2012 title by Matt de la Peña, received a star from Kirkus Reviews. While on a subway, Milo imagines the homes of the people he observes. Milo is surprised when a young White boy, whom he had imagined living in a castle, gets off the train and heads to the same destination as his. The review states, "...this picture book offers a child's view of the impacts of incarceration on families" and is described as "A memorable, thought-provoking story poised to make a difference for many (Kirkus Reviews, 2012). Picture book for ages 4-10.

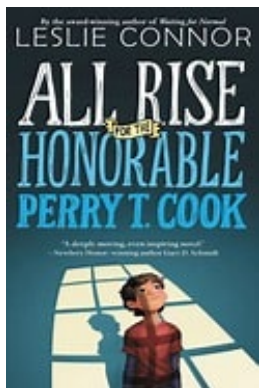
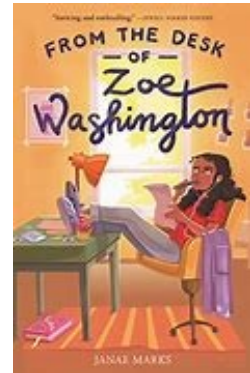
Emmanuel Bourdier's book [Hazelnut Days](#) was released in 2018. It is about a young boy who has mixed and complicated feelings about his father but visits him in prison once every other week. Kirkus Reviews described the book as "an empathetic and powerful evocation of a rarely examined family dynamic" (2018). *Hazelnut Days* may be suitable for children ages 6-10.



[Dear Dad: Growing up with a Dad in Prison and How We Stay Connected](#) by Jay Jay and Antoine Patton was released on September 17, 2024. This book presents a father-daughter pair whose graphic nonfiction work explains incarceration's toll on families. Kirkus Reviews says this book "Offers many young people much-needed inspiration and solace" (2024). This biography is written for children ages 8-12.



When it was released in 2020, Kirkus Reviews gave [From the Desk of Zoe Washington](#) by Janae Marks a starred review. Twelve-year-old Zoe has never met her incarcerated father, but after receiving a letter from him, she sets out to prove his innocence. This fiction book written for ages 8-12 is "an extraordinary, timely, must-read debut about love, family, friendship, and justice" (Kirkus Reviews, 2020).

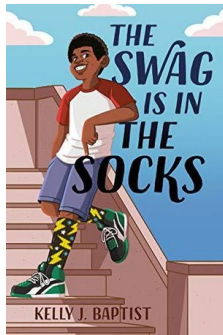


[All Rise for the Honorable Perry T. Cook](#) by Leslie Connor also received a star from Kirkus Reviews when it was released in 2016. The Blue River Co-ed Correctional Facility is the only home sixth-grader Perry Cook has ever known. What happens when a district attorney pulls Perry out of the facility and puts him in foster care? "With complex, memorable characters, a situation that demands sympathy, and a story that's shown, not just told, this is fresh and affecting. Well-crafted, warm, and wonderful" (Kirkus Reviews, 2016). This fiction book may be

suitable for ages 9-13. [Book Trailer](#)

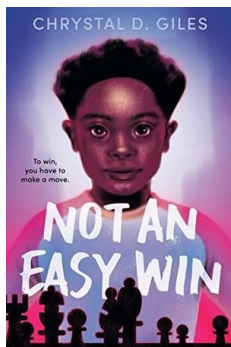
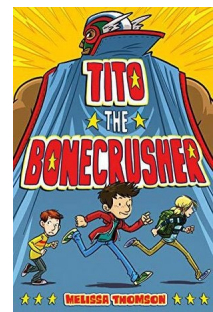
[Mountain Dog](#) by Margarita Engle received a star from Kirkus Reviews when it was published in 2013. After his mother is incarcerated for organizing pit bull fights, 11-year-old Tony goes to live with his forest-ranger great-uncle Tio and his chocolate lab Gabe. Kirkus Reviews labels this book as "absorbing," "poignant," and "memorable." This title may be suitable for ages 8-12.





[Kelly J. Baptist wrote and published *The Swag Is in the Socks*](#), suitable for ages 8-12. The book tells the story of seventh grader Xavier Moon, whose parents are incarcerated, and how socks and words of encouragement from a great uncle help him navigate life. Kirkus Review describes this title as "a deeply funny and relatable story of growth" (2021).

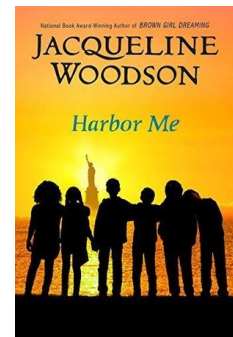
[*Tito the Bonecrusher*](#), by Melissa Thomson, was published in 2019. This fiction book, for ages 8-11, tells the story of 11-year-old Oliver and how he plans to get his incarcerated father out of a Florida correctional facility. Kirkus Reviews gave this title a star and described it as "an uplifting gem."



[*Not an Easy Win*](#) by Chrystal D. Giles was published in 2023 for ages 10-13. "The characters (in this book) are multidimensional and authentic: Complex issues, including poverty, parental incarceration, and racism, are explored with sensitivity, offering readers opportunities for reflection. Giles skillfully illustrates the nuances and cultural tensions that arise in multigenerational homes and masterfully captures the origins, cadences, and mannerisms common to many African American elders with compassion" (Kirkus Reviews, 2023).



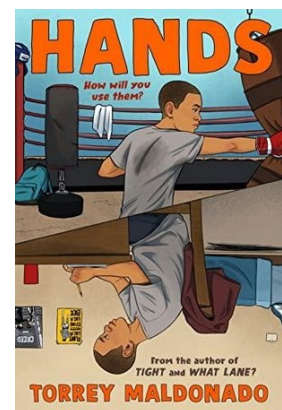
Jacqueline Woodson's [Harbor Me](#), published in 2018, also received a star from Kirkus Reviews. Haley, who is biracial, lives with her white uncle after her white father is incarcerated for murdering her mother. "The characters ring true as they discuss issues both personal and global. This story, told with exquisite language and clarity of narrative, is heartbreaking and hopeful. An extraordinary and timely piece of writing" (Kirkus Reviews, 2018). *Harbor Me* may be suited for ages 10-14. [Jacqueline Woodson](#)

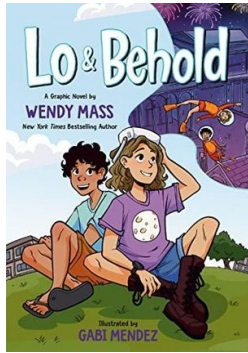


In [Fighting Words](#), author Kimberly Brubaker Bradley tells the story of ten-year-old Della and her older sister Suki, whose mother is incarcerated for meth cooking. The sisters are placed in foster care when their mother's predatory boyfriend is jailed. "Readers will root for these sisters along every step of their daunting journey. Refusing to soft-pedal hard issues, the novel speaks with an astringent honesty, at once heartbreaking and hopeful" (Kirkus Reviews, 2020). This fiction title may be suitable

for ages 9-13.

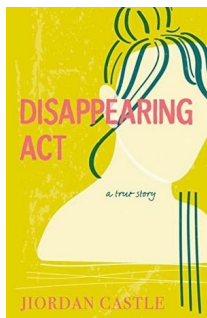
[Hands](#), by Torrey Maldonado, was published in 2023 for ages 10-14. Twelve-year-old Trevor's stepdad, who was incarcerated for abusing his mother, is returning home. Trevor decides he must learn how to protect his mother and sisters. "The author caters to reluctant readers while exploring complex ideas surrounding community, domestic abuse, and problem-solving. Brief chapters, a fast-paced narrative, and simple language make this an accessible read. A short story with a lasting impact" (Kirkus Reviews, 2023).





[Lo & Behold](#) is a racially diverse, contemporary book by Gabi Mendez. The story, published in 2023, focuses on Addie Brecker's life before and after her mom became addicted to painkillers. "This artfully rendered graphic charmer is carefully nuanced and adroitly paced, exploring such issues as addiction, grief, and technology's role in our lives (Kirkus Reviews, 2023). This graphic fiction title may be suited to ages 9-13.

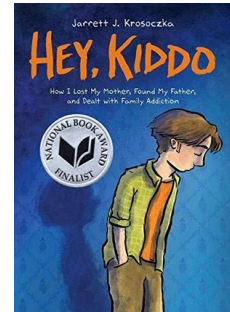
Kim Johnson's book [This Is My America](#) received a star from Kirkus Reviews when it was published in 2020. Tracey Beaumont is a 17-year-old who writes letters to Innocence X with hopes of helping her father, who has been wrongly accused of murder and sentenced to death. Kirkus Reviews describes this book, written for ages 12-18, as "Harrowing and worthwhile; a call-to-action from the anti-racist insights of a generation of Black activists" (2020).



[Disappearing Act: A True Story](#) by Jordan Castle was published in 2023. "The author, who is white and Jewish, grew up on Long Island. She mentions in her author's note that for years, she sought books for kids whose parents were in prison but could not find them; she wrote this verse memoir to help fill that void. (The book) thoughtfully recounts the challenges of growing up with an incarcerated parent" (Kirkus Reviews, 2023). This title might be suitable for ages 12-18.



[Hey, Kiddo](#) is a graphic novel memoir written by Jarrett J. Krosoczka. The book, which was published in 2018, might be best suited for ages 14 to adult. "Krosoczka, as an author, generously and lovingly shows his flawed family members striving to do the best they can even as Krosoczka, the character, clearly aches for more. Honest, important, and timely" (Kirkus Reviews, 2018).



Further Reading

[Both sides of the bars: How mass incarceration punishes families](#)

[Ten statistics about the scale and impact of mass incarceration in the U.S.](#)

Resources

12 children's books about kids with a parent in jail. Imagination Soup. (2023, February 12). <https://imaginationsoup.net/childrens-books-kids-parent-in-jail/>

Kaba et al., (n.d.). Recommended books for and about children of incarcerated parents. https://www.osborneny.org/assets/files/2020_10_2_NYCIP-Book-List.pdf

Owens, R. (2024, June 5). 19 Books Featuring Incarcerated Family Members for Young Readers of All Ages. School Library Journal. <https://www.slj.com/story/19-books-featuring-incarcerated-family-members-for-young-readers-of-all-ages>

Sbrown@casey.org. (2024, May 24). Incarceration issues. Casey Family Programs. <https://www.casey.org/parental-incarceration-issue/>

Taylor, M. (2022, June 17). Books for children and teens that touch on incarceration. Brightly. <https://www.readbrightly.com/books-on-incarceration/>

