

CAREGIVER CHEAT SHEET

Raising a child affected by substance use and incarceration can be challenging. Here are caregiver strategies drawn from the experiences of those who've lived it:

Prioritize Mental Health

"I make time for myself to help with stress – exercise, devotions, reading a good book, hot baths, [even] ice cream splurges with no guilt!"



Learn Your Child's Emotional Needs

"The emotional age of the child who has been through trauma is NOT the same as the physical age."



Have the Hard Conversations



"It is important to make a habit of speaking honestly, but at a level that the child can grasp."

Set Boundaries

"I make no apologies for keeping a safe space for myself and the people who live in my home."



Lean On Your Support Systems



"The local recovery community has kept me grounded, realistic, and educated regarding all aspects of the recovery process."



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CAREGIVER TIP SHEET: SELF-CARE & MENTAL HEALTH

Raising a child affected by substance use and incarceration can be challenging. If you are a grandparent, foster parent, or kinship caregiver, balancing your well-being with the child's needs requires intention, patience, and self-care. Here are caregiver strategies for understanding your child's emotional needs drawn from the experiences of those who've lived it.



Research shows that modeling self-compassion and self-care is one of the most effective ways to teach children to practice self-compassion and self-care. Modeling these behaviors is another form of expressing care. Taking care of your mental health means that you will show up with more warmth as a parent, and research demonstrates that children respond most positively to a parent who shows them they enjoy being with them.

♥ Practice Self-Compassion

"The emotional age of the child who has been through trauma is NOT the same as the physical age."

Many caregivers, especially those who are older, feel guilt or self-doubt. However, it is important to be kind to yourself. Recognize that learning the ropes of modern parenting takes time and effort! In time, you will build the knowledge that you need to parent your child.

♥ Acknowledge Limitations

"I have to be honest with myself about my own physical and emotional limitations and make sure that I am providing as much for myself as I am for the child. I have to give myself permission to say "no" when I simply can't push myself any further."

Parenting is demanding! Setting boundaries is essential. Allow yourself to rest when needed and be honest about what you can take on. You do not have to be all things for your child.

♥ Implement Daily Self-Care

"I make sure that I take time for myself every day, whether it is exercising, reading a devotion, chatting on the phone with a friend, going for a walk, or just sitting in the sunshine."

Simple self-care acts are critical for your emotional resilience. Self-care is an important part of staving off parental burnout and keeping yourself emotionally present for your child.



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CAREGIVER TIP SHEET: UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S EMOTIONAL NEEDS

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All of these strategies are examples of trauma-informed care. Trauma-informed care emphasizes the importance of recognizing the child's emotional needs, which may include difficulty expressing emotions or acting out. Avoiding unrealistic expectations based on physical age and allowing the child to express emotions can promote healthy emotional development.

♥ Be Patient

"The emotional age of the child who has been through trauma is NOT the same as the physical age."

Understanding that a child's emotional age may be different from their chronological age helps caregivers adjust expectations and provide the proper support. A child might need more support than most peers their age because of trauma. Provide your child with the support she needs. This helps prevent frustration for both of you.

♥ Validate Their Feelings

"When I am cognizant that my child is struggling, it allows me to be a better parent to him, using patience and calmness."

Being patient with emotional reactions and showing understanding helps children process their feelings. Your child may be hurt, confused, and unable to express themselves adequately. Recognizing the root causes of behaviors allows caregivers to respond with empathy.

♥ Be Honest

"Being honest with the child in an age-appropriate manner is imperative! It is important to make a habit of speaking honestly, but at a level that the child can grasp."

Research shows that speaking honestly about familial incarceration and substance use can lessen trauma and loss symptoms. How you speak to a five-year-old about incarceration will be very different from how you speak to a fifteen-year-old, but talking is important regardless. Open communication will encourage your child to come to you with questions.



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CAREGIVER TIP SHEET: NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

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♥ Avoid Dehumanizing Language

"It is important to not speak in a critical and demeaning manner about the parent, remembering that often the child loves their parent regardless of what has happened."

It is possible to acknowledge that their parent "is sick" without vilifying the parent struggling with substance use. The goal is to help your child understand that although they don't have control over this situation, their parent still loves them, and they can still show their love for their parent.

♥ Be Honest

"Being honest with the child in an age-appropriate manner is imperative!"

Research shows that speaking honestly about familial incarceration and substance use can lessen trauma and loss symptoms. Open communication will encourage your child to come to you with questions about substance use, incarceration, and more. If you are struggling with age-appropriate language to use, your child's pediatrician or school psychologist is a great place to start!

♥ Be Creative

"Especially for younger children, having them draw what they are feeling is an easier way for them to express themselves."

Art can be an important and life-changing tool for young people who have experienced trauma. Journaling, drawing, or dramatic play can all be tools that help your child process family substance use or incarceration. When a child draws their feelings, ask them questions! It can open the door to meaningful conversation.

♥ Take Time

"Be aware and ready to discuss things in small conversations over a long period of time, rather than one long talk."

It may be best for hard conversations to happen over the course of several days, weeks, and months. Even years later, you may be explaining new details in new ways to your child. Children learn best in small, incremental chunks.

CAREGIVER TIP SHEET: SETTING BOUNDARIES

Raising a child affected by substance use and incarceration can be challenging. If you are a grandparent, foster parent, or kinship caregiver, balancing your well-being with the child's needs requires intention, patience, and self-care. Here are caregiver strategies for understanding your child's emotional needs drawn from the experiences of those who've lived it.



Setting and maintaining boundaries, though difficult, is essential for ensuring a safe and healthy environment for both the child and the caregiver. Establishing these limits helps caregivers prioritize safety and well-being.

♥ Establish Safe Spaces

"My home is my safe space. I make no apologies for keeping a safe space for myself and the people who live in my home."

It's important to protect your home environment from unsafe influences. Your child might have experienced unsafe living conditions before coming into your care. Keeping your home a true safe space is vital to their development.

♥ Set Clear Expectations

"I make it clear to the offending parent that I still love them...but their dangerous, illegal, or unhealthy activities are not allowed in my space."

Clear, consistent boundaries help maintain a stable and safe environment for the child, ensuring that the child's needs come first.

♥ Safety First

"The child's best interests must come first. A child cannot just walk out or run away from a bad situation."

As a caregiver, the safety of your child is your first priority. Setting boundaries can be hard, and there can be tears, second guessing, and guilt that comes with it. Remember that you are setting boundaries for the safety of your child, who is unable to set those boundaries or control the situation themselves. You are their advocate.



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CAREGIVER TIP SHEET: SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Raising a child affected by substance use and incarceration can be challenging. If you are a grandparent, foster parent, or kinship caregiver, balancing your well-being with the child's needs requires intention, patience, and self-care. Here are caregiver strategies for understanding your child's emotional needs drawn from the experiences of those who've lived it.



Establishing a strong support system and using community resources can help caregivers navigate the challenges of caring for a child impacted by trauma. Support from professionals and peers enhances emotional resilience and caregiving capacity.

♥ Lean on Community

"The local recovery community has kept me grounded, realistic, and educated. [I spend] time with friends who are willing to listen and help me work through issues related to being a grandparent raising a grandchild."

Talk to friends that you know will listen and reach out to local recovery groups. There are others who have been in situations similar to yours, and you may even meet someone who has raised a child affected by incarceration or substance use.

♥ Legal Services

"The legal system is difficult, at best, to navigate. It has been helpful to have a legal advocate (or two) that can give me direction and education that in turn helps me to feel as if I am in some control of the outcome."

Ask your child's social worker or school's psychologist about what legal resources might be available to your family. Many law schools in Illinois offer pro-bono litigation clinic services, that can offer support as you navigate the complex legal system.

♥ Clinical Support

"[I use] appropriate counseling as needed to help with coping skills and strategies to deal with difficult emotional and legal issues regarding the child that I am now raising."

Your child is not the only person that can benefit from professional therapeutic or counseling services. Asking for support from clinical services can only make you a better caregiver for your child.



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CAREGIVER TIP SHEET: VOICES OF CAREGIVING

Raising a child affected by substance use and incarceration can be challenging. We asked caregivers raising their grandchildren what they wished people knew about caregiving for system impacted youth.



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We need to work toward a better system of not only reunifying the family as a whole, but also keeping the child's best interests at the center of the reunification process.

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The children in these situations are the ones who suffer the most and we are just now beginning to see the development of appropriate responses to their trauma. That means that we need to make sure that those adults who are raising the child have the tools and resources that they need to do it well. The caregivers need support and counsel, education, tools, financial support, and sound legal guidance.

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There are no quick fixes in the recovery process, nor is it an easy road to reentry after incarceration for the parent. Appropriate healing done well takes time. Everyone involved in the situation needs to know this.

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The world needs to understand that recovery takes time, often a long time. We don't give enough attention to how long it truly takes for folks to heal – we tend to rush the process.

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