



Big Topics With  
Children

## More Information

### Contact

**Kayla Victor, C4J chairperson**

[info@prisonersfamilyconference.org](mailto:info@prisonersfamilyconference.org)

**Dr. Avon Hart-Johnson, AIAC  
chairperson:**

[avonhartjohnson@gmail.com](mailto:avonhartjohnson@gmail.com)



*Thank You*

### AIAC Members and The 2024 Cohort

Barbara Allan

Jess Angel

Dr. Smita Dharmamer

Sanghamitra Dasgupta

Primilla Dixit

Avon Hart-Johnson

Allegra Pocinki

Jim Prager

Kayla Victor



# Mastering BIG TOPICS WITH CHILDREN

Discussions about incarceration, as with any type of loss (e.g., divorce, death, accidents), with children should begin with honesty and empathy. In their book *Children of Imprisoned Parents: A Holistic Guide to Caregiver and Child Well-being*, Drs. Hart-Johnson and Johnson advise, “Share the abstract, not the detail, about the loss. Children want to know the loss is not their fault, that they are loved, supported, and safe, not what the parents did. Children want to know that they were not purposely left behind.” Find more Advocacy in Action tips on holding effective discussions with children in this brochure.



## About Us

The mission of the Advocacy in Action Coalition is to promote social justice by advancing the rights of families of the incarcerated through systemic advocacy and community education, and by supporting healthier families and safer communities.

Each year, the AIAC provides a call-to-action, inviting members to join the upcoming year’s cohort. This work was produced by the 2024 AIAC cohort.

### 2024 Advocacy in Action Coalition Cohort

co-authors:

**Dr. Smita Dharmamer and  
Dr. Avon Hart-Johnson**



## Safety

**STEP 1:** Begin by creating a safe and comfortable space for the conversation. Choose a quiet and private setting where both you and the child feel at ease.

## Empathy

**STEP 2:** Approach the conversation with empathy, age-appropriateness, and understanding. Acknowledge that it may be difficult for the child to process the information and assure them that you're there to support them.

## Direct Honesty

**STEP 3:** Be honest with the child about their parent's situation. Explain in a straightforward manner that their parent is currently in a place called prison or jail because of something they did or their actions.

## Feelings

**STEP 4:** Encourage the child to express their feelings and emotions about the situation. Reassure them that it's okay to feel sad, confused, or angry, and validate their emotions.



## Resources

### Tip Sheet: Supporting Communication for Families Impacted by Incarceration.

<https://cantasd.acf.hhs.gov/wp-content/uploads/FII-Tip-Sheet-Supporting-Communication-08.23.19-FINAL.pdf>

### Developing a child's communication skills:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JG9AC0ZxuY>

**International Coalition for Children With Incarcerated Parents:** <https://www.inccip.org>



## Support

**STEP 5:** Assure the child that they are not alone and that there are people who care about them. Reiterate your support and willingness to listen whenever they have questions or need to talk.

## Tools

**STEP 6:** Provide age-appropriate resources or books that can help the child understand and cope with their parent's incarceration. Offer to connect them with a counselor or support group if needed. Members of the AIAC have compiled children's resources that can support children. See Resource list.

## Summary

Let the child know that it's okay to ask follow-up questions about their parent's situation, even if they've asked them before. Encourage them to share their thoughts and concerns openly. Validate Their Feeling: Validate the child's feelings each time they bring up the topic. Reassure them that it's normal to have questions and that you're here to listen and support them. Provide Consistent and Honest Answers. Regulate our emotional responses and provide honest and age-appropriate answers each time. Avoid making promises you can't keep or providing false hope. Remember, allow children the opportunity to remain children so that they do not feel responsible for the burden of adulthood.