

# Loving Your Kids From Right Where You Are

By Karla Winterfeld



I remember feeling so anxious and scared before making my first call to my kids from Shakopee. I didn't know what I was going to say or how I was going to handle it, but I knew I wanted and needed to call them.

For me, the hardest part of prison is being away from my children. My children were one and three at the time of my arrest and my biggest fear was losing the relationship with them, and not having the bond with my children that I desired to have. Since arriving at MCF Shakopee in December of 2018, my focus and goal has been to maintain, grow and nurture the relationship I have with my children and to ensure they know their mother loves them.

Incarceration can make it challenging to be there for your children, but not impossible. My incarceration has forced me to become creative and find unique ways to send and communicate my love to my children, so they know just how special they are to me. I have been sending my love with consistent phone calls and weekly "kid mail" during my incarceration.

Consistency is key when it comes to any relationship, but especially for kids. Our kids deserve this from us more than anyone! Consistency is valuable because they need to know that we are going to be there and show up for them however we can. We may not be able to be physically present, but we can show up for our kids by calling them and sending mail on a regular basis (and making sure it's as often as possible).

During my first call I let my kids know that even though we are apart, we still see the same moon. I ended our call with a song that God put on my heart, about mommy loving them, and this has become our "special song" which ends all of our calls and visits. I sang our "special song" for six months at the end of our phone calls, and as the end of our first in-person visit approached, I asked my kids if we should sing our "special song" before they left. With my now two-year-old son and four-year-old daughter in my arms, we sang our "special song". As we sang, I watched my son's eyes light up with recognition. He connected my voice with the voice on the phone, and that was a magical moment I will never forget!

One night it was cloudy, and my daughter was upset that we couldn't see the moon together before bed, so I asked her if she wanted me to make a special moon for her, and she said, "Yes." Since that day, our signature special purple moon is somewhere on everything that goes home, so they know it's from mommy. We also each have a moon on our wall to look at, at all times.

Our phone calls are filled with sharing about our days, our highs, and lows from the day, reading books together, having dance parties, playing games, singing silly songs, using our imaginations, making up stories together, doing math and even playing hide-and-seek. I have utilized the library to check out children's books to read to my kiddos and then have copied them down and kept them in a folder, so when they request a particular favorite, I have it ready and available.

With all our quarantine lockdowns, I've had to get creative with ways I send my love to my kids. I utilized this time to create and send extra weekly "kid mail," so my kids knew that mommy was still thinking about them, despite not having regular contact with them. On my first call after I was off quarantine the last time, my kids had two questions, "Mom, can we come see you now so you can hold us again? Can you also please keep sending us the extra weekly mail?" The first question crushed my heart. Hearing the second question about the extra mail brought the biggest smile to my face and filled my heart with joy because it reassured me that my "kid mail" had done exactly what I intended and hope it would do for them. It lets them know they are dearly loved, and always thought of, even though I cannot physically be with them.

My weekly "kid mail" always includes a note for each of them, various things such as coloring sheets, pictures I draw for them, pictures I start to draw or color and they finish (so we made it together), origami animals and other items, stories and poems I've written for them, a game set up like Candyland, but focused on their learning colors, shapes, vocabulary, numbers, letters, and following directions with their own origami game pieces. Recently, they asked for some math problems and writing practice, so I made fun packets for them to complete. Sometimes I ask them what they want and do my best to fulfill their requests since I am FAR from an artist. I always tell them I'll do my best and they assure me that it's okay as long as I try my best. Sometimes, a dinosaur goes home with six legs and well, we use that to make up a great story about why the dinosaur had extra legs and all the cool stuff he could do with them.

I have always invited the women who live around me to join in making my weekly "kid mail" and love hearing their reactions after their kids get the mail, and how that makes them feel. I know that being a parent in and from prison is challenging. I am not perfect, and I definitely don't know everything, but what I do know is that I love my children. Hearing their joy and the feeling I get; feeling connected to them in the different ways I have found, works for us.

So, I encourage you to pick up the phone, create some of your own "kid mail," or find another creative way to send your love and connect with your kids today!

*Author, Karla Winterfeld, has given permission to Correctional Ministries and Chaplains Association to share this article.*