

The first phone call

Ten things that matter most when your loved one calls for the first time

1 Set up the account before the call comes

Most systems require you to create and fund a prepaid phone account in advance. Do this the first day if you can — a rejected or unconnected call in week one is almost always a setup issue, not a sign of trouble.

2 Expect a recorded line and a time limit

Calls are recorded, monitored, and usually capped at 15–20 minutes. Knowing this ahead of time keeps it from feeling like a rejection when the call cuts off mid-sentence.

3 Answer if you possibly can

Missed calls can't be returned — they have to call again, often waiting in line for the phone. If you know a call is likely coming, keep your phone close and step away to take it.

4 Let them talk first

They've likely been waiting all day for this call and may have a lot to get out — or almost nothing, if it's been a hard day. Follow their lead before steering the conversation.

5 Keep bad news for a letter, not the first call

Hard news lands very differently when someone can't process it in private afterward. Unless it's urgent, let serious news wait for a letter, or at least not the very first call.

6 Don't ask about the case or the facility on the phone

The line is monitored, and questions about charges, other incarcerated people, or complaints about staff can create real problems for them. Save those conversations for legal calls or in-person visits.

7 Have small, normal updates ready

What the dog did, how the kids' week went, a dumb thing that happened at work. Ordinary life is often the most grounding thing you can offer — it reminds them the world is still there.

8 Don't take a short or flat call personally

Phone rooms are loud, watched, and rushed. A clipped tone or an abrupt goodbye is usually about the environment, not about you.

9 End with something concrete, not just "I love you"

A specific plan — when you'll write next, when the next call or visit might be — gives them something to hold onto between calls. Uncertainty is harder than distance.

10 Give yourself time to recover too

The first call is often harder on the family than expected — hearing the automated recording, the background noise, the changed voice. It's normal to need a minute after you hang up.

A note for the person inside

The first call is often as hard for the people on the other end as it is for you. If it feels short, rushed, or strange, that's usually the phone room, not the relationship. Tell them plainly what would help most on the next one — that guidance matters more than you might think.