

A Thousand Crayons  
(Pre-release Coordinator)

Last summer, we went to all 13 reentry facilities across the state and did a role play with the staff. We would say, “Imagine we are here as first-time visitors and we’re bringing a child. Let’s walk through visiting at your prison: Do I know where to park? Do I know the entrance? What do the bathrooms look like? Do you have a changing table? What’s it look like to go through security? Where do families sit? Hard plastic chairs don't work for two-year-olds. Are there activities? Could we bring in a book cart? Art supplies? A whiteboard or a chalkboard?” We ended up creating a checklist that went to all the prisons, with money attached to making visits more family friendly.

I mentioned to one associate warden that some facilities were getting big rolls of butcher paper to roll over the tables. It’s a great idea—just get some crayons and when the family visit is finished, you can flip the paper over and use the other side or the family can take the paper home. It's inexpensive. Keeps the tables clean. Creates a memory. And he said, “I don't think we can have crayons because the families will steal them.”

I didn't even know what to do with that. Because, honestly, if the crayons go missing because they're stolen or they were broken or someone dropped them in the trash, then just buy new ones. And if crayons are too much of an expense, then we find a community partner and say, “Hey, church down the road, will you be our crayon supplier for the next year?”

That no is probably symptomatic for something bigger, for not wanting families to have those types of experiences. But the kids are not in prison. Whatever you may think about the parents, the kids are just visitors, and if you had a better, more child-friendly visiting space, that could create better visits, and if the folks inside have a good visit with their family, they're probably in a better mood when they go back on the yard and will cause less anxiety for the staff.

Yes, crayons grow legs. That’s just the nature of crayons. We replace them. We offer something positive. Because these people are coming out. They’re going home. The reentry conversation needs to broaden to include building stronger family relationships while the loved one is still inside. And if that means we buy crayons, even a thousand crayons, that’s something we can do.