

Parental Substance Misuse and Child Abuse

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“Children who grow up with alcoholic parents bear emotional, behavioural and mental scars”¹.

Parental substance abuse influences the extent to which a family functions effectively. There is a greater risk of child abuse and neglect as well as violence against a partner when substance abuse is present in a family. Children with a parent who is a substance abuser have a greater risk of experiencing trouble in school as well as social isolation. Moreover, children living in these unstable environments are at a greater risk of becoming substance abusers themselves.

There is neuro-scientific evidence attesting the fact that addiction is a complex disease characterized by changes in the structure and function of the brain. In some cases, these changes are brought on by substance use and other behaviors; other times, it appears these structural and functional characteristics are pre-existing. The effects of addiction on the brain make conscious control over certain behaviors exceedingly difficult, and in most cases pharmaceutical and/or behavioral treatments are required to manage the disease.² Exposure to parental substance misuse during childhood can have dire consequences for children. Compared to children of parents who do not abuse alcohol or drugs, children of parents who do, and who also are in the child welfare system, are more likely to experience physical, intellectual, social, and emotional problems. Among the difficulties in providing services to these children is that problems affected or compounded by their parental substance abuse (PSM) might not emerge until later in their lives.³ Some of the consequences of PSM on childhood development including a disruption of the bonding process; emotional, academic and developmental problems; lack of supervision; parentification; social stigma; and adolescent substance use and delinquency.

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1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, ACF report. (1999).

2 Kraemer, G. W. (1992). *A psychobiological theory of attachment: Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 15(3), 493–511.

3 Supra fn 3.

PSM leads to disruption of the bonding process

When mothers or fathers abuse substances after delivery, their ability to bond with their child—so important during the early stages of life—may be weakened. In order for an attachment to form, it is necessary that caregivers pay attention to and notice their children's attempts to communicate. Parents who use marijuana, for example, may have difficulty picking up their babies' cues because marijuana dulls response time and alters perceptions. When parents repeatedly miss their babies' cues, the babies eventually stop providing them. The result is disengaged parents with disengaged babies.⁴ These parents and babies then have difficulty forming a healthy, appropriate relationship. Neglected Children may demonstrate a lack of confidence or social skills that could hinder them from being successful in school, work, and relationships, have difficulty understanding the emotions of others, regulating their own emotions, or forming and maintaining relationships with others, have a limited ability to feel remorse or empathy, which may mean that they could hurt others without feeling their actions were wrong, become more mistrustful of others and may be less willing to learn from adults, and also demonstrate impaired social cognition, which is awareness of oneself in relation to others as well as of others' emotions. Impaired social cognition can lead a person to view many social interactions as stressful.⁵

Emotional, Academic, and Developmental Problems

Children who experience either prenatal or postnatal drug exposure are at risk for a range of emotional, academic, and developmental problems. For example, they are more likely to: experience symptoms of depression and anxiety, suffer from psychiatric disorders, exhibit behavior problems, score lower on school achievement tests, demonstrate other difficulties in school, these children may behave in ways that are challenging for biological or foster parents to manage, which can lead to inconsistent care giving and multiple alternative care

4 Goldman, J., & Salus, M. K. (2003). *A coordinated response to child abuse and neglect: The foundation for practice* [On-line]. Available: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/foundation/index.cfm>;

5 Ibid, Sullivan, S. (2000). *Child neglect: Current definitions and models—A review of child neglect research, 1993– 1998*. Ottawa, Canada: National Clearinghouse on Family Violence; Perry, B. D. (1997). *Incubated in terror: Neuro developmental factors in the 'cycle of violence'* [On-line]. Available: <http://www.childtrauma.org/CTAMATERIALS/incubated.asp>; supra fn1.

placements. Positive social and emotional child development generally has been linked to nurturing family settings in which caregivers are predictable, daily routines are respected, and everyone recognizes clear boundaries for acceptable behaviors.⁶ Such circumstances often are missing in the homes of parents with substance use disorders. As a result, extra supports and interventions are needed to help children draw upon their strengths and maximize their natural potential despite their home environments. Protective factors, such as the involvement of other supportive adults (e.g., extended family members, mentors, clergy, teachers, neighbors), may help mitigate the impact of PSM.⁷

Lack of Supervision

The search for drugs or alcohol, the use of scarce resources to pay for them, the time spent in illegal activities to raise money for them, or the time spent recovering from hangovers or withdrawal symptoms can leave parents with little time or energy to care properly for their children. These children frequently do not have their basic needs met and often do not receive appropriate supervision.

Social Stigma

Adults with substance use disorders may engage in behaviors that embarrass their children and may appear disinterested in their children's activities or school performance. Children may separate themselves from their parents by not wanting to go home after school, by not bringing friends to the house, or by not asking for help with homework. These children may feel a social stigma attached to certain aspects of their parents' lives, such as unemployment, homelessness, an involvement with the criminal justice system, or substance use disorders treatment. Drug abuse by a parent will have a significant and enduring impact on the family dynamics and functioning. Families encounter great stress, conflict and anxiety as a consequence of trying to protect the family member from the dangers and harms associated with drugs, and to limit the damage arising from their behaviour towards the rest of the family. A child's basic needs - diet and nutritional intake, health and schooling -

6 Shonkoff, J., & Phillips, D. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; Kagan, J. (1999). The role of parents in children's psychological development. *Pediatrics*, 104(1), 164-167

7 Ibid.

may become neglected if a parent is more preoccupied with drugs. A child is at risk of emotional and physical neglect as they grow. These children may periodically distance themselves from reality as a coping mechanism for the parent's drug abuse.⁸

These children also risk developing emotional and social problems later in life. A child could be the victim of violence – both physical and mental from a family member who is abusing drugs. A child may lose out on childhood to adopt adult responsibilities having to provide both practical and emotional care for their parents who abuse drugs. This includes protecting their parents from harm. A child may become the “parent” if both parents are abusing drugs and unable to fulfill parenting roles and obligations. Older siblings may be expected to look after their younger brothers and sisters – to ensure they continue to go to school, to keep the home in order. A child may be forced to lie, with family life being kept a secret to protect the parent or sibling who is abusing drugs. A child faces a mix of anger, sadness, anxiety, shame, social isolation and loss as parents, brothers and sisters struggle with drug addiction. A child may have a sense of being impotent to alter the course of the drug problem in the family. A child may develop drug problems as a result of being exposed to drug culture in the family.⁹

Children depend on their family to meet their physical, psychological and social needs and their economic security and well-being. All of these can be jeopardized by parents misusing drugs. For a substantial minority of the affected children, the effect of their parents' substance misuse continues into their adult lives. For some, the impact can be multifaceted and persist not only into adult life but even into the lives of the next generation.

Children who have parents that abuse drugs and alcohol are the victims of a number of negative effects. They experience physical effects such as fetal alcohol syndrome, failure to thrive, intrauterine growth retardation, and contraction of infectious disease, premature birth and various types of abuse. These children can also experience behavioral effects such as behavior disorders, impulsive behaviors, independence, children as the role of caretaker, attention seeking and passive behavior.

8 Drug Abuse and Its impact on Children and young people, UNICEF Malaysia, May 2007.

9 Ibid.

The social effects for children are no primary caregiver and atypical social behaviors.¹⁰ There are also emotional and mental effects on these children which consist of mistrust, guilt, confusion, fear, ambivalence, conflicts with sexuality and shame. The same effects can occur in children who do not have parents who substance abuse. After examining traumatic experiences during childhood, such as having a parent who does drugs or being sexually abused, it is clear that these things can have an apparent and noticeable effect on the child both physically and otherwise.¹¹ It seems as though these traumatic events that can occur during childhood, such as abuse, death of a parent and physical illness, are usually directly correlated with a parent or caregivers substance abuse. Poverty is also a factor in the number of negative experiences a child has to deal with.¹²

How does alcoholism affect the family? Alcoholism affects the entire family. The level of dysfunction or resiliency of the non-alcoholic spouse is a key factor in the effects of problems impacting children. Children raised in alcoholic families have different life experiences than children raised in non-alcoholic families. Children raised in other types of dysfunctional families may have similar developmental losses and stressors as do children raised in alcoholic families. Families with alcoholism have higher levels of conflict than other families. Lack of adequate parenting and poor home management and family communication skills often leave children without effective training and role modeling.¹³ Families with alcoholism often lack structure and discipline for their children; as a result, the children often are expected to take on responsibilities normally assigned to older youth or adults.¹⁴

Why should we be concerned about children of alcoholics? Alcoholism tends to run in families. Children of alcoholics (COAs) are four times more likely than non-COAs to develop alcoholism or drug problems.¹⁵ COAs are at higher risk than others for depression, anxiety

10 Supra fn 7.

11 National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism. *Alcohol and Health: 9th Special Report to the U.S. Congress*. Washington, DC.

12 Children of substance abusers: overview of research findings. *Pediatrics* 103(5) Supplement: 1085-1099

13 National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism. (2000). *Alcohol and Health: 10th Special Report to the U.S. Congress*. Washington, DC, Johnson, J.L. & Leff, M. (1999). Children of substance abusers: overview of research findings. *Pediatrics* 103(5) Supplement: 1085-1099

14 ibid

15 Grant, B.F. (2000). Estimates of U.S. children exposed to alcohol abuse and dependence in the family. *American Journal of Public Health* 90(1): 112-115, C.

disorders, problems with cognitive and verbal skills, and parental abuse or neglect. They are significantly more likely than other children to be abused or neglected by their parents or guardians and are more likely to enter foster care.¹⁶

If not prevented, the difficulties faced by COAs can place increased burdens on state and local Governments. These include increased costs for health care, mental health services, child welfare, education, police and juvenile justice, and lost economic opportunity.

How can we help prevent children of alcoholics from repeating their families' alcohol-related problems? Although they are at increased risk, many COAs do not develop alcohol or drug use disorders or other serious problems in their lives. Often, they appear to be resilient, bolstered by protective factors and the support of caring adults in their lives.¹⁷

COAs can be helped, whether or not the alcohol-abusing family members are receiving help. Prevention programs often help COAs reduce stress; deal with emotional issues; and develop self-esteem, coping skills, and social support.¹⁸ Children who cope effectively with alcoholism in their families often rely on support from a nonalcoholic parent, grandparent, teacher, or other caring adult. Support groups, faith communities, and trained professionals also are available to help.¹⁹

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- 16 Ibid, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism. (2000). *Alcohol and Health: 10th Special Report to the U.S. Congress*. Washington, DC, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism. *Alcohol and Health: 9th Special Report to the U.S. Congress*. Washington, DC, U.S. General Accounting Office. (1998). *Foster Care: Agencies Face Challenges Securing Stable Homes for Children of Substance Abusers*. Washington, D
- 17 National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. (2004). *Criminal Neglect: Substance Abuse, Juvenile Justice and the Children Left Behind*. New York.5. U.S. General Accounting Office. (1998). *Foster Care: Agencies Face Challenges Securing Stable Homes for Children of Substance Abusers*. Washington, DC.6. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism. *Alcohol and Health: 9th Special Report to the U.S. Congress*. Washington, DC. . Emsh off, J.G. & Price, A.W. (1999). Prevention and intervention strategies with children of alcoholics. *Pediatrics* 103(5) Supplement: 1112-1121 Werner, E.E. & Johnson, J.L. (2004). The role of caring adults in the lives of children of alcoholics. *Substance Use and Misuse* 39(5): 699-720. Werner, E.E. & Johnson, J.L. (2000). The role of caring adults in the lives of children of alcoholics. *Children of Alcoholics: Selected Readings, Vo 2.1*
- 18 Nastasi, B.K. & De Zolt, D.M. (1994). *School Interventions for Children of Alcoholics*. New York: Guild Press
- 19 Prevention and intervention strategies with children of alcoholics. *Pediatrics* 103(5) Supplement: 1112-1121, Werner, E.E. & Johnson, J.L. (2004). The role of caring adults in the lives of children of alcoholics. *Substance Use and Misuse* 39(5): 699-720

What can others do to help children of alcoholics avoid alcohol abuse and other serious problems? Simple acts of kindness and compassion can make a difference for COAs. By making yourself available to listen, discuss feelings, share interests, and support their efforts to make friends, you can help COAs cope with their present situations and develop the resilience and skills necessary for their futures.²⁰ Tell them they are not alone, that responsible adults are available to help them, and that millions of others have had similar experiences and have grown up to lead healthy, satisfying lives.²¹ Remind them that their families' problems are not their fault and not their responsibility to solve. Their jobs are to be children and help take good care of themselves; learn the facts about alcohol, tobacco, and drugs; recognize their risks; and learn how to avoid repeating their families' alcohol abuse patterns.²² Encourage them to ask for help. Assure them that getting help is a sign of strength. Offer your own examples and be prepared to help them connect with caring, trustworthy adults and with student assistance programs and other services designed to provide them with further skill building and support.²³

Effects of substance abuse on children in the family

Drug and alcohol abuse is a large problem for adults in our world today. But it is probably an even bigger problem for the children of today who are being raised by alcoholics or drug users. These children have to endure a family life that is often unpredictable and chaotic, which can lead to many problems later in life. To think that these children have their whole future ahead of them should cause much concern about how they are being raised today.²⁴

Family Life

Many parents that abuse drugs or alcohol will treat their families differently on different days, depending on their level of sobriety at the

20 Werner, E.E. & Johnson, J.L. (2000). The role of caring adults in the lives of children of alcoholics. *Children of Alcoholics: Selected Readings, Vol. 2*

21 Dies, R.R. & Burghardt, K. (1991). Group interventions for children of alcoholics: prevention and treatment in the schools. *Journal of Adolescent Group Therapy* 1(3): 219-234

22 Nastasi, B.K. & De Zolt, D.M. (1994). *School Interventions for Children of Alcoholics*. New York: Guild Press.

23 Nastasi, B.K. & De Zolt, D.M. (1994). *School Interventions for Children of Alcoholics*. New York: Guild Press.

24 <http://www.treatmentsolutions.com/effects-of-substance-abuse-on-children-in-the-family/>

time. Often the mood swings and changes in parenting that these parents exhibit will confuse the child or make them insecure. Inconsistent care by a parent can lead to a child that either has to grow up quickly and assume adult responsibilities, or one that rebels and gives up trying to do well in school or life. Children in these homes need to constantly be prepared for a parent that is high or drunk, one that is irrational and unable to provide the care that a child needs.²⁵

Families that suffer with substance abuse are more at risk for domestic violence, mental illness, divorce, and sexual and physical abuse than other families. These issues are very detrimental and can lead to children with depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. Children in these situations may be withdrawn and have trouble bonding with others. Often they feel that the problems of the family are their fault or that it is their job to conceal the problem, and this can lead to low self-esteem, lack of desire to perform well in school, or fear of failure. It would be difficult for these children to make friends because of the fear that someone in the outside world will find out about their secret, or will witness the chaos firsthand.

If a child is living with an alcoholic or drug user, the child is likely to develop a warped sense of normal when it comes to using these substances. They may know that their parent drinks too much, or does drugs, but over time, the child may not know what other families are like, or how many drinks a regular person is expected to have in a day. Children of alcoholics are 4 times more likely to become alcoholics themselves, which leads these families into a cycle that is hard to break. Fathers drink to deal with stress in their life, and when their children get older, they have learned that the way to handle stress is to drink.

The good news is that children of alcoholics and drug abusers often develop an inner strength that helps them get through the tough times at home. With much love and encouragement from a sober parent, another relative, or even a social worker or teacher, these children can go on to live happy, successful lives. And of course, the best scenario is if the addict in the family receives treatment and overcomes the problem, and then the child can continue their life and work on a brighter future.

25 *Supra* fn 17.

Children who grow up in alcoholic homes can be deeply affected by the experience and the effects can last well beyond their childhood years. It can affect how they see themselves and how they view the world itself.

Dr. Janet listed several common characteristics shared by many children who grew up with an alcoholic parent. One of those characteristics is the feeling of having to guess what normal is, due to the fact that they never experienced a "normal" family life.²⁶

Some responses to the question, "How Do You Feel Growing up with an Alcoholic Parent Has Changed You?" were²⁷:

Didn't Learn' Correct Behavior'- I do feel I never learned 'correct' behaviors or reactions to situations, am very scared of angry people, authority or any kind of conflict, am easy for bullies to walk all over as I seem to exude a scent of 'weak' and 'victim' that they can smell a mile off. –JoJo

Never Feel Normal - I grew up not trusting my father of 25 years for the first 15 years. I had very major issues with that, and I still struggle with being accepted. I never feel normal. I always feel like all of my security will vanish at any moment. That is what it feels like to grow up with a really hardcore alcoholic. – Kathy

Having to Watch Others- No family is perfect but abusive families are soul destroying. Having to watch others to learn the right way to behave, sometimes you don't know good role models from bad. Dealing with mental health issues and the shame that comes with that. Can you ever overcome the feeling that you are not good enough, the feeling down deep inside that hurts. Does it ever go away? -- Sandie

Very, Very Withdrawn - I think because in school I was very, very withdrawn to the point of not talking in class. I think this being a very deep fear of not being normal and everyone finding this out or

26 Dr. Janet G. Woititz, "Adult Children of Alcoholics,"

27 Janet G. Woititz, "The 13 Characteristics of Adult Children," The Awareness Center. Accessed November 2010. Adult Children of Alcoholics World Service Organization, "The Laundry List – 14 Traits of an Adult Child of an Alcoholic," (Attributed to Tony A., 1978). Accessed November 2010.

worse finding out my secret. I also relate to the feeling of still being a child maybe because at times I couldn't be a child. -- Invisible

Can't Express True Feelings - I realize that I still carry that burden of not being able to express my true inner feelings. I hate to cry in front of people, like it's some kind of weakness. -- E.W.M.

Years to Begin to Know Normal- It took years of counseling for me, when I had two children, to begin to know normal. I am glad to know that it has certainly helped me to be more compassionate and understanding towards people. It has been a long and arduous journey. -- Better Now

Don't Feel Like an Adult - I never feel like I can do anything right, so I don't try. Relationships, forget it, and I am struggling as a parent. I always guess what normal is. I don't feel like an adult. – Kitten

Never Feel Comfortable - I have a hard time getting close to people and I never want a family. I am uncomfortable around families because I'm not sure what to feel or what to do. Put me in the middle of a dogfight and I might feel more at home. –Saully

All these experiences go to show that Families Are Affected. If parents are heavy drinkers and they have children, they may want to rethink how their drinking may be affecting others and try to find help to quit or cut back on the amount of alcohol that you consume. The World Health Organization defines harmful drinking as drinking to the point of causing damage to your health and hazardous drinking as a pattern of alcohol use that increases the risk of harmful occurrences.

If parents drink excessively, they are doing a grave disservice to their child. If they neglect or abuse their child because of an alcohol problem, their child is more likely to start drinking, too. This typically leads to falling grades, skipping school and general delinquent behavior. As an adult, their child is more likely to drink to excess, abusing her children as well. Therefore, Parental Substance abuse leads to child abuse. Parents can help the situation by going for RE-habilitation and DE-addiction treatment.²⁸

²⁸ “Child Maltreatment and Alcohol”, WHO 2006 Report.

Strong links between child abuse and harmful alcohol consumption offer further opportunities to reduce abuse through lowering levels of drinking in the population. Both the harmful and hazardous use of alcohol and child maltreatment has been recognized internationally as key public health issues requiring urgent attention. At both national and international levels, health organizations have a key role in advocating for policies that address the relationships between alcohol use and child maltreatment and in doing so promote prevention initiatives that will improve public health. The World Health Organization (WHO) runs comprehensive programmes on both issues to instigate and conduct research, identify effective prevention measures, and promote action by Member States to implement successful interventions and align policy towards reducing hazardous and harmful drinking and child abuse.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid.