

Parental Substance Misuse

Overview Description

Parental substance misuse is associated with a range of psychological, emotional, behavioural, social, academic and physical challenges among children and young people and can have a negative life trajectory. Furthermore, the prevalence of adverse outcomes in children whose parents are nondependent substance misusers highlights the need for relevant practitioners to intervene with this population before a parent has developed substance dependency.

By implication, it is useful to recognise the importance of holistic and eco-systemic approaches to supporting parents and families, in order to enhance the possibility of children and young people experiencing healthy, happy, safe, productive and empowered lives.

The imperative of Focus

In early life, children of substance-abusing parents (CSAP) are at increased risk for developing anxiety problems, hyperactivity, aggressive behaviour, reduced intellectual abilities and educational attainment. As adolescents, CSAP are more prone to develop mental health challenges compared to their peers without substance-abusing parents.

Despite these increased developmental risks, not all children with a substance-abusing parents or carers experience developmental problems or other negative outcomes.

As described by Hosman, van Doesum, and van Santvoort (2009), the intergenerational impact of CSAP depends on a complex interplay between risk and protective factors in the child's environment, the parent's environment, the social environment, and the wider community.

For the development of effective preventive interventions, it is important to learn more about which CSAP are most at risk for developing negative outcomes and how to support these children at an early stage.

Protective factors

Risk Factors

What constitutes parental substance misuse?

Parental substance misuse is the long-term misuse of drugs and/or alcohol by a parent or carer.

Are dependent on alcohol (with a crave and continued drinking in spite of the harmful consequences, including increased criminal activity, domestic abuse and an increased rate of significant mental and physical health problems) (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2011).

Use drugs regularly and excessively (leading to social, mental, psychological physical illness and legal problems.)

This includes parents and carers who:

Are dependent on drugs.

Consume excessive and harmful amounts of alcohol (for example, leading to alcohol-related health problems, physical illness, depression or accidents).

Practitioners working with children and families where substance misuse may be a factor, consideration must be given to parenting capacity (at that time) in order to inform psychoeducational approaches and interventions.

Based on recent government framework document, parenting capacity is defined as:



"The ability of parents or caregivers to ensure that the child's developmental needs are being appropriately and adequately responded to, and to [be able to] adapt to [the child's] changing needs over time". This includes providing for the child's basic physical needs, ensuring their safety, "ensuring the child's emotional needs are met and giving the child a sense of being specially valued", promoting the child's intellectual development through encouragement and stimulation,

demonstrating and modelling appropriate behaviour and control of emotions, and providing a sufficiently stable family environment."

Parents and carers who misuse substances can have chaotic, unpredictable lifestyles and may struggle to recognise and meet their children's needs. This may result in their children being at risk of harm.

Drug misuse is reported to be more prevalent in socially deprived areas (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2012).

Impact of parental substance misuse on parenting:

Early signs of problematic behaviour in CSAP can be easily missed when parents are unaware of the symptoms and risks of developmental problems in their children.

Parental sensitivity and monitoring are negatively affected, resulting in less reliable or late problem recognition.

Adversely affected ability to attend to the emotional, physical and developmental needs of their children in both the short and long term;

Societal stigmatization can be a hampering factor for these parents, in relation to reluctance to seeking help and being open with professionals about their personal and family matters.

Fear that openness might lead to negative consequences, such as losing custody of their children.

Absent fathers and the lack of suitable male role models.

Unemployment, poverty and / or depression.

Specific impact of parental substance misuse on CYP

Abuse and neglect

It is important to point out that living in a household where a parent or carer misuses substances does not automatically mean a child will experience abuse, but it does make it more difficult for parents to provide safe and loving care and this can lead to abuse and / or neglect.

Parents who misuse substances may have difficulty:

- Staying organized and giving their children effective and consistent support;
- Keeping their home and family clean;
- Recognizing and responding appropriately to their own and their children's physical needs
- Paying for food, clothing and essential bills (for example if their income is being spent on drugs and alcohol)
- Keeping harmful substances and equipment such as needles and syringes safely away from their children.

- Some parents who use drugs or drink excessively may lose consciousness, leaving no other responsible adult present to care for their child and ensure their safety.

Emotional abuse

Parents who drink excessively or misuse drugs can become emotionally unavailable to their children. Mothers with drug problems can be:

- Less responsive to their babies
- Less willing to engage in meaningful play
- Less able to respond in ways which encourage further interaction.
- Behave in ways that are irrational, unpredictable or withdrawn, which may frighten their children.

Physical abuse

Parents who misuse substances may have difficulty controlling their own emotions, which can contribute to child physical abuse.

Impact on brain development

Abuse and neglect are types of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which can affect the healthy development of children's brains. The impacts of abuse and neglect on children's brains can extend beyond childhood and into adulthood. Possible impacts include:

- Impaired cognitive development, for example, difficulties with concentration and learning.
- Inhibited executive functions, such as reduced impulse control, memory, and weak problem solving skills.
- Weakened immune system, frequently becoming ill.

Criminal activity

Parents and carers who misuse drugs or alcohol may turn to crime to fund their dependency. This may mean exposing their children to unsafe adults or involving them in criminal activity, which may set into motion a negative life trajectory.

Other effects

The impact of parental substance abuse varies according to each child's health, stage of development, personality and relationship with their family.

Children may be separated from their parents and/or family for short- or long periods of time due to:

- Intervention from children's services (being taken into care)
- Parents being put in prison
- Parents being hospitalized.

Children and young people may have to take on the role of carer for their family. This could include doing the housework, preparing meals and looking after younger siblings which may then affect their sleep, energy levels, school work, and social life / friendships.

Psychological effects

The following accounts from ChildLine illustrate the psychological effects of parental substance misuse:

"My mum is up and down – sometimes she's fine and sober – but it can quickly change and she becomes worse again...[she] gets abusive when she's drunk and gets angry at me and my sisters. I don't like being at home." (Girl, 15)

"My parents are caught up in drink and drugs. It's pretty bad at home and they've been violent towards me for years. I really want to leave. I'm scared of telling anyone about what's happening because I don't want them to go to prison and I don't want to go into care, I just want to get out of this situation." (Boy, 16)

It is recognised that children and young people often know more about their parents' substance misuse than parents realise. They frequently feel the stigma and shame of this misuse, and as stated above, they also fear the possibility of being taken into care.

Other psychological effects include:

- A preoccupation with their parents' substance misuse;
- Blaming themselves for their parents' behavior;

- Difficulty establishing and maintaining healthy relationships;
- Difficulty with respecting and / or engaging with authority figures;
- Difficulty talking with their parents about how things are affecting them.
- Self-harm.
- Suicidal thoughts and feelings;
- Reluctant to share their concerns due to worry about themselves or siblings being taken into care or that the parents' problems may get worse if the family is separated.

Risk and vulnerability factors

All families experience challenges from time to time. This doesn't necessarily mean children are at greater risk of abuse. But when problems mount up, it can be more difficult for parents to cope – particularly if they are isolated or lack support.

Children who live in families experiencing multiple adversities can be more vulnerable. These include children whose parents:

- are involved in domestic abuse
- misuse substances
- have mental health problems
- have learning difficulties.

RESPONSES REQUIRED

As educators, school counsellors, office and ancillary staff, it is importance to notice, follow through, verify and support children and young people who show signs of adverse childhood experiences, within the context of unconditional positive regard.

Reporting

Ensure that all staff are trained to spot the signs of abuse in all its forms;

Follow the schools/ setting's Child Protection Procedures.

Ensure that staff are aware of the safeguarding policies and procedures and have the confidence to immediately report their observations and concerns to the relevant person(s).

Contact the Police if indicated.

Contact the NSPCC Helpline

Contact MCC's Child Protection Services

Assessment

It is essential that practitioners work collaboratively with children and families to identify and assess concerns and intervene appropriately so that the impact of parental substance misuse is minimized.

This assessment involves undertaking a holistic assessment of the child's development, the parents' ability to meet the child's needs and the impact of broader family and environmental factors.

Of equal importance is the need to identify each family's strengths; and to distinguish between immediate concerns for the child's safety and risks which can be mitigated with appropriate support.

Provide easily accessible parenting support and empowerment of substance-abusing parents in their parenting role in order to increase early detection of and intervention in developmental problems in CSAP.

The goals of effective assessment:

- Focus on the child and their needs;
- Give children and young people the opportunity to talk about their experiences;
- Listen to and record the child's views on the situation;
- Identify those young persons who are acting as carers for their parents and siblings;
- Treat children, parents and carers as individuals;
- Ensure that parents know they are being listened to;
- Ask parents questions about how their use of drug or alcohol helps and / or interferes with their functioning and parenting;
- Consider the wider environment such as support networks, housing and family finances;
- Where possible, gather the views of any extended family members or friends who offer support to the family;
- Collaborate with and seek the views of colleagues from other agencies who are involved with the family, such as health professionals, teachers, substance misuse services and criminal justice agencies.

Protective factors

Factors which help reduce the impact of parental substance misuse on children include:

- The young person being able to ask for help
- Parents' willingness to acknowledge their difficulties and to seek help and support
- The parent and child having a positive relationship

- The parent and young person having good general physical and mental health
- The availability of social support to the family (for example relatives or friends who can provide care and stability, offer financial support and a clean and safe home environment);
- Having one parent who does not misuse substances.
- Being able to maintain daily routines.

Giving children and young people a voice

Children and young people's perspective should always be prioritized. As educators, it is vital to build safe and trusting relationships with children so they can speak out about any problems they may be experiencing. Crucially, this involves teaching children what neglect means and how they can get help. Such conversations need to be developmentally age appropriate so that children understand abuse in all its forms and know how to protect themselves.

Supporting children and young people and families

The literature indicates that successful interventions to support families affected by parental substance misuse should use a holistic approach to look at and improve a family's:

- Day-to-day functioning
- Psychological functioning
- Parent-child relationships
- Social factors (such as the family's network, housing and financial situation).

Being mindful that change in thinking and behaviour takes time, time-frames for interventions need to be flexible; reflecting a balance between long-term support and more focused time-limited services.

Short-term support

Immediate support for families where there is parental substance misuse involves setting pragmatic, realistic and timely goals which focus on solutions rather than problems. Consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, practitioners need to ensure that:

Younger children are taken to nursery/school

Older children are not missing school/college

All children receive the appropriate support with their school work

Children receive regular and nutritious meals

Children are taken to all necessary medical appointments/check-ups (including dental appointments).

In the short-term practitioners need to focus on building a good working relationship with parents rather than putting them under pressure to change entrenched, problematic behaviours immediately. Nevertheless, it is important to make sure that parents are addressing their substance misuse and are engaged with a drug or alcohol service.

Medium- to long-term support

In the medium-to-long-term the family may need intensive support and therapy focusing on recognising and changing unhelpful, repetitive patterns of behaviour.

Children should be given opportunities to express their ideas and feelings. They also need help to understand more about their parent's substance misuse. They need to know that it is not their fault and that they cannot control or stop their parent's substance misuse.

It is important for practitioners working with families to receive reflective and challenging supervision so they can maintain an unbiased viewpoint throughout their journey with the family. It is also essential to work with colleagues in other agencies to gain different perspectives on the situation.

An interesting perspective is that a reduction in parents' misuse of substances does not always automatically result in improved parenting as they may need support to learn parenting skills and how to cope with their own challenges and that of the family.

Friends and family support

Models of change process acknowledge that there will be times of regression to unhelpful behaviours. It is therefore important for members of the family support network to be able to step in and help where possible, during moments of setback.

Again, as part of the holistic intervention, educating extended family members, friends and communities on the impact of substance misuse on children and families can enable them to provide more effective support when required.

Monitoring progress

Practitioners (educators, social workers, etc.) must maintain a focus on the wellbeing of the children and young people. Given that psychosocial problems in CSAP can evolve during their life course, it is important to monitor and review children's progress during the period of intervention and respond appropriately to their mental health status on multiple occasions.

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Tips!

For Early
Years

Parental substance misuse can impact the cognitive, social and emotional development of babies and young children; the effects of this may also influence a child's attachment/ability to bond with their parent or others.

The Anna Freud, Early Years in Mind website provides information and support for early year's staff working with families experiencing substance misuse.

<https://www.annafreud.org/early-years/early-years-in-mind/working-with-families-facing-challenges/families-experiencing-substance-dependency/>



Post-16

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Tips!

All teenagers and adolescents will start to explore more risky behaviour such as alcohol or drugs. However, young people with parents who misuse use substances can be more likely to use substances at an earlier age and it can progress more quickly to a problematic level of consumption.

Young people may also have additional care responsibilities such as cleaning and tidying the house or looking after younger siblings. This may create barriers in being able to complete coursework or revise for exams.

Bancroft et al. (2004) suggests that young people (aged 15 – 27 years old) of parents who misuse use substances can also experience higher levels of anxiety and are more at risk of low mood or depression. This research highlighted how important relationships within their education or workplace settings were and that these relationships were highly valued by young people. Additionally, young people needed to feel a sense of control over their lives and know that they could manage independently: this provided a sense of pride for young people.

The Anna Freud Centre have produced a helpful resource that focuses on young people being taught healthy coping strategies including a grounding and breathing exercise as well as a CBT-style reframing activity. This can be found here:

<https://mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/resources/healthy-coping-strategies-video-for-young-people/>

USEFUL RESOURCES

Organisation specifically providing advice and support for around drug and alcohol misuse. <https://adfam.org.uk/for-professionals/>

<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/risks-and-protective-factors/home-based-risk-factors/parental-substance-misuse/>

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/children-and-families-at-risk/parental-substance-misuse>

Early Intervention Foundation (29.06.2018): <https://www.eif.org.uk/blog/parental-substance-misuse-does-enormous-harm-to-children-but-we-know-dangerously-little-about-how-best-to-help>

Really helpful printable PDF leaflet/information guide for schools.
<https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/24072/1/Identifying-Children-affected-by-parental.pdf>

Download Children living in families facing adversity (PDF).

USEFUL REFERENCES

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Greater Manchester Safeguarding Guidelines

<https://greatermanchesterscp.trixonline.co.uk/chapter/children-of-alcohol-and-substance-misusing-parents-and-carers>