

Drug and Alcohol Misuse in Families Hurts Children Tool

Parents who misuse drugs or alcohol risk neglecting or causing serious harm to their children. This harm may be mainly emotional or psychological but occasionally can be physical.

This is because the misuse of drugs can affect the way people parent and care for their children. Young children need their parents to be available to meet their various needs. Parents who use drugs are often not able to provide this nurturing and care.

Studies show that more than a third of children with a parent who misuses drugs suffer some form of child abuse or neglect.

This is not because parents addicted to drugs do not love their children, but because of the overwhelming effect of the drug on the parent. The need for the drug often takes priority over everything else.

Not all parents who use drugs abuse or harm their children, however, persistent drug misuse by a parent does have detrimental effects on the wellbeing of their children.

All children need carers who are predictable in their responses to them so

that a sense of safety and trust can be established. This is a very important foundation for children to be able to form healthy relationships as adults.

The formation of a person's identity and self-esteem is affected very strongly by experiences that occur in the earliest years of life. If these experiences are negative as a result of a drug-using parent, then the effects can be long lasting.

Effects of Drug Misuse in Pregnancy

- Increased complications of pregnancy for both mother and child
- Increased risk of early delivery of baby and all the problems resulting from this
- Smaller babies and poorer growth of babies in their first year of life.

Effects of Parental Drug Use on Children

If a parent is consistently unable to meet the emotional needs of a child then the following effects may occur in the child:

- Failure to thrive in an infant or young child
- Behavioural difficulties
- Difficulties with school work
- Anxiety or psychological distress
- Mental illness/suicide in teenage and adult years

- Increased risk of drug misuse in teenage and adult years

Some signals of children's distress can be:

- Attendance, concentration and behaviour problems at school
- Being stressed and tired
- Wanting to be left alone
- Being embarrassed by the behaviour of their parents
- Not wanting to go home
- General appearance of neglect
- Lack of trust in adults as their parents behaviour can be unpredictable
- Feeling or taking responsibility for family problems

Supporting a parent with a problem:

Getting help to overcome parent drug and alcohol misuse is the best thing that can happen for children.

There are many things that an adult concerned about the wellbeing of children can do to help families with a problem, some of these are:

- Encourage the parent to seek treatment for their addiction. Remember it is only the person with the problem who can decide to change it. It can be a long and difficult process. Relapses are common. It is

important not to be disheartened. Even if previous attempts have failed, it is still possible to succeed.

- For parents with a narcotics problem, simply stabilising their lifestyle with methadone can make a big change for their children
- Discuss concerns with a counsellor
- Be honest, consistent, trustworthy and available for the children to talk to
- Encourage the family members to seek assistance
- Remind the families that sharing simple, relaxing and pleasant family time is important for children and young people's development
- Offer supportive childcare when children or parents need a break

Concerned adults can also help children cope by:

- Explaining that they can ask for help
- Encouraging them to set goals for things they want for themselves
- Helping them to write a diary or draw about how they feel
- Helping the child to identify and learn to use a network of adults they can feel safe with. These should be people that the child can ring or contact for help when they find themselves unsupported, afraid or alone

- Learning strategies to keep themselves safe, including emergency medical contact numbers to use in the event of an overdose
- Ensuring that there is a good reliable person available at short notice to care for the children if their parent is unwell or "out of it"
- Helping to ensure that dangerous substances and equipment are safely out of a child's reach

Alcohol & Drug Information Service:
Free Call 1800 422 599
KIDS HELP LINE 1800 55 1800