

The Relationship Between Parental Alcohol or Other Drug Problems and Child Maltreatment

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

The relationship between parental alcohol or other drug problems and child maltreatment is becoming increasingly evident. The risk to the child increases in a single parent household where there is no supporting adult to diffuse parental stress and protect the child from the effects of the parent's problem. The following is a summary of what is known by the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse.

What Is The Scope Of The Problem?

Both alcohol and drug problems are widespread in this country. Almost 14 million adult Americans abuse alcohol. The number of illicit drug users exceeds 12 million. Illicit drugs include marijuana, cocaine, inhalants, hallucinogens, heroin, and the non-medical use of psychotherapeutics. With more than 6.6 million children under the age of 18 living in alcoholic households, and an additional number of children living in households where parents have problems with illicit drugs, a significant number of children in this country are being raised by addicted parents.

Child maltreatment has become a national epidemic. More than one million children are confirmed as victims of child abuse and neglect by state child protective service agencies each year. Every day at least three children die as a result of abuse and neglect. State child welfare records indicate that substance abuse is one of the top two problems exhibited by families in 81% of the reported cases.

Do Parental Alcohol Or Other Drug Problems Cause Child Maltreatment?

Recent research on the connection between these problems and child maltreatment clearly indicates a connection between the two behaviors. Among confirmed cases of child maltreatment, 40% involve the use of alcohol or other drugs. This suggests that of the 1.2 million confirmed victims of child maltreatment, an estimated 480,000 children are mistreated each year by a caretaker with alcohol or other drug problems. Additionally, research suggests that alcohol and other drug problems are factors in a majority of cases of emotional abuse and neglect. Neglect is the major reason for the removal of children from a home in which parents have alcohol or other drug problems. Children in these homes

suffer from a variety of physical, mental, and emotional health problems at a greater rate than children in the general population. Children of alcoholics sustain more injuries and poisonings than children in the general population. Alcohol and other substances may act as disinhibitors, lessening impulse control and allowing parents to behave abusively. Children in this environment often demonstrate behavioral problems and are diagnosed as having conduct disorders. This may result in provocative behavior. Increased stress resulting from preoccupation with drugs on the part of the parent combined with behavioral problems exhibited by the child adds to the likelihood of maltreatment.

What Characteristics Are Common To Parents With Alcohol Or Other Drug Problems And Parents Involved In Child Maltreatment?

Histories of these parents reveal that typically both were reared with a lack of parental nurturing and appropriate modeling and often grew up in disruptive homes. Family life in these households also has similarities. The children often lack guidance, positive role modeling, and live in isolation. They may be depressed, anxious, and have low self-esteem. They live in an atmosphere of stress and family conflict. Children raised in both households are more likely to have problems with alcohol and other drugs.

Does The Use Of Alcohol Or Other Drugs By Pregnant Women Affect Their Infants?

Pregnant women who use alcohol can give birth to children with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). FAS is the leading known environmental cause of mental retardation in the western world. Each year 4,000 to 12,000 babies are born with the physical signs and intellectual disabilities associated with FAS, and thousands more experience the lesser disabilities of fetal alcohol effects.



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How Does a Parent's Alcohol Or Other Drug Problem Affect Children?

Children of alcoholics are more likely than children in the general population to manifest a variety of physical, mental, and emotional problems. Similar to maltreatment victims, who believe that the abuse is their fault, children of alcoholics feel guilty and responsible for their parents' drinking problem. Both groups of children often have feelings of low self-esteem and failure, and show signs of depression and anxiety. It is thought that exposure to violence in both alcohol abusing and child maltreating households increases the likelihood that the children will commit and be recipients of acts of violence. Additionally, the effects of child maltreatment and parental alcohol abuse do not end when the children reach adulthood. Both groups of children are likely to have difficulty with coping and establishing healthy relationships as adults. In addition to suffering from all the effects of living in a household where alcohol or child maltreatment problems exist, children whose parents abuse illicit drugs live with the knowledge that these actions are illegal. While research is in its infancy, clinical evidence shows that children of parents who have problems with illicit drug use may be unable to trust legitimate authority due to the fear of discovery of the parent's illegal habits.

Are These Patterns Passed On From One Generation To The Next?

Some individuals can and do break the cycle of abuse. These resilient children share some characteristics that lead to their successful coping skills, such as the ability to obtain positive attention from other people, adequate communication skills, average intelligence, a caring attitude, a desire to achieve, and a belief in self-help. Additionally, the involvement of a caring adult can help a child develop resiliency and break the cycle of abuse. However, a significant number of individuals fall victim to the same patterns exhibited by their parents. Those who have been severely physically abused often have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociation. Individuals with mental health disorders may use alcohol and illicit drugs to decrease or mitigate their psychological distress. Research suggests that adults who were abused as children may be more likely to abuse their own children than adults who were not abused as children.

Why Are These Patterns So Hard To Break?

One explanation for the continuing cycle is the secrecy, denial, and stigma involved in both problems. Many child maltreatment cases do not get reported and many children of alcoholics go unidentified. Within both populations, victims often are afraid to speak up because they do not think anyone will believe them. Often the children do not realize that what seems to be normal behavior is indeed maltreatment, and they learn to repeat these behaviors unconsciously. The lack of positive, parental role modeling and poor coping skills increases the difficulty of establishing healthy

adult relationships. It may not be until they seek help as disturbed adults that they are made cognizant of the root of their emotional problems.

Can We Treat Child Maltreatment When Alcohol Or Other Drugs Are A Problem?

Research has shown that when families exhibit both of these behaviors, the problems must be treated simultaneously in order to insure a child's safety. Although ending the drug dependency does not automatically end child maltreatment, very little can be done to improve parenting skills until this step is taken. It should be noted that the withdrawal experience by parents who cease using alcohol or other drugs presents specific risks. The effects of withdrawal often cause a parent to experience intense emotions, which may increase the likelihood of child maltreatment. During this time, lasting as long as two years, it is especially important that resources be available to the family.

How Can We Prevent These Problems?

Aside from promoting awareness of the link between parental alcohol or other drug problems and child abuse, and cross-training professionals in the recognition and treatment of both problems, prevention services need to be available for all. Among the preventive efforts believed to be the most effective are:

- ◆ prevention education for all children, adolescents and young adults;
- ◆ direct access to supportive services for all children of parents with alcohol or other drug problems before child maltreatment occurs. Validation of feelings, supporting self-esteem, intensive parenting and prevention education, and support for all new parents should be emphasized;
- ◆ access to self-help groups and other supportive services for all parents under stress and all victims and survivors of abuse;
- ◆ education regarding the interplay between a parent's alcohol or other drug problems and child maltreatment for all people who work with children and families including: teachers, service providers, obstetricians, pediatricians, and emergency room personnel.

Information provided by:

National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse (312) 663-3520
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