

Pupils with parents affected by substance misuse

"I need school to understand how hard it is and why our homework is late and why we are tired after mum has been on a bender."

Who is this chapter for?

- All staff
- School lead or staff interested in becoming/establishing a school lead within your school
- Safeguarding officer

This chapter will support schools to:

- inform all staff about the specific impacts and needs of young carers affected by substance misuse.
- enable pupils to get support and understanding at school.
- inform staff about when and how to involve other support agencies and professionals.

Synopsis

Children and young people who care for a parent affected by substance misuse may undertake physical tasks, such as domestic chores, dealing with bills, or nursing a parent suffering from drug or alcohol withdrawal, but it is often emotional support that is prevalent in their caring role.

Due to stigma, fear of intervention from services and not wanting to 'betray' a parent, young carers of a parent affected by substance misuse can be even more reluctant tell anyone about their family situation than those looking after someone with a physical disability.

In addition to the common impacts experienced by young carers, these children may experience additional, specific impacts such as further emotional impacts and safety issues.

The statistics

- There are between 250,000 and 350,000 children of problem drug users in the UK today. That's about one for every drug user.¹
- Between 780,000 and 1.3 million children in England are affected by parental alcohol problems.²
- There are 2.6 million children living with a hazardous drinker.³
- In Britain, 335,000 children live with a drug-dependant parent.⁴



How does parental substance misuse affect young carers?

Not all young people who live in families where there is drug or alcohol misuse have a caring role or experience difficulties at home. The focus of this chapter is on parental substance misuse, but it is worth noting that there are also cases where a young person is helping to care for a sibling affected by substance misuse.

Both research and practice have shown that children of parents who have a substance or alcohol misuse problem can experience very chaotic lives which lack routine. When in school, they may be worried about the safety of their parent and fear what or who they will find on returning home. They may miss school and social activities to keep an eye on their parent and have few friends as a result. They can be angry, confused, ashamed or even feel guilty. They can feel like their parent loves drugs and/or drink more than them. They may be embarrassed about the state of their home (often taking on more domestic tasks) and feel unable to invite friends home. They can be teased or bullied because of a family member's dependency on drugs or alcohol and may feel very isolated. They may also have to deal with the aftermath of alcohol and substance misuse. Much of these can contribute to behavioural problems so that they are withdrawn and secretive about what is happening around them.

Additionally, parents affected by substance misuse may experience impaired patterns of parental care. This in turn may lead to a higher risk of:

- physical neglect or abuse.
- threat of domestic abuse.
- poor or limited diet.
- missed health appointments, such as the dentist or vaccinations.

Like many young carers, this group of young carers may experience bullying, stigma and isolation and display behavioural difficulties. In addition, where children are caring for a relative with drug or alcohol problems, the incidence of missed school and educational difficulties is much more marked with 34% missing school and 40% in total missing school or having other indicators of educational difficulties.⁵

Parents may worry about discrimination and the impact their drug or alcohol dependency may have on their child. Issues surrounding their child's schooling, such as problems with behaviour or attendance problems, can cause further stress.

Like many young carers, these children need someone to talk to and for their needs to be understood. They need to understand that they are not responsible for their parents' choices and that it is not their fault. Early intervention is key to supporting pupils with parents affected by substance misuse.

What do young carers affected by parental substance misuse want?

- More understanding from school.
- More people to talk to who can deal with situations.
- Extra support with school work.
- School to raise awareness of the dangers of drugs within the curriculum.



- To know other children and young people who are affected by parental substance misuse.
- School nurses to check they are ok, undertake home visits and meet the family.
- To be taught more life skills.

Safeguarding children affected by substance misuse

“Drug use by parents does not automatically indicate child neglect or abuse. A social worker has to establish in what ways, if any, drug use is putting children at risk and what the role drug use has in the life of the family.”⁶

However, children and young people are sometimes exposed to circumstances which compromise their safety; they may witness or experience violence, be exposed to drugs and drug equipment or to other adults visiting the home. They can be at a high risk of experimentation with drugs or alcohol.

What can your school do?

Hidden Harm, a report which sets out the findings of an inquiry carried out by the Advisory Council, focusing on children in the UK with a parent, parents or other guardian whose drug use has serious negative consequences for themselves and those around them, makes the following recommendations⁷:

- All schools should identify at least one trained designated person able to deal with the problems that might arise with the children of problem drug and alcohol users.
- Ensure constant vigilance of known vulnerable young people and provision of additional pastoral support.
- Provide pupils with information if they do not want to talk to a teacher.
- Know how to access sources of support for the child and family and when to involve other agencies.
- Encourage and support participation in supervised extra-curricular activities.
- All education services and schools should have critical incident plans and clear arrangements for liaison with their local social services team and local area child protection committee when concerns arise about the impact on a child of parental problem drug or alcohol use.
- General teacher training and continuous professional development should include a broad understanding of the impact of parental problem drug or alcohol misuse on children.

If you are concerned about the well-being of a child the school child protection procedures should be followed. Chapter 25 ‘Safeguarding’.



Dual diagnosis

Some parents can have both mental health ill-health and substance misuse issues. It is, therefore, important to maintain effective links between all agencies involved to provide extra support should they need it.

In families affected either by mental ill-health or substance misuse, it is important to listen to the child and monitor how this impacts on their well-being and development. Please refer to Chapter 20 'Pupils with parents with mental health'.

Other chapters to help you understand this topic

- 4** Barriers to learning faced by young carers
- 20** Pupils with parents with mental ill-health
- 24** Assessment and monitoring
- 25** Safeguarding

Key resources

→ ADFAM

National organisation working with and for families affected by drugs and alcohol. Provides training for people working with substance users.

www.adfam.org.uk

→ Frank

A national website and helpline providing drug information.

www.talktofrank.com

→ Mental health and substance misuse: A practical guide for professionals and practitioners

Toolkit produced by Rethink.

www.turning-point.co.uk/inthenews/Documents/Dualdiagnostoolkit.pdf

→ NACOA The National Association for Children of Alcoholics

Provides information, advice and support to children of alcoholics and people concerned with their welfare (including education professionals).

www.nacoa.co.uk

→ Supporting pupils with substance misusing parents: Information for teachers and school staff.

Booklet produced by The Children's Society to raise awareness of some of the issues experienced by children and young people, due to their parents' problematic substance misuse.

www.youngcarer.com/pdfs/NatDrugsLftt2nd.pdf

→ The Children's Society STARS Project.

A website for anyone working with, children, young people and families affected by parental drug and alcohol misuse.

www.starsnationalinitiative.org.uk



¹*Hidden Harm: Responding to the needs of children of problem drug users Executive.* (2003). Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. Home Office.

²*Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England.* (March 2004). Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.

³*New estimates of the number of children living with substance misusing parents: Results from UK national household surveys.* (2009). BMC Public Health 2009, 9:377: www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/9/377/

⁴*New estimates of the number of children living with substance misusing parents: Results from UK national household surveys.* (2009). BMC Public Health 2009, 9:377: www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/9/377/

⁵Dearden C. & Becker S. (2004). *Young Carers in the UK: the 2004 report.* Carers UK and The Children's Society

⁶Mounteney, J. & Shapiro, H. (1997) *Drugs, Children & Families – a guide for professionals.* Venture Press, Birmingham

⁷Hidden Harm. *Responding to the needs of children of problem drug users.* (2003). The report of an Inquiry by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs: <http://drugs.homeoffice.gov.uk/publication-search/acmd/hidden-harm.html>