

SAFEGUARDING BRIEFING

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The Impact of Parental Substance Use

- Many children grow up with a parent who has a substance use disorder. Having a parent with a substance use disorder can impact on a child's emotional, educational, social and behavioural functioning.
- From about 4 years (often younger), children have an awareness of parental substance use. These children are at an increased risk for developing substance use disorders themselves.
- Parental substance use is a risk factor for other disadvantages, such as; premature death, suicide attempts, addiction, mental illness and teenage motherhood.
- Normalisation of alcohol use can mean the impact can remain unchallenged for much longer than drug use, leading to delayed interventions, with children coming to the attention of services much later (Silent Voices 2012).

Children's experiences

- Children often feel isolated and alone. They may be afraid or embarrassed to talk to others about their situation.
- Children often think they are the problem and to blame. They can feel they have no one to turn to.
- Children become used to broken promises, Chaotic lifestyles, disrupted routines and relationships.
- Worrying about their parent and what is happening at home, or being woken up in the night by arguments, can make it hard for them to concentrate at school.
- They may be regularly getting into trouble and underachieving, or they may bury themselves in schoolwork, overachieve etc. and appear to have no problem from the outside.
- They may find it difficult to make friends and often feel too embarrassed to bring people home.

Family Dynamic:

- The family adapts to cope with the substance use, to keep the problem hidden and the family together. The altered family system can contribute to an increased risk of abuse.
- Parents often display inconsistent and unpredictable behaviour; Mood swings, arguments and a lack of nurturing.
- There is a higher risk of parental conflict and domestic abuse.
- There is more likelihood of financial insecurity and impact on family budget.
- Common unspoken family rules: don't talk, don't trust, don't feel and keep problems hidden from the outside world. To speak out can sometimes feel like family betrayal or lead to isolation within the family.

Hidden Harm:

- Drugs/Alcohol become the priority for the parent, leaving them less emotionally and physically available for their children.
- Drugs/Alcohol can have a dampening effect on emotions and parents may not always be emotionally available to their children.
- Parents may not be able to attend to the child's immediate needs if they are under the influence of substances or experiencing withdrawals, hangovers or come downs.
- In some families, the child may take on adult responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings, managing the finances or taking on household duties. They may also take on the responsibility of caring for their parent and become the main provider of emotional support.



What can we do?

It is important to acknowledge that for many of us, this may not be our specialist area. The following suggestions may be helpful to explore with parents on the basis that we are asking these questions to support the welfare of children. Please seek the advice of specialist services, as required, such as Turning Point or resources on your local Safeguarding Children Partnership website.

- Adopt a strengths-based approach (but always with a degree of healthy scepticism and respectful uncertainty). Work with evidence, not optimism. Recognise and endorse what clients are doing well, while being honest about the issues.
- Explore the parent's perception of the impact of their substance use on their children. The parent's perception of this is extremely important. If they are aware of the effects their substance use may be having on their children, they are more likely to try and lessen the impact, by stabilising or changing their use.
- Discuss harm reduction regularly. Including the risk posed to their children, impact on parenting capacity and protective factors which may minimise harm.
- Discuss the safe storage of any medication, alcohol, drugs and paraphernalia.
- Children are far better equipped to deal with challenges arising from their parent's substance use when they have the support of a caring person who listens to their feelings and concerns and helps them solve problems. We should ensure that we listen to children and young people, take time to observe babies/children and try our utmost to understand children's experiences of daily life.
- Children can be supported to develop effective coping strategies and build their resilience with help from family members, mental health professionals and other members of their social support system.
- When a family member has a drug or alcohol problem, it can easily become a secret that nobody talks about. All children need some explanation and support, geared to their age, to help them understand substance use problems. Each parent and child's first conversations about their substance use issues will be different. How you address the subject will depend on the child's age and ability to handle the information, but children can often understand more than you might think.

“Remember - Every single one of us can touch the life of a child, helping to minimise the harm of feeling worthless, invisible and responsible for the problems at home.”

Where to refer:

- If you believe a child is in immediate danger, contact the police on 999 or 112. If the child is not in immediate danger but you are still concerned about neglect or abuse and the welfare of a child, you can report your concerns via the website: <https://lrsb.org.uk/childreport>
- Turning Point take a whole family approach and can offer support to the substance user, their friends and family members and young people (11 years +) impacted on by their parent's substance use
- Turning Point: <http://www.wellbeing.turning-point.co.uk/Leicestershire>

For further advice and guidance related to substance use:

- <https://www.actiononaddiction.org.uk/>
- <https://www.dearalbert.co.uk/>
- <http://famanon.org.uk/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/drug-addiction-getting-help/>
- <https://www.talktofrank.com/get-help/find-support-near-you/>
- <https://www.turning-point.co.uk/>
- <https://ukna.org/>

