

You Can Help: A Guide for Caring Adults Working With Young People Experiencing Addiction in the Family

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Children and addiction

Alcoholism and drug addiction is taking a toll on the American family. As a result, 8.3 million children in the United States, approximately 11 percent, live with at least one parent who is in need of treatment for alcohol- or drug-dependency. One in four children under the age of 18 is living in a home where alcoholism or alcohol abuse is a fact of daily life. Countless others are exposed to illegal drug use in their families.

The toll addiction takes on these children can be substantial. Children of addiction (or COAs) are at significantly greater risk for:

- mental illness or emotional problems, such as depression or anxiety;
- physical health problems; and
- learning problems, including difficulty with cognitive and verbal skills, conceptual reasoning and abstract thinking.

In addition, children whose parents abuse alcohol or drugs are almost three times more likely to be verbally, physically or sexually abused; and four times more likely than other children to be neglected. Strong scientific evidence also suggests that addiction tends to run in families. Children of alcoholics are four times more likely than non-COAs to develop alcoholism or other drug problems.

You can help

Research shows that many children with drug- or alcohol-dependent parents can benefit tremendously from adult efforts to help and encourage them. In fact, children who cope most effectively with the trauma of growing up in families affected by alcoholism or drug addiction often attribute their sense of well-being to the support of a non-alcoholic parent, step-parent, grandparent, teacher or other significant adult in their lives.

Health professionals, school teachers and guidance counselors, community-based program personnel, social workers, athletic coaches and faith community/native spirituality leaders are just some of the adults who regularly come in contact with children. As trusted and respected figures in their lives, they are in a unique position to support children who live in alcohol- or drug-dependent families.

Understanding children and addiction

Children living in alcohol- or drug-dependent homes are regularly confronted with denial, shame and silence about their family experience. The unpredictability and irrationality caused by the addiction in the family often creates an atmosphere that is blaming, emotionally hurtful and sometimes physically unsafe. COAs often feel obligated to take on the parental responsibilities. For many, this results in a loss of childhood.

Although some COAs will outwardly exhibit negative behaviors that may alert the adults around them that there may be a problem at home, others work hard to succeed and please in spite of the stresses at home. Often these children do not have a balanced childhood, that may result in negative consequences for the future, including an increased risk of substance abuse problems.

When parents receive treatment

Living with an active alcohol- or drug-dependent adult is undeniably difficult for all family members. But surprisingly, the experience of a loved one who is beginning treatment and going through recovery also can be traumatic for children, particularly as the family dynamic associated with addiction begins to change. The uncertainty and tension that are part of this change may be uncomfortable and confusing for children. When a parent receives treatment, their partner and children should also receive appropriate services as well, so that all members of the family can recover from the impact of addiction.

How you can help

Most adults can support COAs in three ways. First, you can provide children with age-appropriate information about alcohol, drugs and the disease of addiction. The most important messages for COAs to hear from trusted adults are:

- Alcohol/drug dependency is an illness. It is not your fault that your parent drinks too much or uses drugs, and you are not responsible for correcting it.
- You can take care of yourself by talking with a trusted person and making healthy choices in your own life.
- Treatment for alcohol/drug dependency is available and can be effective in getting a parent with addiction on the road to recovery.
- You are not alone. You need and deserve services. There are safe people and places that can help you.

Second, you can teach children how to identify and express their feelings in healthy ways, especially by seeking out and speaking with "safe" adults. You can guide them toward educational support programs at school or in your community. Such programs can help them develop coping skills to deepen their innermost strength and resilience.

Third, and perhaps most important, you can take the time to develop a healthy adult/child relationship with a COA who needs you. Children who live in alcohol- and drug-dependent families learn not to trust adults. By offering your time and an open ear to provide assurance and validation, you can counteract much of that mistrust and make an immeasurable and positive impact on a child's life.

If you are in a position to influence the adults in the family, help them find a qualified professional who is experienced with intervention and can help them get the assessment and treatment they need to begin recovery. An actual family intervention only should be undertaken with a qualified professional who is experienced in the intervention process.

Where you and COAs can turn for help

A number of resources are available to help adults identify and support COAs, and refer them to local programs and services that can assist them. If you want to help children in alcohol- or drug-dependent families, familiarize yourself with area peer support groups, such as Alateen and Al-Anon, school-based student assistance programs, and therapy programs that can assist COAs. Additionally, there are a number of national organizations dedicated to raising awareness, educating and assisting COAs that can provide resource materials to caring adults, as well as COAs themselves. All of these organizations are available to help COAs, but, for you, just showing an interest in the child and offering support can make a difference in his/her life.

For more information about how you can help children who live in alcohol- or drug-dependent families, please contact any one of the following organizations.

Organizations for COAs

The National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA)
301-468-0985 or 888-55-4COAS (2627) (Toll-Free)
nacoa@nacoa.org • www.nacoa.org

Al-Anon/Alateen
For Families and Friends of Alcoholics
888-4AL-ANON/888-425-2666 (Toll-Free)
WSO@al-anon.org • www.al-anon.org

800-ALCOHOL (Toll-Free) for information and referrals

Resources for Information on Substance Abuse and Treatment

Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT)
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
CSAT's National Helpline 800-662-HELP (Toll-Free)
800-487-4889 (TDD) (Toll-Free) 877-767-8432 (Spanish) (Toll-Free)
info@samhsa.hhs.gov • www.samhsa.gov

Additional copies of this publication may be obtained by calling NCADI at 800-729-6686 or through the SAMHSA website.

SAMHSA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)
301-468-2600 • 800-729-6686 (Toll-Free) 800-487-4889 (TDD) (Toll-Free)
info@samhsa.hhs.gov • www.samhsa.gov

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc. (NCADD)
212-269-7797 • 800-NCA-CALL (Toll-Free)
national@ncadd.org • www.ncadd.org

Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP)
800-666-3332 (Toll-Free)
ondcp@ncjrs.org • www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov

Freevibe: www.freevibe.com is an educational entertainment website for youth 11-18 focusing on drug-specific information in an entertainment setting.

Adults can get drug-specific information and tips for children by visiting the multilingual website, www.theantidrug.com, designed by the National Youth Anti-Drug Campaign to help adults keep kids healthy, safe and drug-free.

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