

## Chapter 3

# The Impact of Parental Substance Abuse on Children

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### ABSTRACT

*Substance abuse is a difficult situation for anyone to deal with, but the problem is compounded when children are involved. Parents who are substance abusers may knowingly or unknowingly be causing a number of problems for their child. Substance abuse in a parent can lead to child abuse and neglect. A child can develop anxiety; this can include overachievement, constant need to please others, fear of harm coming to the family, and concern about getting home on time. Children can experience depression including symptoms like fatigue, listlessness, and no interest in pleasurable activities. For a child with a parent who abuses drugs or alcohol, there is a strong likelihood they will experience psychosomatic illness and complaining often about not feeling well. The child may also show behaviours evident of regression, including thumb-sucking, enuresis and infantile behaviour. Phobias can occur, which sometimes are about attending school. Some additional effects on a child can include low self-esteem and social isolation. These can encompass difficulty making decisions, self put downs, reluctance to try new activities, keeping to one's self, no friends and avoiding peer contact. This chapter aims to describe and increase awareness of the harmful effects of parental substance abuse on children. Therefore, the trends in substance abuse are being discussed to give the reader an understanding of the widespread and complex social phenomenon and the ones most affected; the children.*

### INTRODUCTION

Parenting is a complex endeavour, particularly if it is to be carried out in a manner that enriches psychosocial outcomes for children. The substance abuse of a parent has a long lasting effect on all young children. There are a number of substances that can become a problem in people's lives, including marijuana, alcohol, stimulants, depressants, narcotics, hallucinogens and inhalants (Substance Abuse Training Tri-Town Head Start, 2007).

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## ***The Impact of Parental Substance Abuse on Children***

Children who have parents who abuse alcohol or other substances are often the forgotten victims. Substance abuse often results to unpredictable behaviour, lack of appropriate care and no structure to a home life are often. It can be scary, painful and lead to many problems in the future for a child. If family members are addicted to drugs or alcohol, children can be exposed to violence, abuse, neglect, financial problems and even malnourishment.

An adult struggle to control their behaviour, mood and even actions when he/she is addicted to alcohol or other substance. For a child, this can be very confusing to have a parent going through unpredictable mood swings, depression and even times of abandonment for the sake of being high or being drunk. Sometimes children do not understand why their parent would be behaving this way and they may blame themselves for the mood swings. This can have a disturbing effect on a child as they develop.

When a child becomes older, they begin to distance themselves from friends because they think that people will judge them on their parent behavior. Often they will not invite school friends over, avoid going to events where a parent is invited, they even lie to friends about a family member being sick or absent. A child does not talk to anyone about their substance abusing parent for fear of people's reactions because their family is a guilty secret for them.

Children does not like to talk about what is happening in their family, but living with an adult who is abusing alcohol or other substance can affect a child's behavior. The child might:

- Be mean to others,
- Be quiet or keep to themselves,
- Act like a parent and try to take care of everyone,
- Get in trouble at school or have falling grades,
- Have nightmares or other sleeping problems,
- Not be able to focus or finish tasks,
- Miss many days of school or daycare,
- Believe the problems in the family are their fault,
- Worry about what will happen next,
- Hurt themselves or others,
- Feel helpless,
- Feel scared,
- Be sad, angry or cry a lot,
- Feel bad about themselves.

Parents who abuse drugs often have children who are at increased risk of abusing drugs because the drug use is viewed as a normal activity by them or because they might think they need to turn to substances to deal with emotional or social problems.

## **Neglect**

Although parents who are addicted to drugs might make an effort to provide a stable home for their children, the financial cost of drug use could prevent them from providing adequate food, housing and clothing for their children. Furthermore, when a parent is under the influence of drugs, he might be unable to respond to the child's emotional and physical needs adequately. This can lead to poor parent-child bonds. In turn, these poor bonds might lead to behavioral problems in school and other social settings.

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