

The Effects of Substance Abuse on Parenting

It is important to remember that when a parent is involved with drugs or alcohol to a degree that interferes with the ability to parent effectively, a child may suffer in many ways:

- A parent may be **emotionally and physically unavailable** to the child.
- A parent's **mental functioning, judgment, inhibitions and/or protective capacity may be seriously impaired** by alcohol/drug use, placing the child at increased risk of all forms of abuse/neglect, including sexual abuse.
- A substance-abusing parent **may "disappear" for hours or days**, leaving the child alone or with someone unable to meet the child's basic needs.
- A parent may **spend the family's income on alcohol and/or other drugs**, depriving the child of adequate food, clothing, housing and healthcare.
- The resulting lack of resources often leads to **unstable housing**, which results in frequent school changes, loss of friends and belongings and an inability to maintain important support systems (religious communities, sports teams, neighbors).
- **A child's health and safety may be seriously jeopardized by criminal activity** associated with the use, manufacture and distribution of illicit drugs in the home.
- Eventually, a parent's **substance abuse may lead to criminal behavior and periods of incarceration**, depriving the child of parental care.
- Exposure to parental abuse of alcohol and other drugs, along with a lack of stability and appropriate role models, may contribute to **the child's future substance abuse**.
- **Prenatal exposure to alcohol or other drugs** may impact a child's development.

What the Child Experiences

From a child's perspective, a parent's substance abuse is usually characterized by the following:

Broken Promises

Parents may break their promises to go somewhere with the family, do something with the children, not drink that day, or not get high on some occasion. The children grow up thinking they are not loved or important enough for their parents to keep their promises.

Inconsistency & Unpredictability

Rules and limits may seem to change constantly, and parents may be loving one moment and abusive the next.

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What the Child Experiences

Shame & Humiliation

Alcohol or drugs may take over and suddenly turn an otherwise lovely parent into a loathsome embarrassment.

Tension & Fear

Because the children of substance-abusing parents never know what will happen next, they typically feel unsafe at home, the environment in which they should feel most protected.

Paralyzing Guilt & an Unwarranted Sense of Responsibility

Many children think they cause their parents' behavior. Part of the disease is to blame someone else for it, and the children grow up thinking that if they were better students, more obedient, neater, more reliable, or nicer to their siblings, their parents would not use alcohol/drugs.

Anger & Hurt

Children may feel neglected, mistreated, and less important in their parents' lives than the alcohol or drugs. They grow up with a profound sense of abandonment.

Loneliness & Isolation

Because the family denies or hides the problem and often will not even discuss it among themselves, the children, with no one to talk to about the most important thing in their lives, think they are the only ones with this problem.

Lying as a Way of Life

Children may feel they have to constantly cover for the failure of the parent, or account for his/her deviant behavior.

Feeling Responsible

Often children feel that it is their job to organize and run the home and care for younger siblings.

Feeling Obligated

Children may feel they must hide the problem from authorities in order to protect the parent.