

Parental Substance Misuse: What Professionals Need to Know

Parental substance misuse refers to problematic use of drugs (legal or illegal) and/or alcohol by a parent or caregiver. This includes but is not limited to:

- Dependency on alcohol or drugs
- Regular or excessive drug use
- Consuming large quantities of alcohol regularly that can lead to health problems
- Being unable to supervise their children appropriately due to their drugs or alcohol use.

Exploring a parent or carer's drug or alcohol use is important to understanding the impact on a child's lived experiences. Substance misuse can affect a caregivers ability to provide practical support, or a safe and nurturing environment for their child. It can also increase the risk that a child could experience neglect or abuse.

 NSPCC
Learning

The NSPCC has published a review of serious safeguarding incidents concerning children of parents who misuse substances. The learning tells us:

- It is important to think about how an adult's substance misuse affects their children.
- Parental substance misuse puts children at increased risk of multiple forms of harm.
- Substance misuse can reduce a parent's ability to keep children safe, through lack of supervision, and accidental injuries.
- Infants are at increased risk of harm from co-sleeping with a substance using parent.
- Assessments of an adult's need or a child's welfare must take full account of the impact of substance misuse on parenting capacity and the child's safety, wellbeing and quality of life. This applies to child and adult services alike.

Learning from the Family Drug and Alcohol Courts

Family Drug and Alcohol Courts were introduced as an alternative to care proceedings for parents that misuse alcohol or drugs. The aim was to support parents to reduce their substance misuse and improve the long term outcomes for children and their families during care proceedings. They also hoped to prevent families re-entering care proceedings at a later date.

The Evaluation of Family Drug and Alcohol Courts Report estimated that:

- there are 120,000 alcohol dependant adults living within UK
- Of these adults identified above only 21% were in treatment in 2020.
- there are 478,000 children living with an alcohol or drug dependent parent, which equates to 40 children per 1000 parents.

 Evaluation of
FAMILY DRUG AND
ALCOHOL COURTS

The findings showed that parental substance misuse often exists with other concerns that could cause harm to children such as mental health, domestic abuse and criminality. The recommendations from the report promoted the need for:

- Services for children and adults need to work together to provide a whole family approach.
- Early help and early identification of parental substance misuse promotes better outcomes.
- Supportive and effective interventions can reduce risk and improve outcomes for children and their parents.
- Information sharing between services improves outcomes.

Understanding and Responding to Parental Substance Misuse

There are many reasons why parents or carers may misuse drugs or alcohol. Adverse childhood experiences and trauma can increase the risk of substance misuse in adulthood. Parental substance misuse often co-occurs with a number of other difficulties including mental and physical health concerns, domestic abuse, deprivation, unemployment and offending behaviour. All of these issues can impact child wellbeing, safety and overall development. Families can struggle with shame and fear around engagement with services about all of these issues.

Some Common Risks for Children

- Child neglect
- Exposure to criminal behaviour
- Financial and material deprivation
- Children becoming young carers for parents or siblings
- Accidental harm from lack of supervision or exposure to drugs or drug paraphernalia e.g. needles.

Signs and Indicators

When working with children look out for signs and indicators of parental substance misuse. Many of these signs indicate a concern for the child and could indicate parental substance misuse or other issues with parenting capacity. They all require curiosity, concern and exploration.

- neurodevelopment consequences caused by substance misuse during pregnancy
- poor attendance at school or low education attainment
- a child is caring for siblings or parents
- child or parental involvement with anti-social behaviour or criminality
- child substance misuse
- children not taken to medical appointments
- appearance of child neglect - poor personal hygiene, frequently hungry, often tired
- appearance of distress or mental health concerns in the child
- lack of parental supervision or attention to child's safety or wellbeing
- financial problems for parents
- unsafe or neglected living environment
- unfamiliar adults frequenting the property

Protective Factors

There are some factors that can reduce the impact of, and support resilience to, parental substance misuse for children. This can include a close and protective relationship with another adult carer who does not use substances, good school attendance and professionals that can support children and respond to their needs. Children's voices and experiences should be listened to and validated. They should also be supported to engage in positive activities.

What to do if you are worried?

- **Be curious, ask questions, explore your concerns with the child, the family and other professionals**
- **Ask yourself: what is it like for a child living in this environment? Have they witnessed their parents using substances? Is there any support from other relatives? How does the parent present when they are sober and intoxicated?**
- **Talk to your child safeguarding lead**
- **Complete an Early Help assessment on the [Stronger Families Hub](#)**
- **If you feel risks are high and imminent call Stronger families Hub on 01895 556006**

Think Family

Adults with substance misuse issues can need a lot of support in their own right. Substance misuse can result in significant mental and physical ill health.

If you worried about an adult with care and support needs report this to London Borough of Hillingdon [Social Care Direct](#) on 01895 556633 or socialcaredirect@hillington.gov.uk

Resources to Support Safeguarding Practice

The Adolescent Development Service have recently launched the Moving Parents and Children Together Programme. This is an evidenced based whole family programme, which is child focussed.

This programme is for families affected by parental substance misuse (illegal and/or prescribed substances) it offers a ten-session brief intervention that is suitable for families with children aged 8-17 years. Families work together in a multi-family group environment.



ARCH is a free, NHS-led multiagency service for young people and adults who live or are registered with a GP in Hillingdon. They work with people at any stage of their alcohol or drug difficulties to provide a single point of access for assessment and treatment.

Drug Fam provide support to families and friends affected or bereaved by loved ones harmful use of drugs, alcohol or gambling.



The Daniel Spargo-Mabbs Foundation(DSMF) is a drug and alcohol education charity that aims to support young people to make safe choices about drugs and alcohol and reduce harm.

DSMF are offering training about the impact of substance misuse on young people and how professionals can have conversations with children and young people about drugs.

Young carers aged 5 – 24 years, who provide regular and ongoing care to a family member can access a range of supports from the Carers Trust.



Alcohol Change UK has worked with the Home Office to develop a Police led alcohol intervention checklist and toolkit to provide information about effective interventions for tackling alcohol related harm.