

# Include Project

Information for  
teachers and  
school staff



The  
Children's  
Society

supporting pupils with  
substance misusing parents

# Identifying the issues

- 1.2 million children and young people in the UK live with a parent or carer who uses drugs or alcohol.
- In England, 2–3% of children and young people live with a parent or carer who uses drugs. Even more live with someone who uses alcohol.

In a school which has 1000 pupils, about 20–30 pupils will have a parent who uses drugs and even more whose parents use alcohol<sup>2</sup>

This booklet has been produced to raise awareness of some of the issues experienced by these children and young people, due to their parents' problematic substance misuse. Each situation will be different and possibly complex, but you can help make sure these children and young people are safe, have their needs met and know how and where to get help if they need it. This booklet highlights the issues, gives suggestions for good practice and identifies support.

*“I need school to understand how hard it is and why our homework is late and why we are tired after mum has been on a bender.”<sup>1</sup>*

Children and young people may be very reluctant to let it be known that they are experiencing any problems as a result of their parents' drug or alcohol use. This could be because:

- The stigma and shame surrounding their parents' drug or alcohol use
- They may be wary of the involvement of outside agencies
- They may not wish to “betray” their parents.

Not all substance misusers' families experience difficulties. Some parents may experiment with drugs or use them recreationally but this may not always impact on their ability to care for their child. It is also true, however, that parents and children hide problems, sometimes very serious ones. Children are often wary of talking about their needs for fear of losing their parents. Parents on the other hand may have concerns about their children being taken into care.

Note: 'substances' include legal drugs like alcohol and illegal drugs such as cannabis, cocaine etc.

*“I did not tell anyone at school except my best friend. In the classroom I cried and got upset.”*

# Impact on child or young person

## Emotional impact

Each child's and young person's situation is different but they experience common feelings. They may feel:

- Unimportant or second best (Their parents may have their emotions invested elsewhere)
- Angry and confused
- Upset/sad
- Afraid or embarrassed
- Isolated and alone. They may be cautious about exposing family life to outside scrutiny and therefore friendships may be restricted and social isolation severe.<sup>3</sup>

These feelings might affect their behaviour and they may be:

- Withdrawn, secretive or shy
- Aggressive
- Anxious and nervous
- Attention seeking and needy
- Controlling.

Additionally, chaotic lifestyles may disrupt children's routines and relationships, leading to early behavioural and emotional problems.<sup>3</sup>

Children's responses to their parents' substance misuse problems are likely to vary from the child who presents a front that all is well to the child who acts out their pain and anger.<sup>4</sup>

## Physical impact

Their parents at times may have difficulty providing for their children's basic needs due to finances and emotional energies being diverted elsewhere. This could have the following impact on the child/young person:

- Poor or limited diet (The young person may not have access to regular balanced diet or may have to provide for themselves or siblings)
- Physical neglect
- Missed health appointments, including dentist, vaccinations
- Self neglect, poor personal hygiene
- Erratic school attendance
- Impaired patterns of parental care with a higher risk of emotional and physical neglect or abuse
- Threat of domestic abuse.

## Adopting a caring role

A particular issue for schools is that of pupils acting as carers for their drug-using parents. Here the roles of child and parent become confused. This can account for a range of behaviours such as persistent lateness, truancy, tiredness and consequent under-achievement. Such children may feel they are responsible for their parents' behaviour and changes in mood. As a result, they may develop intense feelings of guilt. They may be afraid of what happens at home becoming public knowledge, which may lead to their becoming isolated from other children or mixing with older children who are themselves problem drug users.<sup>2</sup> Some children may have inappropriately high levels of responsibility for social or personal care of parents with problem substance use, or care of younger siblings.

The caring responsibilities for children and young people in households where there is problematic substance use may include:

- Undertaking domestic tasks, such as cooking and cleaning
- Looking after siblings
- Ensuring parent is safe
- Supporting parents emotionally
- Dealing with the aftermath of alcohol or substance misuse.

## Impacts on their school life

These children and young people may:

- Experience bullying and isolation
- Have difficulties completing homework on time
- Arrive late to school
- Have poor attendance
- Be constantly tired or have difficulty concentrating
- Have parents who are unable to attend parents evening
- Experience being stigmatised
- Underachieve academically
- Have behavioural difficulties
- Be unable to attend after school clubs/trips
- Have difficulty socialising with peers
- Be unsupported by parents
- Truant or be excluded.

*“Rebecca doesn’t go to school. She stays at home to look after Julie and Christopher [the younger children]. She cleans up in the house. She has to mind them.”<sup>2</sup>*

# Children's and young people's views on how schools could offer support

Children and young people tell us they need:

- A quiet area to go to when you are down or want to chill out
- More people to talk to who can deal with situations
- Teachers who have an understanding of what you have been through
- Extra support with school work
- Teachers not shouting at you
- Counselling help
- Raise awareness of drugs and the dangers of drugs within curriculum
- Less bullies
- Identified special teachers who you can talk to
- Knowing other children whose mums and dads use drugs and alcohol
- To be taught more life skills
- School nurses need to check we are okay and do home visits and meet family.

*(Information supplied by Andover Young Carers Project, Hampshire and The Children's Society Stars Project)*

*"It's difficult to talk to the teachers. It is not easy to explain... it's always in the corridor or class. I just don't tell them."*<sup>1</sup>



# Providing support

- Ensure pupils (and parents) know who and how to ask for advice or help.
- Children and young people may be aware that help is needed for their parent or for themselves before the parent has recognised the need. Agencies need to ensure that information about how to seek advice and support is accessible to children<sup>1</sup>
- It is important to take the views of children and young people seriously so we can understand what they might want or need.
- Invite the parents to talk to the head teacher or the teacher nominated for child protection issues on a confidential one-to-one basis<sup>2</sup>
- If the parent themselves has identified the need for help, it enables a more comprehensive holistic approach.

*“School can be a safe haven for the children of problem drug users, the only place where there is a pattern and a structure in their lives. Schools and their staff can do much to help these children but need to be supported by and liaise with other agencies and initiatives that have complementary resources and expertise.”<sup>2</sup>*



# What can you do within school or as a schools worker?

The following recommendations were made in the *Hidden Harm* report.

- All schools should identify at least one trained designated person able to deal with the problems that might arise with the children of problem drug and alcohol users.
- Ensure constant vigilance of known vulnerable young people and provision of additional pastoral support.
- Provide pupils with information if they do not want to talk to a teacher.
- Know how to access sources of support for the child and family and when to involve other agencies.
- Encourage and support participation in supervised extra-curricular activities.
- All education services and schools should have critical incident plans and clear arrangements for liaison with their local social services team and area child protection committee when concerns arise about the impact on a child of parental problem drug or alcohol use.
- Gaining a broad understanding of the impact of parental problem drug or alcohol misuse on children should be an objective of general teacher training and continuous professional development.

## Further recommendations

- Find different ways of communicating with parents other than parents evening
- Ensure that full use is made of all other support services, e.g. Education Welfare Service, Children's Services, Youth Services Drug and Alcohol Action Team and Connexions
- Seek advice from specialist agencies
- Refer young person to any local support groups, such as a Young Carers Group
- Ensure information about support agencies and helplines is available on a school Community Notice Board (see YCI resources)
- Raise pupils' awareness of issues relating to drug and alcohol use. Drug and Alcohol organisations will be able to help with this
- Allow pupils to telephone home during the day if needed, to allay anxiety about parents.

*“Schools need to recognise the signs that someone needs help and be there to listen”<sup>1</sup>*

# Staying safe

Children and young people in this situation are sometimes exposed to circumstances which compromise their safety. These may be:

- Increased likelihood of witnessing violence in the home
- Increased risk of experiencing violence
- Exposure to danger, e.g. alcohol, drugs and drug-taking equipment
- Increased risk from other adults visiting the home, whose actions potentially put the child/young person at risk
- High risk of experimentation with smoking, drinking and drugs
- Parents' reduced capability, or loss of consciousness, may place children at physical risk in the absence of another responsible adult to supervise and care for children.

*Hidden Harm* recommends that schools have:

- Procedures on dealing with disclosure and confidentiality
- A definition of significant harm in terms of child protection and guidance on when to invoke child protection procedures
- Boundaries of the school's responsibility
- A protocol for the assessment of pupils' needs in terms of welfare and support
- How to access sources of support for the child and family including links with other statutory and community services; and know when and how to involve other agencies
- A protocol for dealing with drug-related incidents.

When revising child protection policies and procedures, full account should be taken of the particular challenges posed by parental problem drug use, with the consequent implications for staff training, assessment and case management procedures, and inter-agency liaison.

If it is felt that the child or young person may be at risk, child protection procedures should be followed.



## Further help and advice

### National resources

**Addaction** is a leading UK charity working solely in the field of drug and alcohol treatment.

Website: [www.addaction.org.uk/](http://www.addaction.org.uk/)

**ADFAM** The national organisation for the families and friends of drug users.

Tel. 020 7928 8898

Website: [www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)

**Alateen** is part of Al-Anon and is for young people, aged 12–20, who are affected by a problem drinker.

Tel. 020 7378 9910

Website: [www.al-anon.alateen.org](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org)

**Alcohol Concern** National agency on alcohol misuse.

Tel 020 7928 7377

Website: [www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk)

**Drinkline** For information about alcohol.

Tel. 0800 917 8282 (Mon–Fri 9.00am–11.00pm;

Sat–Sun 6.00pm–11.00pm)

**Drug Education Forum** brings together national organisations from health, education, police and voluntary sectors that deliver or support the delivery of drug education. The Forum promotes the provision of effective drug education for all children and young people in England.

Website: [www.drugeducationforum.com/](http://www.drugeducationforum.com/)

**Drugscope** The national campaign and support organisation on drug related issues.

Tel. 020 7928 1211

Website: [www.drugscope.org.uk](http://www.drugscope.org.uk)

**Frank** The national website and helpline providing drug information.

Tel. 0800 776600

Website: [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

**NACOA** The National Association for Children of Alcoholics provides information, advice and support to children of alcoholics and people concerned with their welfare through its free, confidential telephone helpline.

Tel. 0800 358 3456

**National Drugs Helpline** For information about drugs.

Tel. 0800 77 6 00 (open all hours)

**Resolv** The national charity solely dedicated to the prevention of solvent and volatile substance abuse (VSA).

Website: [www.re-solv.org](http://www.re-solv.org)

**The Advisory Council on Alcohol and Drug Education**

Tel 0161 836 6850

Website: [www.tacade.com](http://www.tacade.com)

**The Children's Society National Young Carers**

**Initiative** provides a national focus for people who work to support young carers and their families across England. It has information for professionals, offers training and has a national directory of young carers projects.

Website: [www.youngcarer.com](http://www.youngcarer.com)

**The Children's Society STARS National Initiative**

A national project that provides information and resources about children and young people who are affected by their parents' or carers' substance (drugs or alcohol) use.

Website: [www.parentsusingdrugs.com](http://www.parentsusingdrugs.com)

**The Princess Royal Trust for Carers**

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers has a website that provides information for young carers and also for schools (including a sample schools policy on young carers).

Website: [www.youngcarers.net](http://www.youngcarers.net)

**Turning Point** provides services for people affected by drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems and those with a learning disability.

Website: [www.turning-point.co.uk](http://www.turning-point.co.uk)





# The National Young Carers Initiative

The National Young Carers Initiative (YCI) is part of The Children's Society Include project.

It is a national, England-wide, strategic project, which focuses on the needs of Young Carers and their families. The YCI supports young carers to have a voice and campaigns for them and their families. The YCI provides information, advice and a range of training to professionals. Contact us for more details.

The Young Carers Initiative has a comprehensive website ([www.youngcarer.com](http://www.youngcarer.com)) and an excellent range of resources including:

- A practice guide: *Making it Work: Good Practice with Young Carers and their Families* (published by The Children's Society and The Princess Royal Trust for Carers)
- *An Educational Resource Pack for Young Carers* – an information pack on how to support young carers in
- A schools notice-board pack
- *Key Principles of Practice*

All these resources are available from The Children's Society Young Carers Initiative on request.

Find out more and locate where the nearest local Young Carers Project is at [www.youngcarer.com](http://www.youngcarer.com)



## References

1 *Making It Work: Good practice with Young Carers and their Families*. Published by The Children's Society in partnership with The Princess Royal Trust For Carers. 2002

2 *Hidden Harm: Responding to the needs of children of problem drug users*. Report of an inquiry by The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. June 2003

3 Scottish Office (1998) *Protecting Children – A Shared Responsibility: Guidance on Inter-Agency Co-operation*. The Stationery Office. Part 4, para 1

4 The Children's Society STARS Project.  
[www.parentsusingdrugs.com](http://www.parentsusingdrugs.com)



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**This information is available in other formats on request.**



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