Children and Families
Caught in America’s Addiction Epidemic

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National Association for Children of Addiction
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People of all ages suffer the harmful consequences of drug abuse and addiction.

- **Babies** exposed to legal and illegal drugs in the womb may be born premature and underweight. This drug exposure can slow the child’s intellectual development and affect behavior later in life.
- **Adolescents** who abuse drugs often act out, do poorly academically, and drop out of school. They are at risk of unplanned pregnancies, violence, and infectious diseases.
- **Adults** who abuse drugs often have problems thinking clearly, remembering, and paying attention. They often develop poor social behaviors as a result of their drug abuse, and their work performance and personal relationships suffer.
- **Parents’** drug abuse often means chaotic, stress-filled homes and child abuse and neglect. Such conditions harm the well-being and development of children in the home and may set the stage for drug abuse in the next generation.

(c) William S. Jacobs, MD, Chief of Addiction Medicine, Medical College of Georgia
Core Competencies Needed

Guide to the core knowledge, attitudes, and skills essential to the ability of concerned adults to meet the needs of persons with alcohol or drug dependence and their family members

*Focus on:*

- Addicted person
- Family system
- Affected children
Let’s Acknowledge…

Within our communities, including our churches, schools, and our police and fire departments, there are persons and families who are – or were -- captured by addiction.

– It is often a multi generational disease
– It is often hidden from community’s view
– It is often minimized within the family system
– It has long-term devastating impact on family members, especially children
– It isolates its victims from the rest of the community.
This illness – addiction - is often mis-labeled and those who suffer are stigmatized by the notion that “it’s their own fault.”

– What he/she is doing is a crime or a moral failing.

– “If only he /she would have the will power, they could stop drinking.”

– And other misdirected shaming and blaming.
Children of addiction are **2 to 4 times more likely to be sexually abused**. They are prime for victimization as they...

1. Are often starving for attention
2. Are less apt to speak up because of fear of not being believed.
3. Give others the benefit of the doubt.
4. Don’t trust their own perceptions.
5. Don’t know what they feel and can’t use feelings and cues as signals.
6. Are confused about appropriate boundaries.
7. Experience shame upon shame.
Stimulation of the brain’s pleasure circuit teaches us to keep taking drugs

- Our brains are wired to ensure that we will repeat life-sustaining activities by associating those activities with pleasure or reward.

- Whenever this reward circuit is activated, the brain notes that something important is happening that needs to be remembered, and teaches us to do it again and again, without thinking about it.

- Because drugs of abuse stimulate the same circuit, we learn to abuse drugs in the same way.

WHAT IS THE LESSON HERE?

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Why the Emphasis on Children?

• Numbers are so great
• Chronic confusion, fear, stress, emotional and - sometimes - physical abuse
• Developmental and emotional impact from the toxic family environment
• Greater risk for neglect, for mental health problems, for addiction and for entering the juvenile justice system
ACE PYRAMID

The more Aces a child experiences (ACE score), the higher risk they are for negative health outcomes as they grow older.
ACES AND SUBSTANCE USE

• UNRECOGNIZED ACES ARE A MAJOR, IF NOT THE MAJOR, DETERMINANT OF WHO BECOMES ‘ADDICTED.’

• PARENTAL SUBSTANCE USE AND FAMILY VIOLENCE ARE MAJOR RISK FACTORS INCLUDED UNDER THE DESCRIPTION OF TOXIC STRESS.

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Why the Emphasis on Children?

- Children are our best opportunity to break the generational transmission of addictive behaviors.
- Children are resilient and can grow through our relationships with them.
- Children are a precious resource, not to be wasted or harmed.
Family interaction is defined by the drug or alcohol addiction.

Problems that are frequently associated with addiction in the family:

**Increased…**
- Family conflict
- Emotional or physical violence
- Family isolation
- Family stress
  - e.g.: work problems, illness,
  - marital strain, finance issues,
  - increased infidelity, frequent relocations

**Decreased…**
- Family cohesion
- Family organization
- Physical health
- Participation in activities
What Makes the Family Toxic?

- Don’t talk
- Don’t feel
- Don’t trust
TOXIC STRESS IS THE STRONG UNRELIEVED RESPONSE OF THE BODY’S STRESS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN THE ABSENCE OF THE BUFFERING PROTECTION OF ADULT SUPPORT.

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University
www.developingchild.harvard.edu
Addicted Family Defense Mechanisms

- Delusion
- Denial
- Minimizing
- Projection
- Rationalization
A Parent who is misusing alcohol or other drugs

- May be less attentive to the child while drunk or high – or abusively attentive
- May be unable to fulfill their role as a parent, including providing medical treatment
- Is more likely to be diagnosed with a co-morbid psychological problem
- May be chronically physically ill from using
- May be engaged in illegal activities
- Places financial stress on the family system
Consequences for Children

- Daughters more likely to connect to/marry men who also misuse substances
- More depression and suicide in adolescents; more PTSD in adulthood
- More involvement in Juvenile Justice
- More illness, injuries, poisonings, substance abuse, hospitalizations
- More risky sex and undefined moral boundaries
- More absenteeism from school, less help with homework
Enabling is defined as **reacting** to a person in such a way to **shield** him or her from experiencing the **full impact** of the **harmful consequences** of the behavior.

Enabling behavior differs from helping in that it permits or **allows the person to be irresponsible or to unwittingly continue down the path of self–destruction.**

Offering alternatives that begin a firm path toward recovery is not enabling – it is a step toward accountability.
Affected Spouses and Children Need a Framework for What They are Experiencing

- Information about addiction as a family disease
- Information about the hope of treatment and the process of recovery
- Information on community-based supports such as Al-Anon and Alateen
- Validation of their experiences
- Reassurance that affected children and spouses need and deserve support and help…whether or not the addicted family member recovers
Talking Helps to Break the Silence

Talk TO the children of alcoholics and drug addicts and talk ABOUT them; explain the disease and the 7 Cs

I didn’t Cause it
I can’t Cure it
I can’t Control it
I can help take better Care of myself:
by Communicating my feelings
making healthy Choices
and by Celebrating myself.
Other Messages Children Need

• You’re Not Alone.
• It’s Not Your Fault.
• You deserve help, and there are safe people who can help you.
• Addiction is a health problem.
• It’s OK to feel our feelings.
• It’s important to talk.
• Treatment helps, and recovery happens.
There are Many Message Delivery Systems

- Health Care Systems
- Treatment Systems
- Faith Communities
- Courts
- Community Coalitions
- Schools
- Workplace Programs
- Knowledgeable and caring family members
Help for the Children

There is great value in educational support group activities –
– Provide beneficial education for all children and youth
– Especially helpful for children living with alcoholism or drug dependence in the family

Tools to help:

- SAMHSA’s *Children’s Program Kit*
- NACoA’s *Celebrating Families!*™
- *Student Assistance Programs (SAPs)*
Group Work is the Preferred Strategy Because:

- Kids learn they are not alone.
- Group work increases the likelihood of breaking denial.
- Group work provides safety and protection.
- Kids experience healthy social interactions.
- Group work builds trust in social situations.
- Group work provides opportunities for group validation.
- Group work allows kids to try out new approaches to old problems.
COA Groups

• Let them know they are not alone!
• Validate their perceptions and interpretations
• Help them gain some perspective
• Absolve them of blame
• Help them separate parent from parental behavior
• Offer hope, self-care skills and help to cope
• Provide a safe outlet for anger
• Explain risks of behavior, and how to identify safe people in their lives
• Help build self-esteem
Benefits of Support Group Intervention

- Resiliency
- Family stress is reduced
- Children’s sense of stigma and shame are reduced
- Improved school attendance and performance
- Family recovery is enhanced
- Treatment outcomes improve
- Can change the trajectory of a child’s life
Critical Information/Skills for Children in Support Groups

Children’s educational support programs provide education about addiction to give children a framework for what they are experiencing as well as:

- Information about addiction as a family disease
- Information on community based support such as Alateen, and school based student assistance programs
- Clarification about and validation of their experiences
- Resources for them to learn how to get their questions answered and talk about feelings
- Information to learn that treatment is available and recovery is a process
- Information on resilience they have developed as a result of their experiences
- An understanding of the importance of self-care skills
- The development of problem-solving strategies
- An ability to identify and practice ways to say no
- An opportunity to learn new and healthy coping skills
What happens if adults don’t help?

Children are at greater risk for:

- Physical, verbal or emotional abuse
- Poor school performance
- Lacking of trust in others, including God
- Diminished spiritual life
- Truancy or trouble with the law
- Poor choice of life partners
- Diminished economic opportunities
- Re-offending
The Vision

A community environment where all members of a family affected by addiction know there are knowledgeable and caring people “right next door” who:

– Understand what they are experiencing
– Care about them and are available to them
– Can help them find emotional and physical safety
– Can support their healing and recovery
The overall goals of the program are to build strengths and to foster resilience among children of addicted parents (COAs). The skills the program is designed to build are social competence, problem solving, coping, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future.

This kit was developed to assist treatment providers, schools and community-based youth-serving systems to educate and support children affected by parental alcohol and drug addiction, and to bring the benefits of hope, healing, and recovery to children of addicted persons.
Breaking the Rules Helps to Learn the The 7 Cs

I didn’t CAUSE it.

I can’t CURE it.

I can’t CONTROL it.

I can help take CARE of myself by: COMMUNICATING my feelings,

Making healthy CHOICES, and CELEBRATING ME!!!
Breaking the Rules -

• Helps Children to Learn the **The 7 Cs**

• Frees family members to address their own losses and begin their own path to recovery

• Offers the opportunity for each to heal from addiction’s painful control over their lives

• Educational support groups – in schools, at treatment facilities, in recovery community support programs, in youth programs, in summer or weekend camps – break the rules, bring clarity and hope and start the recovery process.