

Substance Misuse and Neglect Impact on Family

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Background

In the UK there are estimated to be between 250,000 and 350,000 dependent children living with parental drug misuse, and 920,000 living with parental alcohol misuse. Parental substance misuse can cause considerable harm. Children are at risk from emotional and physical neglect as they grow up. They also risk developing emotional and social problems later in life. More needs to be known about their lives so that effective policy and service support can be developed.

“About suffering they were never wrong, The old Masters:
how well they understood its human position: how it takes
place while someone else is eating or opening a window or
just walking dully along”

W. H. Auden **Musee des Beaux Arts**

What do we expect of parents/care givers?

- Parents/care givers – centre of our world as children
- They help us learn to understand and make sense of the world
- Security; reassurance; certainty
- Development of sense of self; value of others; confidence; empathy

“It’s no bad people that become addicts and it’s no bad people that don’t care about their kids. It’s just people that addiction has gotten a grip of and that is more powerful than anything, even the love that a parent would have for their children. It just overrules even that”

(Parent)

Research Messages

'There is a reasonable basis in research to suggest that a child whose parent is misusing substances is at increased risk. Substance misuse can demand a significant proportion of a parent's time, money and energy, which will unavoidably reduce resources available to the child. Substance misuse may also put the child at an increased risk of neglect and emotional, physical or sexual abuse, either by the parent or because the child becomes more vulnerable to abuse by others.'

(V Lewis 1997)

Picture of Childhood

- Exposure to parental substance misuse
- New family member
- Hurt
- Role Reversal
- Disruption
- Stigma
- Fear
- Not being there

Fear

It's not like they drank all the time, we had quiet times too.... But from Wednesday to Sunday you knew what was coming.....even the dog was on edge"

(Young Person; Parents alcohol misusers)

Role Reversal

"I'd only be (in school) for a certain amount of time and then I'd have to go home and look after my mum ... I used to come in from school. I would do the dishes. Put, like, all the clothes in the washing machine. My mum would be lying out of it on the couch and I'd have to try and cook dinner."

(Young Person; mother alcohol misuser)

Conclusions

- Confusion, unreliability, frightened lonely world
- Child's place relative to the substance in parent's priorities
- Needs ignored
- Neglect – material, medical, physical
- Impaired social and emotional development
- Those they looked to for care, certainty and security – least able to provide it
- Unpredictability; lack of trust

Over to You....

- What are the strengths locally in supporting your work with young people?
- What are the main challenges?

Message to Professionals

“ They should be helping the parents....and help the children get through what’s going on in the house....they should sit down and listen to children who have been through it, instead of thinking ‘It’s our rules, we have to do it by our rules’ & not listen to the children...they should listen to what the children think and what the children feel.....just because people are children doesn’t mean they don’t know what’s right and what’s wrong.....we know ‘cos we’ve seen it – they don’t know what it’s like living with someone who has been using..... “

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