

# The Impact of Drug & Alcohol Misuse on Parenting Capacity

Translating Evidence to Practice

Series 1 Paper 5

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## Risk Factors

The following factors may indicate a likelihood of increased risk for children if their parents are misusing drugs or alcohol:

- Existence of parental mental health difficulties or illness
- Existence of domestic violence in the home
- The type of substance being misused and frequency of misuse

When parental substance misuse exists, there is an increased risk of the following:

- Increased risk of family conflict
- Higher risk of child being abused and/or neglected
- Increased level of harm prior to intervention in cases of alcohol misuse – this is because service identification rates tend to be slower for misuse of alcohol than for misuse of drugs

## Protective Factors

The following are protective factors which may reduce the impact of parents' misuse of drugs or alcohol on children:

- Parents' positive care style and characteristics
- Stable home environment, with family routines and adequate financial resources
- Parent receiving effective treatment for addiction
- At least one supportive parental figure
- One stable, loving and consistent relationship
- A strong social support network
- A committed mentor from outside the family
- Positive school experiences for children
- Children's engagement in a range of activities
- Individual temperament of children
- Promotion of resilience in children

## Definition

*Parents need to have the capacity to provide basic care, ensure safety, provide emotional warmth and appropriate stimulation, offer guidance and boundaries, and provide the child with stability.*

(The Assessment Framework, DOH 2000)

## Parenting Capacity

Parents play a pivotal role in providing a safe and developmentally-appropriate environment for their children. As children grow and develop, a parent needs to be flexible in order to respond to the changing needs of their child. They need an awareness of what is happening in the world around them and the impact of this on their child. While parental misuse of drugs and/or alcohol alone does not predict parenting capacity, it may indicate that a family is at an increased risk of having parenting capacity compromised and this, in turn, will have negative implications for the children in their care.

The apathy and listlessness associated with drug misuse can lead to difficulties for parents in organising their own, and their children's, lives.

Parents who experience such difficulties are unable to meet their children's needs for safety and basic care, are emotionally unavailable to them and have difficulty in controlling and disciplining their children (Hogan and Higgins 2001).

Substance misuse can lead to unpredictable moods and behaviours, which can negatively impact on the attachment between parents and children (Cleaver et al 2011).

A life dominated by drug or alcohol misuse can leave parents with little time or energy to meet their children's needs, limited money, their memory and concentration may be affected and they may lack awareness of their children's basic needs (Buckley, 2006).

## Prevalence

In 2011, Alcohol Action Ireland estimated that parental alcohol use impacted the lives of 109,684 children, and in 2003 the Hidden Harm study estimated between 250,000-350,000 children under sixteen in the UK had parents with a serious drug problem. There are currently no studies estimating parental drug misuse for Ireland.

## Research

## The Impact of Drug & Alcohol Misuse on Parenting Capacity

Research has shown that when children live with parental drug or alcohol misuse, this is likely to have negative effects on their development and wellbeing.

Children may suffer attachment relationship difficulties and may have poorer developmental outcomes in their physical, intellectual, social and emotional development. Their environment may be negatively impacted, particularly in relation to poor living conditions, material deprivation, disorganised or chaotic lifestyles, lack of family routines, diversion of family income, lack of supervision, exposure

to physical hazards or illegal activities and social isolation.

When substance misuse co-exists with other complex issues, the risk of harm is much higher for the child. Mental illness of a parent, domestic violence and substance misuse are strong predictors of child abuse (Taplin and Mattick, 2012).

In a survey of families in social care systems in Northern Ireland where drug abuse was an issue: 87% also had a history of alcohol abuse, 77% had a history of domestic violence and 79.5% had family history of mental illness (Cousins et al, 2006).

### Further Reading

For more information:

*Children needs - parenting capacities.* Cleaver et al (2011)

*Parental substance misuse: addressing its impact on children.* Horgan, J (2011)

*Personal safety for social workers and health professionals.* Atkins, B (2013)

## Current Thinking

Parental substance misuse is associated with high rates of child abuse and neglect and is a common characteristic of families involved with child protection services. These families are more likely to have their children removed from their care and to have them remain in out-of-home care for long periods of time.

The impact of parental drug or alcohol misuse can have profound implications on children's development, however, it needs to be highlighted that their presence is not necessarily an indication of an inability to meet minimum parenting standards.

In families with parental substance misuse, if the situation can be managed so that one parent is available to provide adequate parenting, thereby ensuring the emotional and physical wellbeing of the children, the outcome for the children may not be compromised.

## Practice Tips

**You should be aware of the need for: the safety of the child, the person, the centre, all service users and all staff members.**

**You should be aware of the increased risk of child abuse and neglect.**

**You should attempt to ascertain the extent of the drug and or alcohol misuse, its effect on parenting capacities and if it is impacting on the needs of the child being adequately met.**

**You should be aware of child protection guidelines, the signs of abuse and neglect, and reporting procedures in the event that you are concerned for the wellbeing of the child.**

**You should consider the need for referral to external specialised**

**supports agencies that offer the necessary supports for the parent to manage their drug/alcohol misuse.**

**You should consider the effects of withdrawal on the parent and on their capacity to parent.**

**You should be aware of, and promote, the resources and support networks that may assist the parent in meeting the needs of the child.**

**You should be aware of the role resilience plays in overcoming adversity for children and the methods of its promotion.**

**You should be aware of your own beliefs and past experiences in relation to thresholds of harm and your view of 'good enough' parenting.**

**You should be aware of your legal obligations and responsibilities in terms of criminal offences, including those relating to drug misuse.**

**“ Excessive drinking or drug misuse during pregnancy can result in babies being born with damage to their central nervous system or with behaviour such as poor feeding, tremors, irritability and occasional seizures. ”**

(Buckley, 2006:99)