

Presentation to TD briefing on Public Health (Alcohol) Bill for Alcohol Action Ireland

July 2016

Introduction

Barnardos welcomes the main provisions in the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill which aim to tackle Ireland's harmful relationship with alcohol and bring about significant improvements in public health, safety and wellbeing. The particular measures that will make a positive difference to children include:

- Labelling: Clear labelling will help drinkers understand the health risks associated with alcohol, such as the risks of drinking during pregnancy as well as allowing people to track their alcohol and calorie intakes.
- Restrict prices based promotions: Tactics such as 2for1 are designed to attract price sensitive customers such as students and those on low incomes.
- Stricter rules around alcohol advertising and marketing such as 9pm watershed and having just descriptive details of products rather than selling positive imagery of drinking.
- Introduce minimum pricing – prevent selling alcohol as a lost leader or selling strong alcohol very cheap.

Barnardos has over 40 projects across the country offering a range of services to parents and children. Alcohol dependency is a common theme affecting many families we work with however, we have two specific projects in Tallaght and Dun Laoghaire where we work directly with parents affected by substance and / or alcohol abuse. We offer practical and emotional support to parents to improve their parenting capacity.

Through our experience, we know most parents do not deliberately intend to harm their children or to develop behaviours that are likely to have a negative impact on them. They often feel guilty about their behaviour and ability to cope with their alcohol addiction. However, as alcohol is so widely available and culturally acceptable in Irish society it is perceived to be less harmful than illegal substances with the result that the effects of its misuse on children can be underestimated.

General familial consequences of parental misuse of alcohol

All family circumstances are different depending on the frequency and severity of misuse but common issues identified include

- Inconsistency in parenting styles with routines becoming irregular.
- Parents becoming emotionally and physically detached from their children. Unable to offer the level of support and encouragement required to meet their child's needs.
- Family may experience material deprivation such as lack of food or clothing.
- Parents have reduced sensitivity to risk of danger and may leave children unsupervised.
- Children prematurely may have to care for a parent who is unwell or look after younger siblings as parents unable to conduct domestic and childcare duties effectively.

- Children feeling confused, rejected, burdened and unable to trust parents. This affects the child's self-esteem and ability to cope.
- If violence accompanies the addiction, a child could be at risk of danger if he /she is the victim of the violence or tries to intervene or complain about the parental behaviour.
- Children of parents with chronic alcohol problems are likely to have more problems at school in terms of learning difficulties, reading problems, poor concentration and generally low performance.
- Children of alcohol misusing parents can suffer higher rates of separation from and loss of parents due to imprisonment, hospitalisation and random absences. This distress and separation anxiety can manifest in children developing behaviour issues such as acting out or becoming withdrawn.
- If the mother is pregnant and continues to drink alcohol it can lead to Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder that can cause physiological differences, concentration problems and heart defects. Alcohol is one of the three most common causes of brain damage in infants and the only one that is avoidable.

Case Studies re Alcohol Misuse

Illustrating food poverty as a result of alcohol addiction

Joan is a single mother of 3 children aged 2, 6 and 10. Joan struggles with alcohol dependency. The family presented to Barnardos with a number of needs, the most immediate one being a lack of food for meals in the home. The family were accessing homeless services for meals up to three times a week while cereal was what was eaten at home. The family only had three plates, a spoon, two forks and four bowls in their home.

Joan herself spoke about not having a cooked meal in her own family as a child. Joan was open with staff in telling them she didn't know how to cook as she had never been taught and not knowing how to plan a shop.

As part of the care plan, Barnardos offered practical support work. The keyworker supported Joan in developing a weekly meal plan for the family and from this a shopping list was drawn up. The keyworker also went shopping with Joan to advise her to pick the best and most economic ingredients for the meals.

The final part of the plan was to show Joan how to prepare and cook these meals for the family in the home, with the hope that going forward she could then do this independently. Family cooking utensils, plates and cutlery were sourced for the house also.

Joan really enjoyed this piece of work and engaged well. She continues to plan meals weekly and to cook for the family. The family no longer need to access the homeless service for meals and the children say that mum is a good cook.

Detailed Case study...Illustrating impact of parenting on children

Ann and David have two children, Kevin aged 7 and Marian aged 2. Both Ann and David struggle with alcohol misuse although Ann is now attending a community addiction project to support her recovery. She and David have separated recently and he goes through periods of doing well

enough and at other times his drinking is out of control. When this happens he either shows up at the house drunk or he disappears for weeks on end without seeing the children or Ann. Ann feels isolated in the community and overburdened by the responsibility of being a parent to the children. Ann is doing well in her recovery but everywhere she goes, including the shops to buy bread she has to work to avoid relapse.

For the children, they have erratic and inconsistent contact with their Dad. Kevin has poor concentration and is not mixing well with other children. Marian is very clingy to her mother and has extreme behaviours such as banging her head off walls and floors.

Through our work with Ann, we supported her to gain increased awareness of how her behaviour in front of the children affects them, she learnt to understand what Marian and Kevin's behaviour is telling her and how to manage Marian's behaviour. Although the dad David refused to be involved, Ann was supported to make sure that any contact David had with the children was safe and appropriate.

We worked with Ann to link in with other agencies such as the school, public health nurse, local housing agency and obtain mental health supports.

Ann was also supported in terms of improving her confidence in playing with the children and this was done through weekly play sessions. Kevin took part in our 22 week programme called the friendship group which supported his social skills and helped him to make and maintain friends.

Small changes can make a huge difference and when Ann says "Now I'm finally becoming the parent I wanted to be" that is because she has worked so hard on her recovery and faced up to so much so that her children would benefit. She is excited that:

- Marian is able to sit down with an activity for longer periods of time and no longer throws things or hits out as much at Ann or others. She is sleeping through the night without bottles, mostly in her own bed.
- Kevin is happier and he finds the yard time in school easier because he has a friend to play with.
- Ann is not as negative and doesn't shout as often. She proactively plays more with her children.

These cases illustrate the profound impact on child development that parenting under the influence of alcohol has. It is time for Ireland to grasp the nettle in regard to our casual relationship with alcohol. Having such a nonchalant and dismissive attitude to the impact living with alcohol addiction has only perpetuates the situation and relegates another generation of children to an impoverished childhood.

Barnardos fully urges the quick passage and implementation of the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill.