

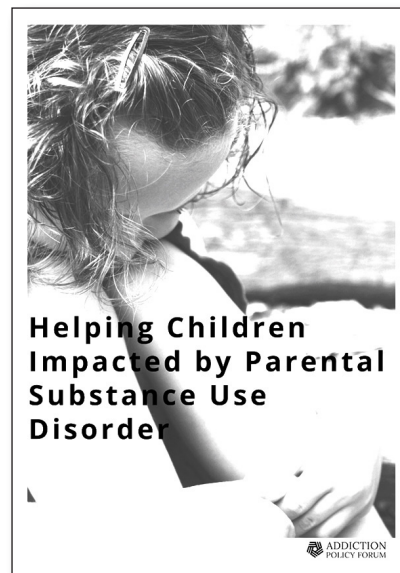


EXCERPTS FROM

Helping Children Impacted by Parental Substance Use Disorder

A substance use disorder (SUD) is a mental disorder that affects a person's brain and behavior, leading to a person's inability to control their use of substances such as legal or illegal drugs, alcohol, or medications. Symptoms can range from moderate to severe, with addiction being the most severe form of SUD. Researchers have found that about half of individuals who experience an SUD during their lives will also experience a co-occurring mental disorder and vice versa. [NIMH » Substance Use and Co-Occurring Mental Disorders \(nih.gov\)](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/substance-use-and-co-occurring-mental-disorders/)

Children who have a parent with a SUD are more likely to see and hear more fighting, witness more crime, suffer more from poverty, and lose more stable relationships with caring adults. The resulting trauma can last a lifetime, harming physical health, academic performance, employment status, and relationship formation. It also puts children at an increased risk for developing mental health and substance use disorders. One of the most important things to remember is that parents struggling with drugs or alcohol are not "bad" parents.



Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur between the ages of 0-17. ACEs, like a parent's addiction, cause "toxic stress," which can change the way the brain develops. Some stress is natural and helps children develop the right emotional responses to life. But brain changes from toxic stress undermine this healthy response process while harming learning and decision-making abilities. Over time, these brain changes may encourage bad decisions and dangerous behavior.

"Children experiencing trauma from a parent's substance use disorder can have very different signs and symptoms," explains Jessica Hulsey, Founder of the Addiction Policy Forum. "One child may take the caregiver role for siblings and even their own parents. They may exhibit high-functioning skills yet show signs of stress and anxiety. Other children may show signs of addiction in the home through unkempt physical appearance or signs of hunger and malnutrition with no caregiver able to provide for clean clothes and care. Other signs may include absenteeism and tardiness from school and expressions of stress and concern about their parent or caregiver's addiction directly to teachers, coaches, and pastors," shares Hulsey.

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Fortunately, there are effective ways for adults to respond to children impacted by parental addiction and begin the process of helping them on a better path. There are also innovative programs and services available to help. Healing from trauma takes time, but the support of a caring adult can make an important difference.

Important Messages for the Child to Hear

You have no control over your parent's addiction. You didn't cause the problem, and you can't stop it. What your parent does is not your responsibility or your fault. You cannot make it better but can take steps to care for yourself. You are not alone, and support is here. Addiction is a disease of the brain. It causes changes in priorities or behavior and loss of control. Get involved in extracurricular activities and things you enjoy at school or near home, like the school band, sports, Boy or Girl Scouts, or others. These types of activities can help you balance your stress from the problems at home, while learning new things and seeing how other people live their lives.


Teach the 7 Cs



I didn't **cause** it.
I can't **control** it.
I can't **cure** it, but I can
help take **care** of myself by
communicating my feelings,
making healthy **choices**,
and **celebrating** me.

Make Sure the Child Has Fun

Help the child feel understood and validated and encourage them to share their feelings and emotions.

 **Full Toolkit:** Helping Children Impacted by Parental Substance Use Disorder
(addictionpolicy.org)

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