



FACT SHEET: Safeguarding Children Living in Families with drug and/or alcohol misuse

Drug and alcohol misuse by a parent or carer has the potential to impact on a child at every age from conception to adulthood. (Hidden Harm 2003 and 2007). Drug and alcohol misuse by a parent is not a neutral experience for a child. The term “substance misuse” will refer to the problematic use of alcohol and/or prescribed / non-prescribed drugs (legal or illicit). It may also include misuse of volatile substances (e.g. butane lighter fuel, aerosols).

The potential impact on children and young people:

Children can be affected by parental drug and alcohol misuse in many different ways and this should never be underestimated. These could include:

- *Pre-natal exposure to drugs and alcohol* – may have an effect on baby/child’s health before and after birth. Some effects will only become evident as the child develops, some will impact on the child for the rest of their life.
- *Impaired parenting capacity* - the use of drugs and alcohol can be an all-consuming activity that leaves little time or space for parenting.
- *Provision of basic needs for children who are physically dependent on their parents*
- *Poor emotional development and attachment*
- *Normalisation of substance misuse and criminality*
- *Lack of consistency and boundaries / unpredictable parenting*
- *Disruption to household routines*
- *Impact on education attainment*
- *Physical Health risks including ingestion of drugs /alcohol, lack of attention to medical needs*
- *Secrecy, stigma and shame leading to poor peer relationships*

The short and long term impact on children will depend on a combination of factors including their age, level of understanding, personality, circumstances, coping strategies and degree of external support. Additionally, children’s responses can alter over time as circumstances change and children adopt alternative coping strategies.

For further details see **chapter 3.15** in Sheffield Safeguarding Children Board Child Protection Procedures.

Strengths and Protective factors in the family:

- Parents recognise the true extent of the effect on their family and make changes
- Parents engage with services and comply with drug / alcohol treatment
- The extended family understand the drug / alcohol problem and offer support to the children
- The child can develop a close positive bond with at least one adult in a caring role (including parents, siblings and grandparents) who provides them with consistent attention, support and can ensure that family activities are maintained.
- The family maintain contact with the universal services that can provide support.
- The child is engaged in a wide range of activities, where they can recognise that they are separate from their parents’ problems to develop their own sense of self and self-esteem.

Action Plan:

1. Parents must be routinely asked if they have, or have had, any issues with any substance misuse. The answers should be recorded in family files and monitored to keep track of changes and regularly reviewed.
2. Note details of the substance misuse agencies involved. If none, ask if the parent wants a referral to be made.
3. Where parents say they have issues with drugs or alcohol check the following:
 - How do they feel that their use/misuse impacts on the child?
 - How do they minimise the effect?
 - Do they have any support systems?
 - Routinely focus the parent’s attention on the impact of their misuse on the children.
 - Communicate openly and frequently with substance misuse services.