

Background:

Whilst substance misuse by parents/carers does not **automatically** indicate that a child/young person is at risk of abuse or neglect, consideration should always be given to the possible **impact on the child/young person**. Research shows that children living with parental substance misuse come to the attention of services later than other areas of concern. Parental substance misuse is strongly correlated with child abuse, domestic violence and family conflict. (NSPCC)

The Possible Impacts on Children and Young People:

Parental substance misuse can have a negative impact on children at each stage of their development. Women who misuse substances during pregnancy may put their babies at risk of impaired brain development, congenital malformations, premature delivery, low birth weight and withdrawal symptoms after birth.

Some possible impacts upon children:

- Physical and emotional abuse and neglect as a result of inadequate supervision, poor role models and inappropriate parenting
- Behavioural, emotional or cognitive problems and relationship difficulties
- Taking on the role of carer for parents and siblings
- Preoccupation with, or blaming themselves for, their parents' substance misuse
- Infrequent attendance at school and poor educational attainment
- Experiencing poverty and inadequate and unsafe accommodation
- Exposure to toxic substances and criminal activities
- Separation from parents due to intervention from children's services, imprisonment or hospitalisation

- Increased risk of developing drug or alcohol problems or offending behaviour themselves

When assessing the risks, practitioners should consider:

- If the parent is willing to acknowledge their difficulties and seek help and support
- The relationship between the parent and the child
- What social support is available to the family, such as relatives or friends who can provide the children with care and stability, offer financial support and make sure the home is clean and safe
- How excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs affects the parents. Some people lose consciousness whereas others may become aggressive. Effects may vary and depend on their current state of mind, personality, tolerance of the substance, dosage and means of administration
- If the substance abuse is dependent, hazardous or recreational
- How old the child is. Babies and young children are completely dependent on their carers for all their day-to-day needs whereas teenagers are more in need of guidance and support as they transition to adulthood
- If the child has some autonomy, is attending school and able to ask for help
- If there's conflict or violence in the home or unsafe visitors
- The parent's and child's general physical and mental health
- If one parent is having difficulties or both parents
- If daily routines are maintained
- If the child has to take on a caring role for their parent and siblings
- If harmful substances and equipment are stored safely and not accessible to children
- If anything has changed recently. Substance dependency is a chronic, relapsing condition and a situation can change very rapidly.

How to Tell if Someone is Affected by Alcohol or Drugs:

You need to make your judgement based on your knowledge of the person concerned. Concentrate on **behaviour** rather than the fact that the person smells of alcohol. The following is a list of suggested effects but is not exhaustive:

- **Noticeable change in behaviour** - aggressive behaviour, using offensive language, becoming boisterous or disorderly, physical violence, incoherence or slurring.
- **Lack of, or reduced, inhibition** - being louder than usual, excessive displays of emotion.
- **Lack of judgment** - being careless with money, annoying other people, showing inappropriate sexual behaviour
- **Loss of co-ordination** - staggering, spilling drinks, bumping into things
- **Decreased alertness** - drowsiness, rambling, difficulty understanding, glassy eyes
- **Appearance** - unkempt, dishevelled

What Can You do to Help the Child/Young Person in School:

- Give the message to children/young people that you will listen to and take seriously any concerns they may have.
- Include parental substance misuse explicitly when doing curriculum work about what constitutes a risk to children/young people.
- Tell children/young people that they have a right to be safe.
- Tell children/young people it is not their fault.
- Look beneath presenting behaviour (research shows that boys are more likely to be picked up in relation to behaviour rather than possible harm they may be suffering)

- Make a referral to Children's Social Care if the child/young person's health or development is being significantly impaired or they are at risk of harm.
- Consider an Early Help Assessment if you have lower levels of concern which would not reach the threshold for referral to Social Care.
- Make sure children/young people know what to do in an emergency.
- If you are not a Designated Safeguarding Lead/Deputy Safeguarding lead, discuss your concerns with your DSL.
- Record all your concerns in order to "build a picture".

Suggested Strategies for Dealing with a Parent Who is Under the Influence Now:

- Talk to the parent away from the child/young person.
- Firmly tell the parent that they are not in a fit state to take the child/young person and suggest that they contact someone else. Help them make the call if necessary.
- If the parent won't co-operate, don't get into a confrontation.
- If the parent leaves with the child and is driving, note the car registration number and call the police (phone 999).
- If the parent leaves with the child, and they are not driving, call Social Care on 0345 045 5203. Please also consider whether a call to the police to request a welfare check on the child is needed.
- If the parent is angry or aggressive **call 999 immediately.**

Engaging Families Where a Parent is Misusing Substances:

- Be open and honest about your concerns.
- Use factual information based on your records of concern.
- Focus on the needs of the child/young person and remind the parent(s) that you have a duty to protect the child/young person from harm.
- Consider family strengths/protective factors as well as the risks e.g. there may be one parent who does not misuse alcohol and is a source of support for the child/young person.
- Signpost the parent(s) to services they could access for support e.g. GP, NSPCC, [Alcohol, drugs and parenting | NSPCC](#), CGL (Change Grow Live) - Aspire recovery service offer drug and alcohol services for adults. www.changegrowlive.org, 0300 5550101, cambridgeshirereferrals@cgl.org.uk.
- Set realistic targets for parents and inform them what the consequences may be if the situation doesn't improve e.g. referral to Children's Social Care.
(Taken from NSPCC.org.uk, 2022)

Guidance for Dealing with Parents Who Are Under the Influence of Alcohol and/or Other Substances

September 2022

