
PARENTAL SUBSTANCE ABUSE INFORMATION SHEET
(For children)

WHAT?

* What is addiction?

Addiction is a chronic, often relapsing brain disease that causes compulsive drug seeking and use despite harmful consequences to the individual who is addicted and to those around them. Drug addiction is a brain disease because the abuse of drugs leads to changes in the structure and function of the brain. Although it is true that for most people the initial decision to take drugs is voluntary, over time the changes in the brain caused by repeated drug abuse can affect a person's self control and ability to make sound decisions, and at the same time send intense impulses to take drugs. (National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse)

* What is a drug?

Drugs are chemicals that tap into the brain's communication system and disrupt the way nerve cells normally send, receive, and process information. There are at least two ways that drugs are able to do this: (1) by imitating the brain's natural chemical messengers, and/or (2) by overstimulating the "reward circuit" of the brain.

* What do children whose parents abuse illegal drugs or alcohol experience?

According to the federal government (<http://www.family.samhsa.gov/set/practicepreach.aspx>),

1. Research shows that children of parents who abuse drugs are more at risk than their peers for delinquency, depression, poor school performance, and alcohol and drug use.
2. Young people with parents who are addicted to alcohol or illegal drugs are four times more likely to become addicted if they choose to drink alcohol or use illegal drugs.
3. Children who begin drinking alcohol before the age of 15 are five times more likely to develop alcohol problems than those who start drinking after age 21.
4. According to one study of over 17,000 people in the United States (The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study), most kids whose parents abuse illegal drugs or alcohol have lots of other stressors in their homes. In that study, almost half of the kids who had two or more adults in their home abusing drugs or alcohol were also being sexually abused. About a third of the kids were being emotionally abused and about a quarter were physically abused. Almost half of those kids saw their mom beaten by another adult in the house and some had family members who were in prison or committed suicide.

WHO?

* Who has parents who abuse drugs?

More than 6 million children (about 9% of all kids) have at least one parent who abuses illegal drugs or alcohol. About 10% of those kids are 5 years old or younger.

* Who abuses drugs or alcohol?

All kinds of people. Sometimes kids love the person who abuses alcohol or drugs and sometimes they hate the person or fear him or her. Sometimes they feel all different things. All of their feelings are OK.

HOW?

* How do drugs work?

Nearly all drugs work by tricking the person's brain. Our brains work through chemical reactions and we have all kinds of chemicals in our brains. We have chemicals in our brain that make us feel good naturally. For example, when we exercise or hug someone we love or pet an animal, our brain releases natural chemicals that make us feel happy and relaxed. In the beginning, taking drugs or using alcohol will cause us to feel way happier and more relaxed than we naturally do. This reaction sets in motion a pattern that "teaches" a person to repeat the behavior of abusing drugs. But the chemicals in the drugs or alcohol confuse our brains and cause our brains to stop making its own "feel good" chemicals. After a while, the person who is using the drugs or alcohol has to take more and more of them in order to not feel really awful because their brain has stopped making its own "feel good" chemicals.

* How can you tell if a person abuses drugs or alcohol?

A person who abuses drugs or alcohol may be able to keep a job and manage their adult responsibilities. When they are not intoxicated, they may be really nice and fun to be around. Sometimes kids say even when their parents are abusing drugs and alcohol, they are still fun to be around. But sometimes that's not true. Sometimes adults act really mean or depressed because of their drug or alcohol abuse. They might make kids feel scared because kids don't know what they will do next or because they make decisions that put the kids in danger. Sometimes they yell or fight or threaten or cry. It can be really scary to have a parent that is supposed to protect you act that way.

* How do children whose parents abuse alcohol and illegal drugs act?

Kids whose parents abuse alcohol and illegal drugs might act in lots of different ways. Many report feeling tired and unable to do their school work because they don't sleep really well since their parents are up late or out of the house. Kids whose parents abuse alcohol or drugs are more likely than their friends whose parents don't abuse alcohol or drugs to be late to school, be held back in their grade and get kicked out of school. Others try to do really well in school and take care of younger siblings because they feel like they have to parent themselves. Some kids even describe doing the grocery shopping and trying to take care of the house. This doesn't usually work out very well since kids haven't been taught by a responsible adult how to do that stuff, so sometimes that is when Social Services comes in to try to help. Sometimes kids whose parents abuse alcohol and drugs end up getting in trouble with the law or school. They might look to gangs for the support they are not getting from home. Others decide not to have friends at all because they don't want anyone to know what is happening at home.

* How do children whose parents abuse drugs or alcohol feel?

- They might feel guilty, like they caused it. Sometimes their parents even tell them this but that is their addiction talking!
- They might feel mad at the person abusing alcohol or drugs.
- They might feel like they can't trust any adults.
- They might feel confused because they feel anger and love and fear and respect of the same person at the same time.
- They might feel worried about what will happen next.
- They might feel really embarrassed.

WHY?

* Why do people take drugs or alcohol in the first place?

At first, people may perceive what seem to be positive effects with drug use. They also may believe that they can control their use; however, drugs can quickly take over their lives. The initial decision to take drugs is mostly voluntary. But when drug abuse takes over, a person's ability to exert self control can become seriously impaired.

* Why do people get addicted to drugs or alcohol?

There are lots of reasons. All of them have to do with the grownup that is addicted. It is NEVER the child's fault. Long-term drug or alcohol abuse causes changes in other brain chemical systems and circuits as well, which gets in the way of the person's ability to learn, remember things, control their behavior and make good decisions for themselves and their kids. Eventually, this can lead to the person having really strong cravings for the drug. Together, these changes can drive an abuser to seek out and take drugs compulsively despite adverse consequences—in other words, to become addicted to drugs.

* Why do some people become addicted, while others do not?

No single factor can predict whether or not a person will become addicted to drugs. Risk for addiction is influenced by a person's biology, social environment, and age or stage of development. The more risk factors an individual has, the greater the chance that taking drugs can lead to addiction.

WHERE?

* Where should you go for help?

Counselors, teachers, social workers doctors and police are some good people you can talk to. It is important to tell an adult if your parent is having trouble with drugs or alcohol . Talking will help you feel better after a while.

Here are some other resources that can help:

Intervention Resource Center at 1-888-421-4321

Al-Anon Family Groups

www.al-anon.org

Alateen for children 11+

www.alateen.org

Alcoholics Anonymous

www.aa.org

Adult Children of Alcoholics

www.adultchildren.org

Website for Teen children of alcoholics - www.shoutinginside.com

<http://www.nida.nih.gov/>

<http://www.drugfreeworld.org/?gclid=CKzcou-13JoCFR4hnAodFFDl3g#/home>

<http://www.family.samhsa.gov/set/practicepreach.aspx>

***Really Amazing Resource:

<http://www.nida.nih.gov/scienceofaddiction/sciofaddiction.pdf>

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