

Alcohol and the family: a position paper from Alcohol Concern



Scale of the problem

Alcohol problems within families cause misery for children and other family members affected. The Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England states that there are up to 1.3 million children affected by parental alcohol problems, but this is probably a conservative estimate. The number of children affected by parental alcohol misuse is certainly much higher than those affected by parental drug misuse, estimated as 5 times higherⁱ. However, services for children and families affected by alcohol misuse are often not available for all families or only available for the problem drinker.

This paper looks at the impact of parental alcohol misuse on children and families and what can be done to support them. Although children can be *particularly* affected by parental alcohol misuse, problem drinking affects *all* family members and recommendations are thus made to support the whole family.

Impact on the family

Problem drinking can affect all aspects of family functioning, with seven key areas of family life

being adversely affected, including its social life, stable finances and good communicationⁱⁱ.

Relationships between family members, employment and health issues can also be adversely affected by alcohol misuse. Heavy drinking is also strongly correlated with conflicts, disputes and domestic violence and this too has a damaging effect on children.

Impact on parenting capacity

- Parents with alcohol problems may become increasingly focused on their drinking, and as a result may become less loving, caring, nurturing, consistent or predictable.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Parents may become unable to care adequately for their children and less able to carry out parental responsibilities.
- Alcohol is present in an estimated one third of domestic violence incidents^{iv}
- Marriages with alcohol problems are twice as likely to end in divorce^v.
- The spouse *without* the drinking problem can often cope by becoming increasingly focused on their alcohol misusing spouse, and therefore not on the child.

Impact on children

- Children can experience a loss of parental availability and feel lonely and isolated, they can also often become the carer of the problem drinking parent affecting their education, peer relationships and family life
- Children can learn "don't talk, don't trust, don't feel" from their parents^{vi}, often tending to see parental problems as in some way their fault and feel guilty.^{vii}

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- Children can experience or witness physical, verbal and sexual abuse and neglect. Alcohol plays a part in around a third to a quarter of known cases of child abuse. ^{viii ix}
- Children of problem drinkers can also experience long-term psychological effects into adulthood. ^x

What can professionals do to support these families?

Alcohol Concern believes that in spite of the many potential negative impacts of parental problem drinking on children and families, parents and children can and do cope in spite of alcohol problems in the family. It seems that some children are more resilient than others and do not develop problems, either when they are young or when they reach adulthood. Professionals should therefore be working with families to build children's *resilience* as well as identifying and monitoring risks. In addition effective support for parents who drink can help them to minimise the harms caused by their drinking or reduce drinking completely. Such work should be part of locally commissioned whole-family services for all family members, with accredited training and supervision available for professionals.

Building stable families for children to grow

Professionals working with families with alcohol problems can build resilience amongst children by supporting both problem drinking parents and other family members to work towards family cohesion and harmony, secure and stable relationships and the presence of a stable adult figure. In addition, where the child has good social networks, particularly with adults, a sense of self-efficacy, and high self-esteem

and confidence will all contribute to building children's resilience irrespective of their parents drinking. These are all important factors that professional, parents and family members can work towards ^{xi}.

Importantly, Commissioning Groups and senior managers must ensure that a whole-family approach exists to work with all families members to support equally children, problem drinkers and non-drinking family members. In this way, families can be supported to remain stable and build the best environment for children.

Professionals working with children

Professionals working with children severely affected by parental drinking may need to focus on the child's distress, using active listening skills to help the child cope and make the best of their situation ^{xii}. By reviewing the factors that help to increase resilience, professionals can identify which aspects they are best able to support, e.g.:

- A teacher would be best placed to help children feel good about their abilities and ensure that a child is involved in activities outside school hours.
- A therapist may be best placed to work with children on coping with difficulties and learning to problem solve.
- A social worker could focus on improvements in family and social supports. ^{xiii}

Professionals working with parents

Professionals can support parents to develop specific protective factors that make it less likely that children will develop problems in the short or long-term as a result of parental problem drinking. These factors include an increase in parenting



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skills, a decrease in parental conflict and an improvement in family life and relationships. Parents with alcohol problems should be provided with quick, open-access, professional support to address their drinking. This should tie in with any support needed to improve parenting skills. Both alcohol and children's services should work jointly to ensure common assessment and care planning systems exist.

An underlying principle for work with problem drinking parents is that even if the parent continues to drink, professionals can support parents to ensure that parents put children's needs first: *'Even if the alcohol problem isn't amenable to immediate or even long-term change,...[both alcohol specialists and parenting professionals]... can work on helping parents provide a safe, secure and supportive family environment for children'*.^{xiv}

Support to increase the health, wellbeing and self-efficacy for all family members in their own right will enable families to function more effectively, reduce the impact of problem drinking and assist with building resilience for children.

Alcohol Concern's work to support families

Alcohol Concern has developed resources and training to support professionals in the health, education and social sectors working with problem drinking parents and/or their children. These resources (available at www.alcoholandfamilies.org.uk) highlight that responsibility for supporting families with parental alcohol problems sits within the Commissioning Groups of PCTs and Local Authorities and argues that all agencies have a role to play in identifying and supporting problem drinking

parents and their children as early as possible. Alcohol Concern's Parenting and Alcohol Project has also designed training for alcohol specialists and professionals working with parents and children. This training has been supported by the development of guidance on issues such as promoting protective parenting and resilience, child protection, domestic abuse and multi-agency working.

Alcohol and families policy - the gaps

Services for children and families are patchy across the UK with many families often unable to receive support. Although the Every Child Matters agenda is striving to safeguard and promote children's welfare, the specific stressful impact of parents with alcohol problems on family members is often overlooked in the wider policy context. The Hidden Harm agenda for example primarily tackles parental drug, not alcohol, use. Where alcohol is considered, as in the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England it is individualistic in its focus on the drinker and failed to make any recommendations for action in response to the needs of children and families affected by parental alcohol misuse. Models of Care for Alcohol Misuse passed only scant reference to the needs of children and families. There therefore needs to be much more action at national and local levels to further support families affected by parental alcohol problems.

Recommendations

Alcohol Concern therefore makes the following recommendations, which call for Government to devise and implement a national and local framework for tackling parental alcohol misuse and its impact on children and families, supported by further research into the issues:

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1. A National Alcohol and Families strategy linked to Every Child Matters and Hidden Harm led by a public health minister, to tackle alcohol problems in the family ^{xv}.
2. An identified 'Alcohol Champion' lead in every local authority, ie a representative from the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), to lead locally on family alcohol misuse issues and link alcohol and families targets into other local plans, such as Local Strategic Plans, Local Area Agreements and Alcohol and Drug Treatment Plans.
3. An identified alcohol commissioner in every local authority responsible for commissioning services that support children and families affected by parental problem drinking. Commissioning should include services that work with the whole family, specific staff training, monitoring and multi-agency working to ensure services can support the whole family.
4. Targets and linked resources must exist within local plans to tackle the issue of alcohol problems in the family in order to achieve real change in dealing with this issue. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) within the Every Child Matters agenda should be developed, specifically tackling the issue of parental problem drinking, e.g. increasing the number of families referred to specialist services by 30%.
5. More research to be commissioned on the number of children affected by parental

problem drinking and how services should be developed.

References

- i *Bottling It Up* (2006), Turning Point
- ii The other four are: roles, rituals, routines and conflict
- iii Cleaver et al (1999) op. cit.
- iv Cabinet Office Strategy Unit (2003) *Alcohol Harm Reduction Project: Interim analytical report*, London, Cabinet Office.
- v Ibid
- vi Robinson, B.E. & Rhoden, J.L. (1998) *Working with children of alcoholics: the practitioners handbook* (2nd edition), Newbury Park, CA, Sage Publications.
- vii Velleman (1993) op. cit.
- viii Robinson, W. & Hassell, J. (2000) *Alcohol problems and the family: from stigma to solution*, London, ARP and NSPCC.
- ix Brisby, T., Baker, S. & Hedderwick, T. (1997) *Under the Influence: coping with parents who drink too much*, London, Alcohol Concern.
- x Orford, J. & Velleman, R. (2002) *Families and alcohol problems, In Alcohol Research Forum (eds.) 100% proof: research for action on alcohol*, pp106-110. London: Alcohol Concern.
- xi From Galvani, Templeton and Williams (2006) www.alcoholandfamilies.org.uk
- xii Op cit.
- xiii Robinson, W. (2006) *Protective parenting and children's resilience within the context of parental alcohol problems*, p.8, London, Alcohol Concern.
- xiv Ibid., p.5.
- xv This has also been called for by Turning Point in their *Bottling it Up* (2006) report

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