

Drug and Alcohol Vulnerability

Drug and alcohol

Description and context

For DoCS' Brighter Futures program, parental drug and alcohol (or substance) use is seen as a vulnerability when it adversely affects parenting capacity and therefore impacts on the wellbeing and safety of children. DoCS describes this as drug or alcohol (or substance) misuse. In the literature, 'misuse' and 'abuse' are often used interchangeably to describe problem substance use.

It is estimated that around 50 per cent of child protection reports to DoCS involve drug or alcohol issues. Research tells us that any parental drug and alcohol use can have harmful, or potentially harmful, effects on the children in a family. However, the impacts on children's wellbeing and safety, and on parenting capacity, will vary depending on the category of the substance (whether depressants, stimulants and hallucinogens), the level of use and the characteristics and circumstances of the individual user. This applies whether the substance is illegal (illicit) or legal (licit). Poly-drug use (the use of combinations of drugs and/or alcohol) adds further complexity to the individual, familial and social effects of substance misuse.

Harmful impacts of parental substance abuse can begin before a child is born. Drug or alcohol

misuse during pregnancy may have detrimental effects on the unborn child which may continue to impact on the child's longer term physical and psychological development. For further reading, you may want to have a look at the 'National clinical guidelines for the management of drug use during pregnancy, birth and the early development years of the newborn'.

Parental substance misuse may affect children through:

- the direct effect on parenting behaviour due to the effects of the drugs being used, for example a parent being more likely to use physical punishment, a parent driving while intoxicated, a parent being unable to get up to prepare meals
- the substance abusing lifestyle interfering with appropriate parenting, for example parents not providing adequate supervision
- psychosocial factors commonly experienced by substance misusing parents which impact on their capacity to parent such as, stressful life situations, lack of social and family support and parents' history of care during their own childhood.

Research also shows that substance misuse is commonly associated with domestic and family violence and increased risk of child abuse.

Drug and alcohol issues cannot be dealt with in isolation. Usually, they're associated with a number of other problems and families need ongoing assistance and support to deal with the range of problems they are experiencing. (For information about working with children around parental mental health and drugs/alcohol issues, have a look at DoCS' Dual Diagnosis Kit).

In accordance with State and Federal Government policies, DoCS takes a 'harm minimisation' approach to drug and alcohol use. Harm minimisation says that where people choose to use drugs or alcohol they do so safely and where possible, the aim is to reduce, minimise or limit the harm done to the community, family and individuals.

Harm minimisation focuses equally on the drug misuser, their family and the community. However it's essential to remember that for the DoCS Brighter Futures program the primary issue is always the impact of substance misuse on the safety and wellbeing of children. This must be the main focus of early intervention practice when there is a drug and alcohol vulnerability in the family.

Effective work with parent/s to improve parenting capacity can have major benefits for the child. Parents may not be willing to work on – or even admit to – having drug and alcohol issues that seem obvious to health and welfare professionals.



NSW Department of
Community Services

In a voluntary program, change is facilitated through dialogue, not direction. Supporting a family to change is based on successfully engaging the family, creating effective partnerships, and working collaboratively to help bring about change.

Alcohol is sometimes dealt with separately from other drugs in the literature and by service providers. For specific information about parental alcohol misuse, make sure you take a look at 'Parental alcohol misuse and the impact on children' in DoCS [Research to Practice](#) materials. You will also find useful general information about alcohol, including consumption amounts and effects.

It can help to learn more about drugs and alcohol and their effects and there's a lot of information available to help you do this. Utilise available resources and work together with your manager, colleagues, other agencies and services wherever possible to maximise the help you can provide to families.

Impact of drug and alcohol vulnerability on parenting capacity and child wellbeing and safety

Key learnings from current research

Broadly, three themes emerge in the research about families in which parents misuse substances:

1. Parents have less involvement with children

2. Parents experience increased irritability with children, largely connected to the effects of drugs and alcohol wearing off. Parents described feeling cranky or frustrated or snappy or their interactions were characterised by harshness and
3. There is an atmosphere of secrecy that seems to pervade the family as a consequence of the substance use.

Specifically, research also tells us that:

- children raised in homes where parents are misusing substances are more likely to have problems with brain development and learning, and difficulties with emotional control, behaviour and social adjustment
- children of substance-abusing parents are at greater risk of child abuse and neglect, and less likely to be well looked after
- alcohol or substance misuse is a factor in around half of the cases of child abuse or neglect reported in Australia
- instability experienced by children raised in substance misusing families (for example due to factors such as parent/s' admission to treatment programs, imprisonment, hospitalisation or just the 'emotional absence' of parent/s) is likely to impact on children's emotional wellbeing

➤ parental substance misuse has been associated with low supervision and monitoring, inconsistent, explosive discipline practices as well as high levels of verbal and physical aggression

➤ parents with a substance misuse problem may experience considerable conflict between meeting the physical and emotional needs of their children and sustaining their drug habit

➤ many parents with substance misuse problems were conscious of the fact that their children were sometimes called upon to take on adult responsibilities beyond their years and this has also been a focus of concern for many professionals

➤ while parental substance misuse can have a serious adverse effect on the lives of children, it cannot be assumed that all substance using parents are unable to adequately parent their children.

A study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation '[Parental drug and alcohol misuse – Resilience and transition among young people](#)' provides some insight into young people's experience of the effects of parental drug misuse on their lives and what workers can offer.

➤ Parental drug and alcohol misuse created considerable problems for most of the young people. Many felt that their parents were unable to provide consistent practical or emotional care.

- Many of the young people felt their childhood was shortened through having to assume early responsibility for their own and others' wellbeing.
- Although the young people in this study lived in a range of circumstances, they showed resilience and adaptation in finding ways to deal with their difficulties.
- Informal relationships - with extended family members, neighbours, friends and friends' families - were very important. These relationships made children and young people feel supported.
- A strong personal relationship with a service worker, where this had been experienced, was highly valued.

Evidence-based practice principles

When considering the key messages from research outlined below, remember that the following Brighter Futures program principles also apply:

- child-centred and family-focused
- voluntary
- strengths based
- accessible
- inclusive and sensitive to diversity
- collaboration and partnership
- confidential

Key messages from research are:

- Multiple disadvantages usually accompany substance misuse for example unemployment, educational, poverty, mental health and history of abuse, especially for women. These and not just the substance abuse need to be targeted.
- Health and welfare professionals need to be vigilant about the biases they bring to their work... the important thing is to look at people's behaviour, not at the label that society attaches to them'.
- Gaining and sustaining trust without compromising the safety and wellbeing of children is integral to creating an environment that enables parents to look at their drug use. Parents are generally fearful about the potential implications of admitting substance use for example legal intervention and removal of their children. It's important to balance the development of a trusting and functional working relationship with the need to be clear that children's safety and wellbeing are always paramount;
- Establishing a partnership with parents doesn't mean always agreeing with parents; it's about the need to treat family members with dignity and respect and to recognise parent's expertise in relation to their children's needs.

- Being open, honest and clear about workers' expectations and concerns is beneficial, and where possible health and welfare professionals should always seek to involve the parents as partners.
- Look at how adults manage their own lives as this can be an indicator of their ability to look after a child.
- Often parents feel bad about their issues with drugs, so providing support rather than judgement or criticism is vital; criticising someone in this position may only result in them feeling worse and becoming defensive.

Key messages for you to share with parents about reducing the risk of harm to children include:

- Drugs should not be administered to children under any circumstances (except those therapeutically prescribed for the child or standard doses of over-the-counter children's medicines, for example children's paracetamol).
- Securely store drugs and paraphernalia (syringes etc) in a place where children cannot access them (have a look at the '[Opioid Treatment Guidelines](#)').
- Children, particularly babies, should not co-sleep with a substance affected parent/carer as it puts baby at risk of being smothered. Co-sleeping has also been linked with the risk of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) - the [SIDS](#)

and Kids website provides more information.

- Arrangements for the appropriate care of children should be made if a parent/carer is intending to use drugs or alcohol.

Strategies to use in your work with families include:

- Focus on the child – in your work with parents highlight the potential impacts of substance misuse on parents' ability to care for children.
- Identify the connection between the presenting problem (for example child behaviour problems) and drug use.
- Help the parent/carer identify for themselves the impact of their drug use on them and on their ability to care for their children by appropriate use of questions. These should, wherever possible, help parents to identify and focus on the children's feelings and on their own potential strengths. Here are some examples 'Do you think the kids notice when you're out of it or when you're coming down?' 'Do you notice at those times that the children's behaviour is worse?' 'How do you think the kids feel at those times?' 'What would have to be different for you to be able to get up in time to get the kids ready for school?' You can talk more to your manager about this type of engagement.

- Provide information on options, or a referral, for those considering reducing or stopping their drug use.
- Highlight advantages of parent/carer dealing with substance abuse eg letting them know you are there to work with parent/s and family to improve their quality of life and reduce problems they may be having.
- Aim at helping to create a more safe and stable environment by encouraging the parent to consider where and when they use substances and to introduce daily routines for their family.
- Help parents to identify their goals in concrete terms then structure your work to reflect these goals while always keeping a child-focus.

Parents/carers with substance misuse issues may not admit the problem and, if they do, generally won't disclose the extent of their substance use. It's important not to accept parental accounts at face value if you believe they are not offering the full picture. Sensitive, well-timed and straightforward questions are one appropriate way to get more detailed information.

Endorsed research and resources

General drug and alcohol resources including official Government sites

ActNow – the official NSW Government website on drug issues including Government

policies on drugs including fact sheets on illicit drugs, information on legal issues, plus information on the role of parents, families and the broader community in reducing drug abuse.

NADA – Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies – peak body for NGO AOD sector in NSW.

Australian Drug Information Network (ADIN) – funded by the Australian Government as part of the National Illicit Drug Strategy and managed by the Australian Drug Foundation – a central point of access to alcohol and drug information provided by prominent organisations in Australia and Internationally. ADIN is Department of Health and Ageing Drug Foundation.

ADIS: Alcohol and Drug Information Service – auspiced by St Vincent's Hospital Sydney confidential, anonymous information, advice and referral service. For information about drugs, including methadone, safer injecting advice, parent advice and detox 24 hour (02) 9361 8000 or 1800 422 599 (toll free outside Sydney)

DrugInfo Clearinghouse – DrugInfo Clearinghouse functions as a drug prevention network, providing easy access to information about alcohol and other drugs, and drug prevention.

Families and Carers - affected by the drug or alcohol use of someone else – link to page containing NSW Government Kit.

NSW Health – Area Health Services central intake contacts – NSW Health official pathway to access services.

NSW Health – New South Wales Drug and Alcohol Treatment Service Directory – search facility for drug and alcohol treatment services across New South Wales

Engaging clients effected by drug and alcohol vulnerability

Community Drug Action Teams (CDATs) – a NSW Government initiative auspiced by NSW Health, work to reduce the local impact of drug problems by working with organisations and community groups on local projects and identifying opportunities to improve (especially rural and regional) services.

DoCS' Dual diagnosis support kit – information kit about working with children around parental mental health and drugs/alcohol issues.

Impacts of drug and alcohol vulnerability on parenting child wellbeing and safety

Raising Children Network – Australian site all about parenting.

DoCS Research to Practice information, including Parental Substance Misuse Literature Review, Parental Alcohol Misuse and the Impact on Children, Prevention & Early Intervention Literature Review, Assessment of Parenting Capacity Literature Review.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation – one of the largest social policy research and development charities in the UK, with a significant research and development program that seeks to better understand the causes of

social difficulties and explore ways of overcoming them.

Research in Practice – the largest children and families research implementation project in England and Wales includes excellent papers such as Parental Drug Misuse - A Review of Impact and Interventions Studies and Parental Alcohol Misuse and the Impact on Children.

Specialised services for families

Treatment services

ADIN* InfoExchange Service Seeker – allows you to search for particular drug information and services, and gives you an option to identify a target group, eg women, children, Indigenous people, etc.

ADIN Alcohol and Drug Services – a central point of access to quality internet-based alcohol and drug information provided by prominent organisations in Australia and internationally.

Dual Diagnosis programs NSW and ACT – service directory.

NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA) – funded primarily by the NSW Health Department, provides education, practical support, information and advocacy to users of illicit drugs, their friends, and allies.

Family Drug Support – up to date information on all aspects of illicit drug and alcohol use in relation to families of drug users.

NSW Health – New South Wales Drug and Alcohol Treatment Service Directory – search facility for drug and alcohol treatment

services across New South Wales.

Service Directory: NSW Detoxification And Rehabilitation Services – service directory NSW detoxification and rehabilitation services.

Alcohol information

www.alcohol.gov.au - Australian Government, Department of Health and Ageing official alcohol information site.

Education and Prevention: Alcohol - Australian Government, Department of Health and Ageing education resource.

Specialist culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and Multicultural Services

Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre (DAMEC) – state wide, non-profit, nongovernment organisation funded by South East Sydney Area Health Service aimed to bridge the service gap by assisting and AT&OD service providers to make a difference to the way they access and service CALD client.

Interpreting Services – To access interpreting and translating services contact the Community Relations Commission on 1300 651 500 or the Commonwealth Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

ADIN InfoExchange Service Seeker – see above

Alcohol and Other Drugs - A website for Professionals, CALD page – provided by the Australian Government Dept of Health and Ageing.

Specialist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services

ADIN InfoExchange Service Seeker

– allows you to search for a particular drug, it also gives you an option to identify a target group, eg women, children, Indigenous etc.

Aboriginal Medical Service –

a list of Aboriginal Medical Services (AMS) in NSW, including links to individual service websites.

Australian Indigenous Health

InfoNet – ‘one-stop info-shop’ for people interested in improving the health of Indigenous Australians.

NSW Office of Drug Policy: Alcohol

Info - Indigenous – part of the NSW Office of Drug Policy site.

For a glossary of related terms refer to

Australian Drug Information

Network ADIN Glossary – provides a link to material about each word.

Substance Misuse

Terminology & Classification – World Health Organisation