

Supporting Kids from Families Who Are Affected By Drugs

Five-year-old Shadia and her two-year old brother Kyle were left at home unsupervised and caring for each other for two days. Their mom and dad were partying with friends, using meth and lost all track of time. Their parents were arrested, and the children were taken into custody. As a result, the kids are now in foster care.

Some children may be exposed prenatally to drugs while others have witnessed drug use by family members. How does this exposure affect your children in care? How can you support them?

Researchers estimate that one in four children live in homes with chemical dependency issues. Studies by the Child Welfare League of America have found that substance abuse is a factor in at least 75% of all placements in out-of-home care. Foster and adopted children are often exposed to illegal drugs like marijuana, heroine, methamphetamine, ecstasy, cocaine, Special K, and alcohol, as well as abuse of prescription drugs.

Insight into the Children

Recognize that many children who come from drug-affected families have backgrounds of unpredictability, chaos and danger. Additionally, people who use drugs often promote secrecy, and there is often a lot of mistrust and shame. Try to gather as much information as possible from your social worker about the child in your care (or who will likely be in your care) and his or her family history.

Children will be affected by their parents' drug use depending upon their age when the problem developed and escalated, the parents' pattern of use, as well as the drug of choice and how fast it can become addictive. The parent's role and gender and their use of legal or illegal drugs also determine the effect on children too.

Not all children are affected the same. Drug exposure is just one factor that creates a person, along with culture, environment, support and caregivers.



However, when children are exposed to drug use, the physical, emotional, behavioral and educational development is often affected and interrupts normal development.

Recognizing Effects

Delays in cognitive development, speech and language, and motor skills are often seen in kids who have been exposed to drugs. Fetal alcohol syndrome, audio visual processing and sleep and eating disorders are just some of the physical issues.

Kids can also experience:

- Stress –related health issues (headache, stomachache, asthma)
- Seizures
- Problems transitioning from activities
- Retardation
- Failure to thrive (in infants)

Continued on the next page

Supporting Kids from Drug-Affected Families, continued

Emotionally, children may often be overwhelmed by sights and sounds and have a hard time identifying and expressing feelings. You might also see extreme mood swings and attachment issues.

In reaction to drug exposure, children may take on the role of an adult (“the parentified child”), cry often and be inconsolable, or be aggressive in their actions.

Other characteristics include:

- Hoarding or stealing food
- Difficulty listening and taking directions from others
- Limited social skills
- Short attention span
- Irritability

Children often experience academic and learning problems. They are often unable to focus on their school work due to worries, conflicts, and tensions within their family home. They have often not attended school regularly and, as a result, have repeated grades, transferred schools, and have even been suspended and/or expelled.

Interventions and Strategies

Every child has unique strengths and challenges. As a foster or adoptive family, you can have a significant impact on the lives of children in your care by providing support and guidance.

Creating a positive environment for infants and pre-school children who have been drug exposed often relieves some of the symptoms and stressor exhibited.

The following are some techniques you can try with infants and pre-school children:

- Provide a calm environment with low lights, sounds, minimal stimulation (no mobiles or bright colors), and slow transitions.

- Note signs of stress by increased sneezes, yawns, muscle tone and flailing, hiccoughs, irritability, sucking, and crying.
- On a regular basis, use consistent, calming techniques for infants by swaddling blankets tightly around them. You might also try using a pacifier.
- Rock your child (including vertical rocking at times), hold him or her, or try placing her in a swing or carrier.
- Give massages and learn about infant massage techniques.
- Bathe in warm water and soothe with lotions.

For other strategies to deal with feeding, transitioning, temper tantrums and limit setting refer to www.archrespice.org.

Often school age children have questions and worries about their drug effected parents. By answering their questions, guiding and supporting, they can have a better understanding of their situation.

The following are suggestions to effectively work with children affected by drugs in your care:

- Talk to children about addiction, alcohol and drugs. Check out *The Kids Kit* at: www.nacoa.org.
- Acknowledge their feelings.
- Let your children know it is not their fault for parents or others in their lives are abusing drugs. View a pamphlet about this from the Children of Alcoholics kid’s page at: http://www.nacoa.org/pdfs/ondcpbro_rev.pdf.
- Teach healthy ways to identify feelings and solve problems. Use storybooks with younger children and ask “How do you think this character feels?” or “How can the character handle and solve the problem?”

Continued on the next page

Supporting Kids from Drug-Affected Families, continued

- For adolescents, discuss the safe use of prescription drugs and alcohol.
- Prepare kids for visits or their return home by creating a list of emergency phone numbers and addresses for people for safety and support.
- If age appropriate, suggest that children in care talk with their parents about their worry and hurt when the parent is using. Suggest that this discussion happen with other supportive persons such as with a family member, a therapist, or social worker.
- Use community resources for support such as Alateen, a therapist or AODA counselor.
- For more behavioral techniques, check out the FCARC tip sheet, *Working with Children Who Have Been Traumatized*, at: <http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/12/Working%20with%20Children%20Who%20Have%20Been%20Traumatized.pdf>.

Children in care are often exposed to drug and alcohol abuse. Learning more about how this can affect a child's development can help you continue to develop strategies to help a child grow and build on their strengths and possibilities.



Sources for this tip sheet

- Parents. The Anti Drug.
 - ◊ *Young Children of Substance Abusers: The Case for Alcohol and Other Drug Education* Newsletter of the National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center, Spring 2-005, Volume 14, No. 1.
 - ◊ *Children of Substance Abuse: The Basics* by Texas CASA 2004 Conference, Children of Alcoholics Foundation 2004 <http://www.theantidrug.com>.
- Connect for Kids, Child Advocacy. <http://www.connectforkids.org/node/57#parents>
- Children of Alcoholics Foundation <http://www.coaf.org/professionals/alcvdrug.htm>
- ARCH, National Respite Network and Resource Center, 800 Easton Drive, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27514. 1-800-473-1727 www.archrespite.org/archfs49.htm
- Childwelfare League of America www.cwla.org

Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center life Library Resources

(You can find the following by going to this link www.wifostercareandadoption.org/plugins/library/advancedsearch.asp.)

- Policies and Practice Challenges for Serving Infants whose parents abused drugs (Book)
- Methamphetamine & Drug Endangered Children: Breaking the Cycle (DVD)
- Children with prenatal alcohol and or other drug exposure (Book)
- Understanding the drug exposed child (Book)
- Meeting The Needs Of Drug-Exposed Children and Their Families (Tape)