

# Swept under the carpet:

Children affected  
by parental alcohol misuse



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**Alcohol Concern**  
Making Sense of Alcohol





## **Alcohol Concern and The Children's Society**

**Alcohol Concern** is the national agency on alcohol misuse campaigning for effective alcohol policy and improved services for people whose lives are affected by alcohol-related problems.

We are a membership body working at a national level to influence alcohol policy and champion best practice locally. We support professionals and organisations by providing expertise, information and guidance. We are a challenging voice to the drinks industry and promote public awareness of alcohol issues.

As part of its portfolio, Alcohol Concern set up the Embrace project in May 2008. Funded for three years by the Big Lottery Fund, the project aims to build capacity in voluntary sector alcohol services, enabling them to work more effectively with families where there are alcohol problems and to address domestic violence and abuse.

**The Children's Society** transforms the lives of over 44,000 children and young people each year, providing over 75 direct programmes, including Children's Centres and preventative work. Our aim is to improve the lives of all children and challenge society's negative attitude towards young people. As a national charity and service provider, we benefit from 130 years of experience listening to children and working in partnership with frontline professionals. Through our campaigns and research, we seek to influence policy and perceptions at all levels so young people have a better chance in life.

With a history of providing direct therapeutic services to children affected by parental drug and alcohol misuse we currently run the STARS National Initiative – a hub of information and guidance on parental substance misuse which raises awareness of children's experiences of this issue, increases the capacity of practitioners to recognise and respond to it and informs policy development. The Children's Society's Include Project is acknowledged as the national specialist programme in England for young carers and their families. This is the direct result of the effective consultation with young people and the development of strong partnerships with the statutory and voluntary sector. For more information please visit [www.starsnationalinitiative.org.uk](http://www.starsnationalinitiative.org.uk) or contact 0115 9422 974.

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## Introduction

The effects of harmful drinking on British society are often defined in terms of anti-social behaviour, young people's alcohol use and the cost to the health service.

The serious hidden consequence that is rarely considered, however, is the impact of parents' harmful drinking and alcohol-related domestic abuse on children.

By 'harmful drinking' we refer to patterns of drinking that cause harm to the person drinking or to those around them.

In a recent survey, eight out of ten adults agreed that heavy drinking among parents is a serious problem for children in the UK. And 84% agreed that a parent who drinks heavily is as harmful to a child as a parent who takes drugs.<sup>1</sup>

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Despite the serious effects of parents' alcohol misuse on their children, and the high prevalence of this issue in child protection cases, there are significant gaps that need to be addressed: in training, information, joint working, and resources (for children, parents and professionals working with them). This paper makes recommendations on actions needed to support these children and their families.

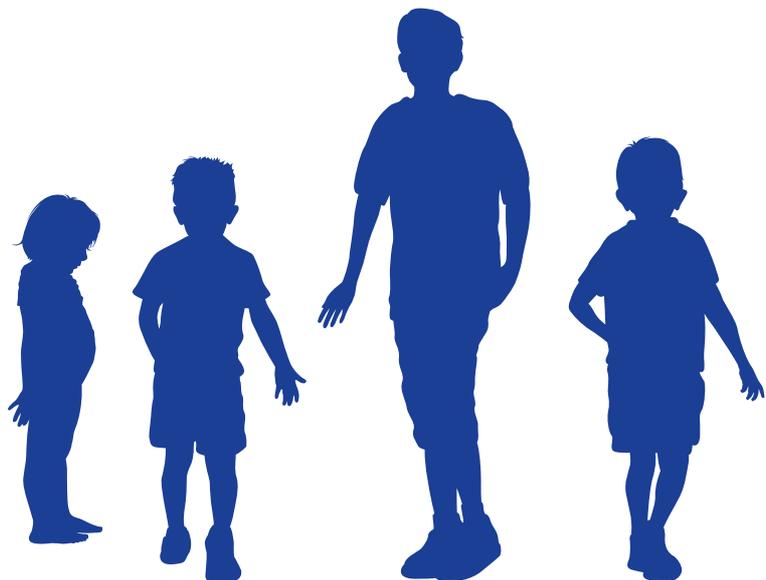
***“Alcoholism is hidden because it's legal  
– it's swept under the carpet”***

***Girl aged 13***



## Key statistics

- Recent research estimates that 2.6 million children in the UK are living with parents who are drinking hazardously and 705,000 are living with dependent drinkers.<sup>3</sup>
- More than 100 children, including children as young as five, contact ChildLine every week with worries about their parent's drinking or drug use.<sup>4</sup>
- There is evidence of parental substance misuse in 57% of serious case reviews (of serious or fatal child abuse).<sup>5</sup> Since there is currently no routine screening by children and families services for parental alcohol misuse, this is likely to be an underestimate.
- In a study of four London Boroughs, almost two thirds (62%) of all children subject to care proceedings had parents who misused substances.<sup>6</sup>
- Alcohol plays a part in 25-33% of known cases of child abuse.<sup>7</sup>
- In a study of young offending cases where the young person was also misusing alcohol, 78% had a history of parental alcohol abuse or domestic abuse within the family.<sup>8</sup>
- In a survey of 250 recently qualified social workers, one third reported receiving no training on substance misuse on their training course whilst half of all respondents had received half a day or less.<sup>9</sup>
- Alcohol use is a feature in a majority of domestic abuse offences.<sup>10</sup>
- Women – including mothers - experiencing domestic abuse are up to fifteen times more likely to misuse alcohol than women in the general population.<sup>11</sup>



## Background

### Britain's drinking habits

Our drinking habits have changed significantly in recent history. Alcohol is now 75% more affordable than in 1980 and alcohol consumption has more than doubled over the past 50 years.

Drinking has moved out of the public domain – pubs – and into the private sphere – home. Thousands more children now grow up in homes where alcohol is misused by one or both parents.<sup>12</sup>

### Effects of excessive parental drinking on children and families

The World Health Organisation identifies parental substance misuse as a public health concern: 'The negative effects of excessive drinking on non-drinking family members, and particularly on children, remain a concern and have to be considered a pertinent public health issue... Children are the most severely affected, since they can do little to protect themselves from the direct or indirect consequences of parental drinking'.<sup>13</sup>

In a recent survey, 87% of the public agreed that heavy drinking by a parent has a negative effect on children and families.<sup>14</sup>

A parent's ability to provide a stable and supportive home environment is very likely to suffer if they are struggling to control their drinking. They may become inconsistent and unpredictable, emotionally unresponsive and less interactive.<sup>15</sup> This can often lead to disrupted households and parenting that is neglectful, passive or even cruel, where children are not supervised or supported and parents are 'not there for them'. A lack of routine, lack of family activities and missing celebrations of special events are common.

The impact on children and childhood is significant. Children whose parents misuse alcohol can suffer a range of poor outcomes. These will vary according to the child's stage of development, but include behavioural and/or psychological problems, poor educational attainment, low self esteem, offending behaviour, exposure to sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, self harm and suicidal thoughts, as well the normalisation of substance misuse.

There are strong links between parental substance misuse, child protection plans, care proceedings and adoption, and being cared for by extended family.<sup>16</sup> For instance, a study of families involved in care proceedings in one unitary authority found that 78% of parents misused substances (including alcohol).<sup>17</sup>

Children are thought to be more vulnerable when alcohol and drug use coexist with domestic violence and where both parents use substances.<sup>18</sup>

### Alcohol related domestic abuse

*"I'm alone in the house with my sister. Mum and Dad have just left, they had a massive fight. Dad has been drinking. He always drinks and then hits us and says it's our fault and that he wishes we hadn't been born"*

Girl aged 11, ChildLine<sup>19</sup>

There is no evidence that alcohol plays a direct causal role in domestic abuse, but evidence suggests a strong association between alcohol misuse and violence in the home. Like parental alcohol misuse, the impact of domestic abuse on children is often manifested in damage to family attachment, aggression or withdrawal; sleep problems, fear and a wish for safety.

A parent who has alcohol problems and who also suffers or perpetrates violence will exacerbate the harm and risk children face. Statistics also suggest that alcohol plays a part in around a quarter of known cases of child abuse.<sup>20</sup>

### **Guilt, conflict, isolation and caring roles**

*“She couldn’t really help us with anything. We had to do lots of things on our own. Nothing was really getting done. I had to get up on my own and help my little sister get ready for school. Sometimes I had to miss the morning off school to take my sister.”*

Young woman aged 17<sup>21</sup>

Children affected by parental alcohol misuse often experience feelings of guilt and see their parent’s alcohol misuse as in some way their fault. They may take on inappropriate caring roles at an early age and become ‘young carers’ for the drinking parent or siblings. This can affect their education and peer relationships, with many young carers dropping out of school altogether.

Often children will be fiercely protective of parents and will keep their parent’s drinking a secret, increasing the risk of social exclusion and isolation. In this situation ordinary activities, such as inviting friends over or socialising, become difficult. Arguments and conflict can become commonplace in the household, leading to fear and anxiety.<sup>22</sup>

Children can also 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 sexual abuse.<sup>23</sup> Children of problem drinkers also often experience long-term psychological effects well into adulthood.<sup>24</sup>

### **Resilience and protective factors**

The impact of a parent’s problem drinking on children will vary from family to family, and children living with parental alcohol misuse will respond and cope differently. There are protective factors that have been shown to encourage resilience in situations of parental alcohol misuse. These include the presence of one stable (usually non-drinking) adult or a close bond with at least one adult carer (parent, sibling, grandparent) and a good support network beyond this.

Reducing violence and conflict, continuing family cohesion and harmony in the face of the substance misuse, doing things together as a family, as well as parenting that is consistent, sensitive, warm but firm, are also protective factors. Schools also play a key role in building resilience; enjoying school, having teachers who are alert and aware of issues, engaging in a range of activities outside home and school, and having positive opportunities at times of life transition are all protective factors.<sup>25</sup>

## Policy and practice issues and recommendations

Research shows that parental alcohol misuse is widespread and that its impact on children and childhood can be very damaging. Yet it also demonstrates that with the right support the harm to children can be significantly reduced.

Children living with alcohol-misusing parents may not be in contact with health or social services until problems escalate and even then, parental alcohol misuse is not always recognised or recorded.

This lack of awareness and the strong stigma attached to parental alcohol misuse means that the issue remains largely hidden, and previous Governments have taken little action to tackle it.

Alcohol Concern and The Children's Society believe that Government needs to improve social work training and partnership working, and address the gaps in resources, information, and research on the scale and nature of the problem.

We believe the recommendations below are fundamental to improving outcomes for children affected by parental substance misuse.

### 1. Training for social workers

According to the Laming Review of Social Work, 'the issues of alcohol, domestic abuse, drugs and mental health come up again and again in serious case reviews'.<sup>26</sup> Shockingly, despite this very high prevalence, training for social workers on substance misuse is still not mandatory.

The landmark *Hidden Harm* report of 2003 recommended compulsory, specialist training for social workers on the effects of parental substance misuse on children. This recommendation was rejected by the previous Government.<sup>27</sup>

The Coalition Government has the opportunity to reverse this decision and ensure that it builds (alongside the Munro Review) a social work profession that is fit for purpose.

Research shows that one third of recently qualified social workers received no training on substance misuse and 50% received half a day or less. The same research found that it takes as little as three days of training to instil the knowledge needed for social workers to feel confident about responding to parental substance misuse.<sup>28</sup>

The Head of Social Work Education at the General Social Care Council has said "(These) very important issues ... are critical to the education and training of social workers in their day to day job with adults and children and families. We believe that the issue of drug and alcohol dependency and abuse is a critical factor in social work intervention that crosses many areas necessitating its generic nature and needs to be part of core training."<sup>29</sup>

**Recommendation: Government should ensure that parental substance misuse and related domestic abuse becomes a mandatory part of all social work degree courses and launch a rolling education programme for those already qualified.**

### 2. Joint working between adult and children's services

At a Children's Society learning event in 2010 with practitioners across adult and children's services in statutory and voluntary sectors, 60% of practitioners identified joint working as the biggest change needed to improve outcomes for children affected by parental substance misuse. This, alongside innovative outcome-based commissioning, based upon a good understanding of need and what works, lies at the heart of improving the lives of children, parents and families.

Government needs to provide robust strategic leadership on both partnership working and joint commissioning between adult and children's services in relation to parental alcohol misuse. Any service being commissioned needs to prove partnership arrangements, have relevant indicators around service delivery and demonstrate how service users (whole families including kinship carers) have shaped the provision.

**Recommendation: Government should ensure that parental alcohol misuse and alcohol-related domestic abuse are addressed within local commissioning arrangements for both adults and children's services and that partnership working is made a condition for funding.**

### **3. Resources and information for professionals, children and parents**

*Resources to use with children* - Surprisingly, there is virtually no material available in the UK for professionals to use with children to talk about their parental drinking. This is a major concern.

A resource is needed to aid professionals, for example, children's social workers, young carers' organisations and schools, to advise children on a practical and emotional level on how to deal with their parents' drinking.

Research shows that professionals may be aware of the impact of parental substance misuse yet still find it difficult to understand how it feels for a child experiencing it.<sup>30</sup>

A resource specially commissioned and involving the participation of children could help to meet this need.

*"(I needed someone to) come and sit and talk to me...ask me what was wrong with me...everything was all about my mum and dad...nothing was about me...why was no one asking why I was coming to school down in the dumps or why I was kicking off?"*  
Young woman aged 18<sup>31</sup>

*Information and support for parents* - Effective support for parents with harmful drinking patterns can help them to minimise the harms caused by their drinking. Whilst all alcohol professionals should have a clear understanding of when to use child protection referral procedures, an underlying principle for working with problem drinking parents is that even if the parent continues to drink, professionals can support parents to ensure that they put their children's needs first and keep them safe.<sup>32</sup>

New research shows evidence that parents invest in denial and strategies of ambiguity concerning their substance misuse despite the fact that children are often aware of the misuse from an early age.<sup>33</sup>

Parents need support to understand the impact of their substance misuse on their children and how to address this with them.

Clear public health information and key messages for agencies to use with parents to improve parenting and minimise harm to children should be standardised, endorsed by the Government, funded and circulated.

**Recommendation: Government should commission a resource for professionals to use with children affected by parental substance misuse and support the delivery at local level of information for parents on the risk of heavy drinking to children.**

#### 4. National inquiry

There is a strong need for a national inquiry into the impact of parental alcohol misuse on children: its scale, its short and long-term impacts, its cost to society and how best to tackle this issue.

This recommendation has been made by many in the alcohol field, including in the Turning Point report '*Bottling it Up*' (2006) which states that 'there is so much unmet need in this area that it must be responded to by Government as a specific issue'<sup>34</sup>. Since the problem remains largely hidden, a national inquiry could make considerable steps forward.

**Recommendation: Government should launch a national inquiry into the impact of parental alcohol misuse on children and the cost implications for society.**



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