

Parental Drinking: keeping the child in mind

Alcohol Action Ireland

27th May 2009

Wendy Robinson

Children & Families Substance Misuse Consultant

The Bottom Line

- Children are multi-sensory
- Problems for parents are problems for children
- Children thrive in homes high in love, attention and routine, and low in tension, aggression and unpredictability

Parental Problems

- Alcohol and drug misuse
 - Domestic violence
 - Mental Health
- Where the parents ability to be present for their children is overshadowed by adult concerns

Parental Substance Misuse

Figures for illicit drugs:

- Between 200,000 and 300,000 children in England and Wales (2-3% children under 16)
- 41,000 – 59,000 in Scotland (4-6% children under 16)

- Figures for alcohol:
- Upwards of 1 million in UK

Irish Data

Childhood Study 2009 – Alcohol Action Ireland

We can say that, due to parental drinking:

- **90,000 children witnessed parental conflict**
- **71,000 children felt afraid or unsafe**
- **71,000 children take care of parents or siblings**

- **Domestic Abuse National Study**
- **34% cases alcohol identified as a trigger to abusive behaviour**
- **1/4 severe cases alcohol always involved**

Parent – Child Relationship

- Attachment is key
- Humans need attachments
- We will adapt in order to achieve them
- Secure attachments are essential for subsequent mental health, self-esteem and positive relationships

Predicting Secure Attachment

- Environmental factors (nb. mediated by quality of attachments)
- Parental attunement
- Parental responsiveness
- Repeats of joyful interactions

Parenting Style of Problem Drinkers

- Inconsistent
- Unpredictable
- Ambivalent
- Chaotic
- Authoritarian
- Neglectful

Family Environment

- Violence in the home
- Marital Conflict
- Separation, divorce, loss of parent
- Inconsistent and ambivalent parenting
- Unpredictability
- Role reversal
- Lack of routines and rituals



Childs Experience

Childs Experience

- Parents arguing, unhappy and preoccupied

Childs Experience

- Parents arguing, unhappy and preoccupied
- Violence between parents

Childs Experience

- Parents arguing, unhappy and preoccupied
- Violence between parents
- Parents not united in parenting role

Childs Experience

- Parents arguing, unhappy and preoccupied
- Violence between parents
- Parents not united in parenting role
- Inconsistent boundaries and rules

Childs Experience

- Parents arguing, unhappy and preoccupied
- Violence between parents
- Parents not united in parenting role
- Inconsistent boundaries and rules
- Negative family atmosphere

Childs Experience

- Parents arguing, unhappy and preoccupied
- Violence between parents
- Parents not united in parenting role
- Inconsistent boundaries and rules
- Negative family atmosphere
- Low level of enjoyable family activity

Childs Experience

- Parents arguing, unhappy and preoccupied
- Violence between parents
- Parents not united in parenting role
- Inconsistent boundaries and rules
- Negative family atmosphere
- Low level of enjoyable family activity
- Financial hardship

Childs Experience

- Parents arguing, unhappy and preoccupied
- Violence between parents
- Parents not united in parenting role
- Inconsistent boundaries and rules
- Negative family atmosphere
- Low level of enjoyable family activity
- Financial hardship
- Poor relationship with one or both parents

Childs Experience

- Parents arguing, unhappy and preoccupied
- Violence between parents
- Parents not united in parenting role
- Inconsistent boundaries and rules
- Negative family atmosphere
- Low level of enjoyable family activity
- Financial hardship
- Poor relationship with one or both parents
- Increased risk of abuse and neglect

Resulting Problems for Children?

- Anti-social behaviour
- School problems
- Emotional difficulties
- Friendship/relationship difficulties
- Adolescence
- Transition to adulthood

Wider impact:

- Schools and education
- Safeguarding children/CPR
- Fostering and Adoption
- Youth Offending
- Primary Care
- Community Safety
- Workforce

Trauma and distress

- 'When children are distressed they are at the mercy of these states. Until these states are brought under control, the child must use all their resources to cope. While they are doing that, they can do nothing else.'

Tronick and Weinberg, 1997

- When caregivers not only fail to provide comfort at times of extreme stress, but are themselves the principal source of that stress.



Key Issues for children

Key Issues for children

- Attachment and Bonding

Key Issues for children

- Attachment and Bonding

Key Issues for children

- Attachment and Bonding
- Identity and Self Image

Key Issues for children

- Attachment and Bonding
- Identity and Self Image

Key Issues for children

- Attachment and Bonding
- Identity and Self Image
- Separation and Loss

Key Issues for children

- Attachment and Bonding
- Identity and Self Image
- Separation and Loss

Key Issues for children

- Attachment and Bonding
- Identity and Self Image
- Separation and Loss
- Control and Suppression of Needs/Feelings

Key Issues for children

- Attachment and Bonding
- Identity and Self Image
- Separation and Loss
- Control and Suppression of Needs/Feelings

Key Issues for children

- Attachment and Bonding
- Identity and Self Image
- Separation and Loss
- Control and Suppression of Needs/Feelings
- Trust

Protective Factors

- **A non-drinking parent** - time and attention
- **Cohesive parental relationship** - united front
- **Cohesive family** - activities and affection
- **Rituals maintained** - special occasions
- **Influence of important others** - stable adults
- **Things outside the home** - own interests
- **Deliberate planning for the future**
 -

How can we help?

- Strategic lead ⇔ policy and practice developments
- Acknowledge the impact of alcohol on parenting capacity and child welfare
- Bridge the gap between adult and child services
- Promote working together across sectors and services

Example:

UK Policy & Practice Framework

- **ACMD Hidden Harm**
 - **Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy**
 - **National Drug Strategy**
 - **Every Child Matters**
- All identify the why and the how in relation to meeting the needs of children affected by parental alcohol and drug misuse**

Main messages:

- Parental problem drug & alcohol use can and does cause serious harm to children
- Reducing this harm should become a main objective of policy and practice
- Effective treatment of parents can have major benefits for the child
- Joint strategic approach centrally and regionally, and services working together is essential

Lord Laming Report 2009: The Protection of Children in England

Recommendations for parental alcohol & drug use:

- **“It is vital that professional staff working with adults are trained to identify and assess the needs of, and risk of harm to children and young people.**
- **These issues are a consistent feature of Serious Case Reviews, demonstrating how seriously they put children at risk of significant harm.**
- **All police, probation, adult mental health and adult drug and alcohol services should have well-understood referral processes which prioritise the well-being of children. These should include automatic referral to social care where domestic violence or drug or alcohol abuse may put a child at risk of abuse or neglect.”**



Safeguarding children and supporting families

Safeguarding children and supporting families

1. Huge challenge to accurately and fairly assess and intervene effectively

Safeguarding children and supporting families

1. Huge challenge to accurately and fairly assess and intervene effectively

Safeguarding children and supporting families

1. Huge challenge to accurately and fairly assess and intervene effectively
2. Important to remember that keeping the well-being of children as paramount usually means supporting parents and keeping families together

Safeguarding children and supporting families

1. Huge challenge to accurately and fairly assess and intervene effectively
2. Important to remember that keeping the well-being of children as paramount usually means supporting parents and keeping families together

Safeguarding children and supporting families

1. Huge challenge to accurately and fairly assess and intervene effectively
2. Important to remember that keeping the well-being of children as paramount usually means supporting parents and keeping families together
3. Should not and need not be an either/or

Safeguarding children and supporting families

1. Huge challenge to accurately and fairly assess and intervene effectively
2. Important to remember that keeping the well-being of children as paramount usually means supporting parents and keeping families together
3. Should not and need not be an either/or

Safeguarding children and supporting families

1. Huge challenge to accurately and fairly assess and intervene effectively
2. Important to remember that keeping the well-being of children as paramount usually means supporting parents and keeping families together
3. Should not and need not be an either/or
4. Requires a high degree of multi-agency partnership working, and open minded professional approach



And more....



And more....

5. Services working with problem alcohol users should see the well-being of children as being of paramount importance



And more....

5. Services working with problem alcohol users should see the well-being of children as being of paramount importance



And more....

5. Services working with problem alcohol users should see the well-being of children as being of paramount importance
6. Those working with children and families should understand why and how to act when a parent has alcohol problems.



And more....

5. Services working with problem alcohol users should see the well-being of children as being of paramount importance
6. Those working with children and families should understand why and how to act when a parent has alcohol problems.



And more....

5. Services working with problem alcohol users should see the well-being of children as being of paramount importance
6. Those working with children and families should understand why and how to act when a parent has alcohol problems.
7. Need to develop united strategic and service approaches despite timescale and priority conflicts.



Why is it hard to respond?

- Normalisation of alcohol in society
- Illicit drugs seen as more risky
- Knowledge and competence
- Professional legitimacy
- Complex and multidimensional needs
- Culture of specialists and experts

A pessimists problem is an optimists opportunity!

- Collaboration towards common goal – we all want the same thing
- Bridge the gap between adult alcohol treatment and child welfare - vigilant towards professional bias
- The family is the client and children are the priority
- Changes in parenting now, changes in alcohol use over time

Best Practice Guidance

No need to reinvent the wheel!

- Supporting children affected by parental alcohol misuse: A Toolkit www.alcoholandfamilies.org.uk
- Working with children and families of problem alcohol users: A Service Development Toolkit www.bath.ac.uk
- Adult Drug Problems, Children's Needs: Assessing the impact of parental drug use www.ncb.org.uk
- Seeing & Hearing the Child: Rising to the challenge of parental substance misuse www.nspcc.org.uk
- Building Resilience in Families Under Stress: Supporting Families affected by parental substance misuse www.ncb.org.uk

Challenges & Opportunities

Challenges:

- Change is slow...for individuals, for families, for communities
- Cross sector issue – no-one solely responsible
- Children need to believe all is well – parents are perfect!
- “It never did me any harm”

Opportunities:

- New evidence points the way
- Small changes- big impact
- Working together
- Everyone benefits when families do well





**For more information please
contact:**

Wendy Robinson Consultancy

9a Nelson Road

Whitstable

Kent

England

CT5 1DP

01227 772712