



# PARENTAL PROBLEM ALCOHOL USE

**The phrase “Adverse Childhood Experiences” (ACEs) is used to refer to stressful experiences occurring during childhood that directly harm a child or the environment in which they live.**

Growing up with parental problem alcohol use is an ACE. We know now from neuroscience that when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity this creates a lot of stress. When this stress response occurs continually, or is triggered by multiple sources, it can in some cases have a cumulative toll on physical and mental health – for a lifetime.

For example adverse events, such as physical, sexual or emotional abuse, neglect, parental problem substance use, parental separation, are all ACEs that can cause biological changes that may have lifelong effects on both physical and mental health.

People who have experienced significant adversity (or many ACEs) are not irreparably damaged. For those who have experienced ACEs, there are a range of possible responses that can help, including therapeutic sessions with mental health professionals, meditation, physical exercise, spending time in nature, and many others.

Reducing stress, building responsive relationships, and strengthening life skills are the best way to prevent the long-term effects of ACEs.



↑ [CLICK TO WATCH VIDEO](#)

## Parental problem alcohol use

**Parental problem alcohol use can be defined as “a situation where a parent uses alcohol to the extent where their judgement or behaviour is impaired and results in a detrimental effect on the children in the family.”**

Parental problem alcohol use can damage and disrupt the lives of children and families in all areas of society, spanning all social classes and impacting the development of children affected by their parents' problematic drinking.

Growing up in a home with parental problem alcohol use (PPAU) has been recognised internationally as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) for over 20 years.

In Ireland, an estimated 1 in 6 young people suffer the impact of alcohol- related harms at home. Therefore it is likely that today

### Toxic stress

According to the Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, activation of stress-related processes in the brain is akin to “revving a car engine for days or weeks at a time”.

more than 200,000 children in Ireland are living with the traumatic circumstances of a childhood where problem alcohol use in the home is a frequent event.

Children, of course, are not an homogenous group and so their response to this situation will be individual to them. This means that it's not always easy to see these children and what the root of their issues are.

That's why understanding some of the common characteristics of young people experiencing trauma is so important for all professionals.



**RESEARCH HAS FOUND THAT CHILDREN WHO GROW UP IN HOUSEHOLDS WHERE THERE IS PARENTAL PROBLEM ALCOHOL USE ARE MORE LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE ADDITIONAL ACES.**  
**SEE THE ACE SECTION FOR MORE INFORMATION.**

## The effects

**Research indicates that parental alcohol problems rarely exist in isolation from other difficulties such as family relationship problems, trauma in the background of one or both parents, domestic abuse, parental mental health issues, bereavement, and financial hardship.**

Studies have found that there is a serious risk that parents with alcohol problems may neglect their children. Such neglect can have a negative impact on children's emotional and physical development and education, and put them at risk of physical and sexual abuse. It's also true that children may not

experience serious abuse, but they still suffer from neglect as the parent in question may not be available to meet their needs.

There are a range of ways a child might act and feel because of dealing with problem alcohol use in the home. Children growing up with a parent with an alcohol use disorder may experience higher rates of emotional problems and increased disruptive behaviours such as hyperactivity in childhood and conduct problems as teenagers. Due to the fact that they might have to take on a parenting role at home, they may also appear to be the 'perfect' child and have very high standards for themselves and others. They may also appear distracted and disconnected - ie daydreaming in school, due to hyper-vigilance at home, i.e. worrying about the parent and what is coming next.

### Children can be:



**SILENT &  
WITHDRAWN**



**GUILTY &  
ASHAMED**



**ANGRY &  
DSYREGULATED**



**STRIVING FOR  
PERFECTION**



**ACTING AS  
A PARENT**

Read more about potential characteristics of young people [here](#).

## Resources for professionals

**Many different professionals come into contact with children and families and that is why it's important that all professionals can recognise how ACEs can impact young people and respond accordingly. Here are some helpful resources for professionals relating to problem alcohol use in the home.**



ADDICTION COUNSELLORS/  
OTHER COUNSELLORS



FAMILY SUPPORT WORKERS



MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS



TEACHERS/ EARLY YEARS



GPS/ DOCTORS



SOCIAL WORKERS



A range of specially designed resources for all professionals from Scotland.



Social worker toolbox - a variety of helpful booklets for working with young people.



Resources from the UK's National Association of Children of Alcoholics.



Information for teenagers on coping with a parent's problem alcohol use.



A wide range of articles, research and resources for all professionals.



An overview of support services available in Ireland for families dealing with this issue.



Resources and information for teachers on trauma-informed education.



National policy for working together - a joint strategy from Tusla and the Health Service Executive.



View the Health Service Executive resource How to help the child of a problem drinker here.



Building Our Children's Developing Brain. This webinar resource can be used by parents or professionals to help parents.