



The Effects of Parental Substance Misuse on the Lives of Children and Young People: Educational Attainment

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Abstract

This literature review looks at the effects of parental substance misuse on the lives of children and young people. Particular attention is given to its effects on children's educational attainment. While the findings in the literature are somewhat mixed, this review concludes with some tentative suggestions on the best way to provide help and support for children and families.

Clarification of Terms

The term 'children' refers to individuals up to the age of eighteen. The term 'parent/parental' is used to include all mothers and fathers (biological and non-biological, resident or non-resident), expecting mothers and fathers, and caregivers who have guardianship responsibilities for children.

Keywords

Parental drug misuse, children affected by drug misuse, education, young people

Key Points

- Parental substance misuse has a range of negative outcomes for children
- Educational attainment is an area that may be adversely affected by parental substance misuse but can also be an area for children to distance themselves from their parents by pushing themselves academically.
- Extra support for school work by providing both one-to-one and group sessions with children who struggle academically could be key to offsetting potentially negative educational outcomes
- Being able to meet other children who are affected by parental substance misuse can help combat social exclusion

Background

There has been a growing recognition within Scotland of the influence of parental alcohol and drug misuse on children and young people's lives. This briefing aims to inform those working with children and families affected by drug and alcohol use of the key findings identified in the literature concerned with providing help and programs to children

and families. Parental drug and alcohol misuse can have an adverse impact on all aspects of a child's life, and to differing extents depending on the demographics of the child. Practitioners should be aware that children's experiences, regardless of how similar they appear to be, are often very diverse. There is a growing body of literature (particularly

from the United States) which looks to understand the wider effects of parental drug use on child welfare, and how practitioners can alter programmes to help children effectively. However, there are significantly fewer studies which explore the effectiveness and need for education based services for children affected by parental substance misuse. This research briefing will first address the key findings of the literature. It will then give a brief introduction to the wider effects of parental substance misuse and its impact on children in Scotland. Before giving recommendations, the briefing will examine the themes which exist in the literature and discuss the effects of parental drug misuse on children's academic achievements, and what children affected by such issues say may help them.

Findings

In 2014, Childline Counsellors in Scotland carried out almost a thousand sessions with children concerned about parents abusing alcohol and drugs. Nearly three-quarters of the calls were made from children under the age of fifteen¹. Many of the children calling Childline had "struggled alone" having not spoken about parental substance misuse outside their family. For the minority who did speak out, friends were cited as the most frequent confidant. Scotland has an estimated 60,000 problem drug users and high levels of alcohol problems, putting it among the highest-ranked countries in Europe for alcohol and drug problems per head of population. There are an estimated 50,000 children of problem drug users in Scotland². The Scottish Government has created a number of policies to address this issue.

This includes 'Getting Our Priorities Right' and 'Hidden Harm',³ which have provided recommendations for local level developments. However, the effectiveness and scope of these developments remain unclear.

Parental substance misuse can adversely affect the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of children. The literature highlights that children affected by parental substance misuse may have heightened risk of injury, poor mental health, domestic abuse and the normalisation of offending behavior, amongst other issues⁴. It can also affect a child's academic achievements, something this research briefing aims to explore. Practitioners who work with children affected by parental substance misuse should recognise that parental substance misuse does not inevitably or automatically make children at risk of adverse development compared to their peers. The literature highlights that many children of substance misusing parents receive "good parenting, stability and have all their needs met" despite other difficulties and often secretive lifestyles. Thus, practitioners and services must be aware that labelling children "at risk" may actually hinder them from receiving the help they require⁵.

How can parental substance misuse affect children and their education?

The literature highlights different ways parental substance use can affect children's education. The research demonstrates the variety of negative effects of, though there is a strand that finds it can have, unintentionally positive effects that partially offset the more damaging aspects.

Negative effects

According to the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress (2014)⁶, children from substance abusing families are more likely to:

- Have learning disabilities
- Repeat more grades
- Attend more schools
- Be truant
- Be delinquent
- Drop out of school because of pregnancy, expulsion, or institutionalisation

Davies (2010)⁷ also identifies negative links between parental substance misuse and children's educational attainments. Davies states that affected children may display behaviours which are identifiable to teachers, such as:

- Exhibiting inconsistent academic work
- Being late or frequently absent (there is evidence that children may miss school regularly by being kept at home due to caring responsibilities and left with little time to socialise)
- Having a parent that is difficult to contact, or fails to keep scheduled meetings and routines
- Have emotional tirades or other disruptive behaviours

Mixed Outcomes

Academics such as Winters (2006)⁸ highlight that some children and young people affected by parental substance misuse achieved academic results to attend college or university as a means of distancing themselves from their parent's lifestyle and that they were encouraged to do so by a source other than their parents. A desire to distance themselves from their parent's lifestyle was a frequently listed theme within Winter's research. It is a primary influence in achieving the academic grades to attend college or university for these young people.

The literature therefore does not point unanimously in a single direction on the effects of parental substance misuse on a child's academic performance. However, the conclusion that parental substance misuse impacts a child's academic performance negatively is more commonly reached. Statistical studies that consider this relationship are also not unanimous, but many reach similar negative conclusions. For example, a study conducted in Sweden highlighted that at age four, children prenatally exposed to methamphetamine abuse by their mothers had significantly lower IQ scores than other children⁹, and by age eight, these same children displayed "delays" in the subjects of mathematics and language¹⁰. However, research conducted by Lester and LaGasse (2010) found that in a review of twenty-one studies of prenatal cocaine exposure on four to thirteen-year-old children, negative effects on IQ, school performance, and academic achievement were found in only seven of the observed studies¹¹.

Consequences

Thus, although the literature is not unanimous, the general direction points to the conclusion that the academic performance of children is negatively affected by parental substance misuse. This negative affect can lead to lifelong consequences for children. For example, through an inability to attend school regularly and appropriately, social isolation begins to grow and becomes more severe as the child grows older. Children in this circumstance can exhibit caution about exposing family life to outsiders and live in a circle of denial and secrecy due to shame and fear¹². This social isolation from others is a central problem faced by children affected by parental substance misuse. Furthermore, negative academic outcomes may extend to later problems in life such as unemployment and a heightened risk of poverty¹³. Thus, there is room for the development of programs which aim to help children affected by parental substance misuse to achieve academically at the same rates as their peers.

How do children see the problem?

There is “limited information about the kinds of services children themselves would find most helpful in situations where their parents have significant difficulties”¹⁴. Charities involved with helping children affected by parental substance misuse have compiled a list of what, in their experience, children have found or may find helpful in dealing with their stresses. A comprehensive resource pack for schools produced by The Princess Royal Trust for Carers and The Children’s Society (2010)¹⁵ dedicates

a chapter to the needs of children caring for parents with drug and/or alcohol problems. This resource provides a list of what young carers affected by parental substance misuse require from schools; (although it is unclear whether this list has been compiled with the involvement of children and young people). The key recommendations are the following:

- More understanding
- More people to talk to who can deal with their situations
- Extra support with school work
- For schools to raise the awareness of the dangers of drugs in the curriculum
- To be able to meet other children who are affected by parental substance misuse
- For school nurses to check they are okay and undertake home visits and meet the family
- To be taught more life skills

(The Princess Trust for Young Carers and The Children's Society, 2010:18-19)

Limitations

As previously noted, there is a lack of understanding in the literature on what children affected by parental substance misuse may find useful in managing their difficulties. Thus, in this briefing there is a reliance on charities and practitioners to provide information on what they think may help these children. It is possible that this does not actually reflect the views of children affected by parental substance misuse.

Furthermore, as children affected by parental substance misuse are often secretive about their lifestyles, they may not be seen or classified as children affected by parental substance misuse. This can call into question the accuracy of available statistics.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Considering the potential effects on academic performance produced by this issue, providing both one-to-one and group sessions to help children who struggle academically with their school work would likely be beneficial. Providing such school sessions would allow some factors that children regard as important to them to be addressed. This includes being able to meet other children who are affected by parental substance misuse, which may help combat social exclusion, and providing academic

help, which may benefit children in later life. However, practitioners and programme developers must make sure that the attendance of children is voluntary. Affected children should not automatically be deemed “at risk” of academic failure and its consequences because of their circumstances. The literature actually suggests that the opposite may be true for some affected.

There is a dearth of literature which provides adequate understanding of what children affected by parental substance misuse may find helpful. Although charities and programme developers have created some resources, there is evident space for research to be developed into what children themselves may find helpful in managing their often-chaotic lifestyles and the consequences this may have. This is especially true for Scotland, where many children live with parental substance misuse.

¹ BBC News. (2014). *Sharp rise in ChildLine drink and drug abuse calls*. Available: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-27428731. Last accessed 10th August 2017.

² Liddel, D. (2012). *Parental drug and alcohol problems*. Available: www.parentingacrossscotland.org/publications/essays-about-parenting/parenting-under-pressure/parental-drug-and-alcohol-problems. Last accessed 10th August 2017.

³ The Scottish Government (2008). *Getting it Right for Children in Substance Misusing Families*. Available: www.gov.scot/Publications/2008/05/22161610/7. Last accessed 13th August 2017

⁴ Velleman, R. and Templeton, L. (2016). 'Impact of parents' substance misuse on children: an update'. *BJPsych Advances*. 22 (2), 108-117.

⁵ Newcastle upon Tyne Area Child Protection. (2002). *7. PARENTAL SUBSTANCES MISUSE AND THE EFFECTS ON CHILDREN*. Available : <https://lx.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Parental%20substance%20misuse%20and%20the%20effects%20on%20children.pdf>. Last accessed 13th August 2017.

⁶ The American Academy of Experts on Traumatic Stress. (2014). *Effects of Parental Substance Abuse on Children and Families*. Available: www.aquets.org/article230.htm. Last accessed 10th August 2017.

⁷ Davies, L. (2010). 'Guide to Children Affected by Parental Drug Abuse'. *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed for Quick Review*. 75 (8), 62-64.

⁸ Winters, A. (2006). 'Influential Factors of Parental Substance and Alcohol Abuse on Children's Academic Achievement.'

Challenging Paradigms: New Frontiers in Graduate Research. 2 (1), 1-19.

⁹ Billing L, Eriksson M, Steneroth G, Zetterstrom R. 'Pre-school children of amphetamine-addicted mothers. I. Somatic and psychomotor development.' *Acta Paediatr Scand.* 1985;74(2):179-84

¹⁰ Billing L, Eriksson M, Jonsson B, Steneroth G, Zetterstrom R. 'The influence of environmental factors on behavioral problems in 8-year-old children exposed to amphetamine during fetal life.' *Child Abuse & Negl.* 1994;18(1):3-9.

¹¹ Lester B, Lagasse L (2010). 'Children of addicted women.' *J Addict Dis.* 29 (2):259-76.

¹² Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) (2003) Hidden harm: responding to the needs of children of problem drug users. London: Home Office.

¹³ Yaghoubi-Doust, M. (2013). 'Reviewing the Association between the History of Parental Substance Abuse and the Rate of Child Abuse!' *Addiction Health.* 5 (3-4), 126-133.

¹⁴ Stratham, J. (2004) 'Effective services to support children in special circumstances.' *Child: Care, Health and Development* 30(6): 589-598.

¹⁵ https://professionals.carers.org/sites/default/files/supporting_young_carers_in_schools_-_an_introduction.pdf

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