



**FAMILIES NEED
FATHERS**

Fathers suffering from substance abuse

Information and Research

There is no universally accepted definition of substance abuse; it refers generally, however, to the excessive use of a substance – particularly alcohol and drugs. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders definition is most commonly cited and defines substance abuse as ‘maladaptive pattern of substance use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress’ and defines four systems which may be exhibited:

1. Recurrent substance use resulting in a failure to fulfil major role obligations at work, school, or home
2. Recurrent substance use in situations in which it is physically hazardous
3. Recurrent substance-related legal problems
4. Continued substance use despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused or exacerbated by the effects of the substance¹

The purpose here is to raise some of the specific challenges facing fathers who suffer from substance abuse and the impact this has on themselves and their families.

Challenges

- Recent studies indicate that there are between 250,000 and 350,000 children of problem drug users in the UK, representing 2-3% of all under 16 years olds. Around 37% of fathers were still living with their children, compared to 64% of mothers².
- Studies indicate that approximately 800,000 children - as many as one in 15 - are living

with parents experiencing serious alcohol problems³.

Lack of understanding/non-involvement:

- Substance abuse is a problem widely researched and the impact it can have upon children is heavily publicised – however, recent studies have indicated a lack of research into substance abuse specific to fathers. One study notes that, “the status of substance abusing fathers is rarely acknowledged in the conceptualisation of public policy and alcohol abuse”⁴ while another states that ‘the studies that do attempt to explore these issues reveal that fathers are overwhelmingly placed, or place themselves, in a peripheral position where the care of their child is concerned’⁵.
- Further to this – one study suggests that where substance abuse is a concern. “Fathers are typically viewed as entirely negative influences that need to be actively excluded from the lives of their children”⁶.

Effects of substance abuse on parenting:

The attitudes prevalent regarding a father that abuses substances are established through very

3 Alcohol Concern 2000 – accessed at <http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk/servlets/doc/442>

4 Angus Bancroft, Sarah Wilson, Sarah Cunningham-Burley, Kathryn Backett-Milburn and Hugh Masters ‘Parental drug and alcohol misuse Resilience and transition among young people’ (Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh 2004)

5 Lorna Templeton, Sarah Zohhadi, Sarah Galvani, Richard Velleman, ‘Looking Beyond Risk Parental Substance Misuse: Scoping Study’ (Mental Health Research & Development Unit University Of Bath, Avon & Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust - 2006)

6 McMahan TJ & Giannini FD (2003). Substance-abusing fathers in family court: Moving from popular stereotypes to therapeutic jurisprudence. *Family Court Review* 41; 337

1 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition (American Psychiatric Association, 1994)

2 Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (2003) Hidden Harm: Responding to the Needs of Children of Problem Drug Users. London: Home Office



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real impacts this can have on the parent, the family and most importantly the child. Recent studies have suggested some differences in behaviour between alcohol abuse and drug abuse (the two primary sources of substance abuse studied) and these are indicated below (they do not however represent an absolute).

1. Failure to enact parenting role: where substance abuse is apparent from an early age one study in Scotland indicates that substance abuse parents often failed to enact what the children need considered expected parenting responsibilities⁷ – for example preparing meals, imposing bed-times/hygiene etc. In some cases the parenting role is reversed as some children felt the need to care for a substance abusing parent or a sibling.
2. Failure to engage emotionally with a child: studies indicate the failures to engage differ between drug and alcohol abuse. In cases of drug abuse research suggests that parents become more withdrawn and fail to take an interest in a child (linked to a failure to perform a parenting role), as evidenced in one study which revealed that 'drugs had the effect of producing indifference and distance in the parent'⁸. In cases of alcohol abuse, indifference is exacerbated by sporadic declarations of love and affection – perceived as non-genuine and a symptom of alcohol.
3. Increased risk of aggression/abuse: studies differ as to the most prevalent cause – some suggest alcohol as the primary substance while studies in America suggest that children of 'drug-abusing fathers (are) more likely to witness violence in their homes than are children of alcoholic fathers'⁹. A study in

Scotland indicates that 'Alcohol tended to make them more invasive, either in a violent or maudlin way, and was associated with parents angrily 'flaring up' verbally or physically'.¹⁰

4. Financial burden: dependence upon a substance brings with it a financial burden, combined with the impact on a parent's ability to work, this financial burden is again going to impact on the parent's ability to care and provide for a child.

Impact:

The effects of a substance abusing parent have been discussed – the impacts that they may have on a child can be severe and long-lasting. Most studies come to the same conclusions regarding the impact of a substance abuse parent: primarily they differ regarding the relative impacts of drug-abuse versus alcohol abuse.

- One study indicates that approximately "one third of the children living with an alcohol-dependent father and one half of children living with a substance-abusing father exhibited symptoms of significant psychosocial impairment".¹¹
- A study from America suggests that where parents are abusing drugs as opposed to alcohol the children were more likely to "exhibit significantly higher levels of worrying, anxiety, depression, behavioural acting out and other antisocial behaviours."¹² This corroborates the figures above.

7 Bancroft et al. 'Parental drug and alcohol misuse' (2004)

8 Bancroft et al. 'Parental drug and alcohol misuse' (2004)

9 Research Institute on Addictions (RIA) (2004) accessed through <http://www.buffalo.edu/ubreporter/archives/vol35/vol35n43/articles/Fathers.html>

10 Bancroft et al. 'Parental drug and alcohol misuse' (2004)

11 Research Institute on Addictions (RIA) (2006) accessed through <http://alcoholism.about.com/library/blria020612.htm>

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Opportunities:

The impact that substance abuse has upon a family, in particular the child, is significant and, as noted, the prevalent attitude regarding a substance abuse father presents only a negative influence on a child's development. Studies have revealed some opportunities for social welfare organisations and support groups to address and build upon.

1. While the impacts are great, a study in Scotland states that for the child, 'despite enormous difficulties, family relationships, whether with parents or siblings, were continually important'.
2. Another study reveals that where 'fathers recover from substance abuse, children exhibit significant improvements in psychosocial functioning'.¹³
3. The view of one study (though this represents an uncorroborated finding) suggests that where the father is substance abusing "children living with both parents have better outcomes, in terms of conduct problems and own substance misuse".

Links and Support

Support/advice:

http://talktofrank.com/home_html.aspx Talk to FRANK is the government run drug advice and support network. Information and support is offered through email, text, instant messenger and a 24hr call service.

http://www.addaction.org.uk/?page_id=5 The largest independent UK charity concerned with drug/alcohol addiction – provides a number of

¹³ Research Institute on Addictions (RIA) (2004) accessed through <http://www.buffalo.edu/ubreporter/archives/vol35/vol35n43/articles/Fathers.html>

services to aid substance abusers.

<http://www.lifeline.org.uk/index.php> A national service concerned with support those addicted to drugs/alcohol

<http://www.adfam.org.uk/> A national charity offering support for families affected by drug and alcohol addiction.

Drinkline – a 24 hr national helpline offering advice and support for people concerned about alcohol abuse. Tel: 0800 917 8282

<http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/newcomer/> Alcoholics anonymous – offers support networks, advice and meetings dedicated to helping individuals overcome alcoholism.

Policy/Information:

<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=16> Provides links to current research regarding substance abuse and specifically fathers.