Parenting Capacity and Substance Misuse

The topic of this briefing is how parenting capacity can be affected by parental substance misuse (drugs and/or alcohol) and how this may be managed.

Key Messages

- The misuse of drugs and/or alcohol may adversely affect the ability of parents to attend to the emotional, physical and developmental needs of their children in both the short and long term

- A number of policy and practice documents are available governing the provision of services to support parents who misuse substances

- Research has tended to focus principally on substance misusing mothers rather than fathers, and drugs rather than alcohol. Residential programmes which include the children have been demonstrated to be effective

- Studies often fail to evaluate the impact of substance misuse on parenting capacity relative to other aspects of disadvantage, such as poverty, unemployment or depression

- Parents are worried about losing their children, so confidentiality is considered to be a requirement for support services

- Children often know more about their parents’ misuse than parents realise, and feel the stigma and shame of this misuse, but also fear the possibility of being separated from their parents and taken into care
Introduction

This section introduces and defines the scope of the briefing and the topic.

A SCIE research briefing provides up-to-date information on a particular topic. It is a concise document summarising the knowledge base in a particular area and is intended as a ‘launch pad’ or signpost to more in-depth investigation or enquiry. It is not a definitive statement of all evidence on a particular issue. The briefing is divided into the different types of knowledge relevant to health and social care research and practice, as defined by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE).

Title link http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/knowledge.asp

It is intended to help health and social care practitioners and policy-makers in their decision-making and practice.

The topic of this particular briefing is parenting capacity and substance misuse. Parenting capacity is defined in a recent government framework document as “the ability of parents or caregivers to ensure that the child’s developmental needs are being appropriately and adequately responded to, and to [be able to] adapt to [the child’s] changing needs over time”. This includes providing for the child’s basic physical needs, ensuring their safety, “ensuring the child’s emotional needs are met and giving the child a sense of being specially valued”, promoting the child’s intellectual development through encouragement and stimulation, demonstrating and modelling appropriate behaviour and control of emotions, and providing a sufficiently stable family environment (1).

The substance misuse covered by this briefing includes both drug and alcohol misuse. This involves drug misuse which is considered by professionals or family members to be having “an adverse impact, not just on the health and behaviour of parents, but on the lives of their children also” (2,3), and alcohol consumption which “warrants attention because it seriously and repeatedly affects the drinker’s behaviour” (4). There are important differences in the characteristics between drug and alcohol misuse, however. For example, the illegality and stigma of drug use makes concealment of use common (5,6).

Why this issue is important

This section summarises research findings relating to the impact or consequences of parental substance misuse on both parenting capacity and childhood development.

This issue is important because the problem is widespread. It is difficult to be precise about the numbers of parents and children affected by substance misuse, but it has been estimated that the number of children who may be exposed to the consequences of problem drug misuse in the UK is between 250,000 and 350,000 (2), while around two million children are affected by parents’ harmful drinking (7). Between 50% and 90% of families on social
workers’ child care caseloads have parent(s) with drug, alcohol or mental health problems (8).

The research has indicated a number of ways in which parental substance misuse can have a negative effect on children in both the short and long term. Children of parents who misuse substances make up a substantial proportion of the children coming to the attention of the child protection authorities for abuse or neglect (8,9,10,11), although neglect rather than abuse is the most common reason for intervention by social services (9). However, it is believed that only a minority of such children come to the attention of social workers (12). Children of parents who misuse substances are also likely to enter the care of relatives, who themselves may require help and support in caring for the children (3,13).

Children of parents who misuse substances may also experience behavioural or psychiatric problems (6,9,14,47,48,53) and may themselves engage in substance misuse (15,16). They may also be vulnerable to physical, educational and emotional problems (50). Parents who misuse substances may interact poorly or in an authoritarian manner with their children (5,17,18,19,20,53) and may also be inconsistent and emotionally unresponsive as a result of their substance misuse (21,55). The lifestyle of families with a substance-misusing parent can also be characterised by chaos and a lack of routine (7,10,22,23), as well as social isolation (10,24,25).

What do the different sources of knowledge show?

Organisational Knowledge

This section lists and briefly summarises documents that describe the standards that govern the conduct of statutory services, organisations and individuals working in the field of substance misuse by parents and its impact on their children.

This report sets out the government's strategy for tackling the harms and costs of alcohol misuse in England. The aim of this strategy is to prevent any further increase in alcohol-related harm.

This guidance provides information on substance misuse in Scotland and its effect on parenting, guidelines on inter-agency working, and guidance on confidentiality and the sharing of information between services. This document contains general information, as well as policies specific to Scotland.

Title link http://www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/07/58/24/04075824.pdf  
This document sets out how all agencies and professionals should work together to promote children's welfare and protect them from abuse and neglect. It is addressed to those who work in the health and education services, the police, social services, the probation service, and others whose work brings them into contact with children and families. It is relevant to those working in the statutory, voluntary and independent sectors.

Title link http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm39/3945/3945.htm  
The updated (2002) strategy is also now available  
Title link http://www.drugs.gov.uk/NationalStrategy  

Children Act 1989 (c.41)  
Title link http://www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts1989/Ukpga_19890041_en_1.htm  
Under the Children Act 1989, local authorities have a duty to provide services to children 'in need'. Joint working arrangements are required to be agreed, implemented and reviewed through the mechanism of the Area Child Protection Committees.

Policy Community Knowledge

This section summarises documents describing proposed structural models for the delivery of policy and improved practice. These documents are published by public policy research bodies, lobby groups, think tanks and related organisations.

Title link http://www.drugs.gov.uk/ReportsandPublications/NationalStrategy/105473380  
This is the report of an inquiry into the effect of “parental problem drug use and its actual and potential effects on children”. This includes both alcohol and drug misuse. The document also makes practice recommendations.


This report seeks to provide guidance and advice to people working with drug using parents. It focuses on policy and covers a range of services including drug services, maternity services and children's services. The importance of both access to services and interagency working is stressed. (Only available in hard copy).


This is an ongoing project that aims to enhance social work decision-making and planning with families where parents/carers are drug misusers, in order to improve outcomes for children. It focuses on all stages of the process from assessment and decision-making to permanency planning. The lessons from the project will be made available to practitioners and social care trainers.


This report describes how to deliver high quality co-ordinated services to families where children live with parents who misuse alcohol or have mental health problems, in accordance with government policy.


This document offers information on the epidemiology and treatment of parental substance misuse within the current policy framework. See chapter 3 section 5.


This is a report evaluating the provision of a pilot family alcohol service in Camden and Islington.

The research literature also suggests services should be coordinated, integrated (27) and interdisciplinary (13,28). Effective risk assessment and screening models (29,30), service evaluation (27) and valid and reliable measures, (12) all need to be developed and applied.
Practitioner Knowledge

This section describes studies carried out by health and social care practitioners, documents relating their experiences regarding the topic, and resources produced by local practitioner bodies to support their work.


Title link http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/ssacpc.nsf/a/effectsonchildren?opendocument
This guidance was developed for practitioners working with children and families and/or adults who have care of children where substance misuse is a factor. The guidance aims to provide practitioners with information about the issue of substance misuse and how this may impact upon an individual’s ability to care for a child. It is intended as a risk management tool for professionals, directing them in their practice when assessing if or how a parent or carer’s substance misuse is affecting a child.


This guidance provides details on how to assess the effect of parental substance misuse on a child.

Option 2. All Wales Unit. Supporting Social Services

Title link http://www.allwalesunit.gov.uk/INDEX.CFM?ARTICLEID=313
Option 2 is an intensive intervention programme aimed at keeping together families in which the parents have a problem with substance misuse and there is a possibility that the children may be taken into care.

Brighton Oasis Project

Title link http://www.dca.gov.uk/family/marsup/marsdir/marsorg62.htm
See also the following article in Community Care, An Oasis for Young People

Title link http://www.communitycare.co.uk/articles/article.asp?liarticleid=34732&liSectionID=22&sKeys="an+oasis+for+young+people"&liParentID=26
This project supports young people whose mothers misuse drugs and alcohol.

Research Knowledge

This section summarises the best available research literature. The focus is on studies undertaken in the United Kingdom, so that their findings are as relevant as possible to the intended audience of the briefing.
The scope of the research

Most of the available research was conducted in the United States (9). The research literature focuses principally on mothers (9,16,21,24,31,32,33,34,50,51,54) and, to a lesser extent, parents generally (3,13,35,36,37); very little research has been conducted specifically into the parenting capacity of substance-misusing fathers (38,39,47,48). There is no specific research relating to black or minority ethnic communities (4). Two recent research reviews have assessed the available research evidence for both parental drug misuse (3) and parental problem drinking (4). This research has pointed out how studies often fail to evaluate the impact of substance misuse on parenting capacity relative to other aspects of disadvantage, such as poverty, unemployment or depression (3,4). It has also been pointed out that research into interventions in this field tends to be localised, based on small samples, and lacking in rigorous and independent evaluations of its methods and findings (22).

Interventions

The research suggests that potentially successful services to support substance-misusing parents might include education in parenting (34,40,51), specific support for substance-misusing fathers (3,38,39) and residential programmes for parents and children (7,32). The supporting role of the extended family has also been identified as a vital means of supporting both parents and children (3,20,31,41).

A number of UK and other non-US studies have concluded that it may be appropriate to provide support to parents who have a controlled drug/alcohol habit, but only if their children’s welfare is not adversely affected by their substance misuse. One research study has suggested that treatment offered to mothers to stabilize their habit is a potentially effective means of protecting children from the consequences of parental drug misuse (31). A number of studies have investigated the effectiveness of the provision of training in parenting skills. Residential, family-based parent training and therapy was found by a UK project to be effective for older parents and single-drug users, but ineffective for younger parents and poly-drug users (42). An Australian study found parent-training to be a potentially effective intervention for parents receiving methadone maintenance therapy (55), and a US study of parent-skills training as part of a treatment programme for substance-abusing new mothers found that their knowledge and competence in child care, feeding, and child development was significantly improved (64). A US home-based education and support programme for substance-abusing mothers of newborns and infants to the age of 18 months found that the intervention had no discernible effect; level of maternal drug misuse was found to be the single most significant factor in mother-child interaction (21). Much of the US research has concentrated on women’s substance misuse whilst pregnant and assumes that total abstinence is essential if any treatment programme is to be successful (30,32,41,51). A recent review also recognised that more research is needed on interventions to help parents with substance-misuse issues (51).

Sharing of information
The issue of what information is passed on to whom has also been identified as an important issue for in any treatment programme. This is because health and social care staff have child protection responsibilities. Parents therefore fear that they might lose their children, and children fear they may have to leave their parents\(^{4,22,33}\).

**Factors affecting parenting capacity**

It has also been pointed out that factors other than substance misuse may affect the ability of a parent to interact with and support their child, for example, poverty\(^ {14,21}\), unemployment and depression\(^ {41,43}\), single parenthood\(^ {31,43}\), and if the parents themselves experienced poor parenting\(^ {13}\), abuse or neglect during their own childhood\(^ {10,14,44}\).

**User & Carer Knowledge**

This section summarises the issues raised by service users and carers in relation to this topic, both as described by the literature and as defined through local consultation.

A number of qualitative studies have explored the views of parents and children around parental substance misuse. Mothers have often been found to have low self-esteem\(^ {44,45}\), a lack of self-care\(^ {36}\) and to be in poverty\(^ {45}\). However, being a mother was of vital importance to them\(^ {16,44}\) and led them to try to conceal drug-taking from their children, usually unsuccessfully\(^ {5,6,22,31}\). They were also aware of the safety risks to children\(^ {31,36}\) and the effects on children of any depression, irritability and aggression associated with substance misuse\(^ {22,36}\). Confidentiality in any treatment programme has also been identified as vital because most parents fear that they might lose their children\(^ {4,22,33}\). Children often knew more about their parents’ misuse than parents realised\(^ {5,46}\), felt the stigma and shame of this misuse\(^ {5}\) and feared the possibility of being separated from their parents and taken into care\(^ {22}\). A recent review of the literature on children’s views about parental substance misuse reported the following findings\(^ {46}\). Children worry about their parents much more than may be recognised, particularly if they fear for their parents’ safety due to violence, self-harm or difficulty in coping. Children frequently described close relationships with parents. They also often expressed a desire to help their parents overcome problems. However, some children also felt torn between love for parents and a dislike of parents’ behaviour and the restrictions this placed on their own lives. Children also said that being involved in finding solutions to problems helped them to cope. Other reviews and research have added to these findings. Children have said that there can be confusion over their role because they sometimes have to look after their parent rather than being looked after by them\(^ {52,55}\). They also say that they can feel secondary to their parents’ addiction, but still feel great loyalty to them and understand that their parents still care\(^ {52,55}\). They also believed that having a strong relationship with a support worker was extremely helpful to them\(^ {55}\).
Recent consultation with parents who are substance misusers, undertaken in the Trent region for this briefing, highlighted a number of additional issues. These parents considered the support provided by both voluntary and mainstream services, such as parent support networks (play groups, family centres) and Surestart, to be extremely valuable. They also acknowledged the effectiveness of residential rehabilitation services, but they wanted to access these services accompanied by their children and believed services felt that this was a problem. By contrast, research from the US found that parents often did not want their children to be involved in their residential treatment (49).

The parents in the consultation exercise also pointed out that they were often reluctant to use social services because they feared losing their children if child protection was considered to be an issue. The support of social services was often withdrawn or not offered if there were no child protection concerns. The parents in the group were all aware of their parenting responsibilities and responded most favourably to a sensitive approach by services. Finally, they also highlighted the need for support services for the children themselves, and the importance of continuing support after a programme of treatment had been completed.

Useful Links

This section lists sources of information relevant to professionals who work within this field:

Adfam (Families, drugs and alcohol)
This organisation offers information about substance misuse within families.

Alcohol Misuse
http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/HealthAndSocialCareTopics/AlcoholMisuse/fs/en
This site is produced by the Department of Health. It contains information on alcohol misuse and links to publications and relevant web sites

Alcohol Concern
http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk/
This organisation provides information and encourages debate on the wide range of public policy issues concerning alcohol, including its effect on children and families.

Area Child Protection Committees in England & Wales
http://www.dfes.gov.uk/acpc/
This website provides information about Area Child Protection Committees (ACPCs) and the inter-agency work they undertake to safeguard children in their area from abuse and neglect.
Children and Families. Department for Education and Skills  
http://www.dfes.gov.uk/childrenandfamilies/  
This document provides links to a range of government and non-government bodies and organisations. This was formerly Quality Protects.

DrugScope  
http://www.drugscope.org.uk/home.asp  
This organisation has a comprehensive information and contact service.

Every Child Matters  
http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/  
Every Child Matters sets out child protection principles and a framework for improving outcomes for all children and their families.

FRANK campaign  
http://www.drugs.gov.uk/Campaign  
The campaign targets 11-21 year olds, and parents of 11-18 year olds and focuses on class A drugs.

Sheffield Drug Action Team  
http://www.sdat.org.uk/  
This team has produced a comprehensive list of relevant links under “Related Services” on the left hand side menu.

Substance Misuse  
http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/HealthAndSocialCareTopics/SubstanceMisuse/fs/en  
This site is produced by the Department of Health. It contains information on substance misuse and links to guidance, publications and relevant web sites.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the experts and service users for their contributions to this briefing.

Reference List

http://www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/01/44/30/04014430.pdf  [Accessed 12 July 2005]

This framework aims to provide a systematic way for analysing, understanding and recording what is happening to children and young people within their families and the community.

This is the report from an inquiry focusing on children in the UK with a parent, parents or other guardian whose drug use has serious negative consequences for themselves and those around them.


This review examines the available research about both the impact of problem drug use and interventions designed to reduce that impact across important aspects of children's lives.


This review of the available research addresses the definition and extent of parental problem drinking and its impact across important dimensions of children's lives.


This is a qualitative UK study examining children's opinions of drug-misusing parents.


This is a qualitative Irish study of the effect that parents' consider their substance misuse has on their children and what they try to do about it. Abstract available http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=pubmed&dopt=Abstract&list_uids=12837989


This study examines effective means of working with parents who misuse drugs and alcohol in relation to judicial proceedings.

   This report is based on a project that looked at the interfaces within and between services for families where a parent has persistent mental health, alcohol or drug problems.


   This is a review of the research literature on interventions for parental drug use and its consequences. Abstract available [here](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=pubmed&dopt=Abstract&list_uids=15078229)


   This monograph explores the potential links between parental substance misuse and the maltreatment of children.


   This UK study examines data on the possible association between parental substance misuse and child neglect.


   This is a UK review of the evidence concerning the effects of parental addiction on children, and the circumstances requiring intervention by health professionals.


This is a Danish study evaluating the impact of parental alcohol misuse on children's behaviour.


This is a US qualitative study of 17 substance-abusing women's perceptions of their mothering practices in the context of a residential substance-abuse treatment program.


This US study examined the relationship between specific parenting problems and maternal addiction. Abstract available

This is an editorial reviewing the literature on strategies to counter substance misuse in families.


This is a qualitative UK study of the impact of parental drug use on children, and considers the possible responses that may be needed to reduce the risks being faced by the children of drug-using parents.


This article explains the effect a parent's substance abuse has on children and how early child professionals can help the children.


This is a US study examining the effectiveness of a residential substance abuse treatment programme.


This is a US study that aimed to identify factors that may influence parenting by mothers who are recovering from cocaine addiction. Abstract available

   The aim of this strategy is to prevent any further increase in alcohol-related harms in England.


   This is a small-scale evaluation of an initiative to try to support the children of parents who are substance users.


   This US study examines the association between parental alcohol abuse (mother only, father only, or both parents) and forms of childhood abuse and neglect. Abstract available http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=pubmed&dopt=Abstract&list_uids=11814159


This US paper offers recommendations on how to incorporate child care and parenting education into drug treatment programmes.


This is a UK analysis of qualitative research evidence on substance misusing parents and related child protection issues.


This is a review of the impact of certain types of parental substance misuse on their children.


This book is a review of the literature about children’s opinions concerning living in families where there is domestic violence, parental substance misuse or parental health problems. Summary available http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/514.asp


This US study examines the life circumstances and experiences of 4084 children affected by maternal addiction to alcohol or other drugs.


This US review evaluates the research on interventions to help mothers with substance-abuse issues.


This is a UK review of the literature on children’s experiences of having a substance-abusing parent.

This US study examines associations between parents’ misuse of substances and their children’s behaviour.


This UK study interviewed 38 young people about their experiences of having a parent with substance-misuse issues.