

10 Impacts of Substance Addiction on Children

Kim Peterson

I recently had the honor of attending a fundraiser luncheon for The Council on Recovery in Houston, Texas where I had the pleasure of hearing Tom Arnold, actor and philanthropist, speak about his own experiences with personal and family substance addiction. An LPC-Intern under my supervision is a child therapist for the children's department at The Council. Among many other interventions, I have been particularly impressed with their Kid's Camp. Held a couple times a year, this camp offers a place for children who have parents affected by substance addiction. Children are given an opportunity to share their story with others, receive education on substance addiction, and begin healing their emotional wounds their parent's addiction has left.

Attending the luncheon and hearing from those who have survived and overcome addiction was truly eye opening to the impact that addiction has on families. According to the National Association for Children of Alcoholics, more than 28 million Americans are children of alcoholics. This statistic doesn't include other addictive substances. When a parent struggles with substance addiction (alcohol, illegal drugs, and prescription drugs), the impact on children crosses all areas of their life, including social, emotional, and academic. The list below only scratches the surface of this very complex family struggle.

1. **Loss of relationship with parent:** A parent who is seeking a high or on a substance high is likely to be emotionally unavailable for their child. Many children describe to me that their mom or dad are "not the same person." Personality and mood changes in a parent are scary for children and leave them with a feeling of insecurity.
2. **Loss of relationships with other family members and friends:** The nature of the addiction is that a person damages relationships with loved ones and friends. The child's aunts and uncles may decide they can no longer expose their own family to the toxic and unpredictable environment and friends of the parent no longer come around. In addition, the child may stop having friends over because of the potential for embarrassment.
3. **Emotional problems such as shame, embarrassment, anger, confusion, and frustration:** Imagine the ongoing struggles the children face when

parents argue, show aggression, nearly overdose, lose their job, etc. The list goes on, and so do the emotional struggles for a child exposed to this environment.

4. **Birth defects:** Parents who use alcohol and drugs during pregnancy may pass these chemicals along to the baby, in addition to poor diet, hydration, sleep, and exercise. [WebMD](#) summarizes these effects well.
5. **Developmental impairments:** Parents under the influence of substances may invest less time with their babies and young children. Less interaction, meaning less talking and playing with the child can impair their cognitive, motor, and speech development.
6. **Limited social life:** A child's social opportunities can become strained in many ways. In addition to the broken relationships as mentioned above, parents under the influence are not capable of supporting (i.e. scheduling and driving) the child's birthday invitations, sporting games, and making other arrangements for building peer relationships.
7. **Stress and related mental and physical health problems:** The home may lack the warmth and nurturing the child needs, creating stress, hindering, development, and other physical problems as a result of the stress.
8. **Academic disadvantages:** A child may struggle with poor concentration, lack of parent support and help with homework.
9. **At risk for own substance abuse problems:** Statistics indicate that children of addicted parents are at a greater risk for developing their own substance addiction. This is due to genetics and environmental reasons including parent modeling, childhood trauma and abuse, and poor coping skills.
10. **Exposure to unsafe environments and people, and possible abuse:** According to the National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACOA), Most welfare professionals (79.6%) report that substance abuse causes or contributes to at least half of all cases of child maltreatment; 39.7% say it is a factor in over 75% of the cases. 13

I believe there are many children and families struggling with addiction and we may not even realize it's happening in our own social circles. Raising awareness is the first step. Whether you are a family member or friend, be prepared to support and love those involved. The family will need ongoing counseling, programs for addiction, and strength from those around them.

Resources on Addiction:

American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress

NACOA: Children of Addicted Parents Important Facts

Handout: Effects of Substance Abuse on Behavior and Parenting