



Carry the Message:

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*The effects of addiction on children of alcoholics and addicts can be devastating*

By Michelle Wierson, PhD

Most people are aware of the role genetics play in addiction, and it is not surprising that substance abuse increases the incidence of physical violence and serious child neglect within a family. However, by far, the greatest consequence of parental

addiction is the loss of effective, substantive and stable parental involvement that is essential for child development. Children of alcoholics and addicts experience interrupted, damaged or slowed cognitive, emotional and behavioral growth. Their mothers and fathers simply cannot provide good daily care and attention because they are preoccupied with drinking and/or using. Likewise, a non-using parent often is not fully available to the children, spending time and energy instead on dealing with the addict. In this way, children's developmental needs go unmet, leading to emotional wounds and/or overt behavioral deficits.

While the effects of addiction on parenting are complicated, the most common patterns for parents who abuse substances include the following:

- Checking Out:** It is not possible to be present in the life of a child when a person is abusing alcohol and/or drugs. Oftentimes, addicts are not physically present, leaving the home to use or 'score' (sometimes leaving children unsupervised), or by passing out, sleeping it off or just being too 'out of it' to interact with their children. Similarly, children of alcoholics and addicts do not have emotionally present parents who are tuned in to their hurts, wants and needs. The substance abusers do not provide effective discipline for their children; they cannot help

their children deal with failure or anxieties; and they do not teach their children valuable life skills or coping behaviors, play with them or monitor their school progress. In fact, sometimes they fail to notice their children at all.

- **Disinhibition:** It is well known that alcohol and drugs reduce inhibitions, and this extends to parenting as well. When parents drink and/or use, their behavior is unpredictable and inconsistent. For some, this means spurts of impulsive and 'fun' activities with their kids, only to become angry, irritable or sullen later on. Intoxicated parents forget their promises, say hurtful things to their kids and expose their children to age-inappropriate language and behavior. In response, children of alcoholics and addicts learn to observe the climate of the home and the addicted parent's mood — often the level of use itself — in order to know how to behave. Children need a stable, predictable routine with parents who are reliable and dependable. Without these, they tend to be anxious, insecure and fearful, and they cannot develop properly.
- **Fractured Parent-Child Relationships:** Addicted parents do not have complete, stable relationships with their children. When addicts are feeding and nurturing their relationship with alcohol and/or drugs, they cannot give the same energy to the parent-child relationship. For some families, the parent-child bond is never established; for others, the attachment is not secure and children learn they cannot trust their parents. Still, for others, the early attachment is adequate, but is not nurtured and developed over time, so that as children grow, their relationship with the addicted parent does not — and cannot — grow with them.

### Common Responses to Parental Substance Abuse

Children of alcoholics and addicts tend to have one of two broad reactions when addiction is present within the family unit: over-responsible or under-regulated. In the face of parental substance abuse, over-responsible children take on household tasks like cooking, cleaning and laundry far earlier than their peers. They provide for their siblings in ways a parent should, by making sure they are dressed and fed, signing forms and documents their siblings need for school, and even protecting them from the addicted parent.

Over-responsible children tend to care for their addicted parent as well, covering up when he or she is intoxicated, cleaning up after messes made and frequently monitoring the parent to ensure he or she is still alive. These children are referred to as *parentified*, because they take on a parental role in their family and miss out on just being a kid. Even if their parents recover later, the joy and innocence of childhood are forever lost. And, quite predictably, parentified children often become

adults who are drawn to addicts as spouses or partners, spending their entire lives in a state of codependence.

The other most common reaction to parental substance abuse is the development of behavioral or psychological problems. These are under-regulated children of alcoholics and addicts who act out in response to inconsistent parenting, or who develop anxiety and depression. They become oppositional with adults, aggressive with peers and have multiple disciplinary infractions at school. They cope poorly with frustration, don't know how to calm themselves when they are frightened or sad and cannot form meaningful relationships with others.

As these children of alcoholics and addicts age, they tend to perform poorly in school, are more likely to be identified for special education services and have a greater chance of dropping out of school or getting involved with the juvenile justice system. And, of course, these children are more prone to become addicts themselves; they are attracted to deviant peer groups, directly perpetuating the cycle of addiction. Under-regulated children of alcoholics and addicts are often referred to as *mirrors*, because they adopt the same types of patterns and problematic behaviors as their chemically dependent parents. Moreover, when mirror children become adults, they have fewer resources to be effective parents themselves — another way in which addiction affects families from generation to generation.

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