

Parental Alcoholism and Children: Breaking the Cycle of Addiction

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The effect of a parent's alcohol misuse on the family can be devastating. Approximately 7.5 million U.S. children (i.e., 1 in 10) live with a parent with an alcohol-use disorder. A significant and growing body of research indicates that children of parents who abuse alcohol are at risk of developing emotional, behavioral, and social problems.

Also, impaired family dynamics are more likely to lead to alcohol use disorders for children when they reach adulthood. With many teens experimenting with alcohol, the effects on the next generation's patterns of alcohol use may crop up sooner than parents expect. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), underage drinking may increase the likelihood of death (motor vehicle accidents, homicides, alcohol poisoning, etc.), injury, impaired judgement, increase the risk of physical/sexual assault, and increase the risk of alcohol problems later in life (<https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/UnderageDrinking/UnderageFact.htm>).

It is often difficult to admit a problem, but sometimes the parent's motivation to finally seek change can serve as positive modeling for their children. Many parents may not initially realize it, but quitting drinking can have positive effects on their children, even years into their recovery. Parents in recovery can serve as examples of what a healthy, full life without drinking looks like.

Whether or not a parent with an alcohol problem gets help, it

is crucial that family members seek treatment during what can often be a tough and complicated time. Alateen, a part of the Al-Anon Family Groups, is a fellowship of young people (mostly teenagers) whose lives have been affected by someone else's drinking. Alateen is free and secular and provides a space for teens to meet other teens with similar situations.

A family physician may also be able to help encourage the parent(s) to engage in treatment. Although many adolescents act like they do not need attention from their parents, this is a critical period in their development when they typically do need guidance. Sadly, a person with an alcohol-use disorder is often barely able to maintain him or herself, much less pay attention to or take care of a child. Moreover, alcohol-misusing parents may not understand the impact on their children and may not fully realize the consequences of drinking on the child's psychosocial development. It is critical that children and adolescents are encouraged to seek help to alleviate the damaging effects of parental alcohol misuse: in other words, to break the cycle of addiction.

While a family history of alcoholism may be painful and at times traumatic for the family, it may also present an impactful opportunity to speak openly with children about the dangers of underage drinking, as well as the importance of drinking responsibly when reaching the legal drinking age and seeking help if needed.



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