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Christopher Bergland
The Athlete's Way

ADDICTION

Harvard Study Pegs How Parental Substance Abuse Impacts Kids

New research identifies ways to break the multigenerational cycle of addiction.

Posted July 18, 2016

Reviewed by Gary Drevitch



This post is in response to **Dad's Psychological Well-Being Impacts His Kids' Development** By Christopher Bergland

In the past week, there's been a groundswell of new research affirming the impact that parents' mental health and substance abuse have on their children's development and life outcomes. A few days ago, researchers at Michigan State University (MSU) **reported new findings** that a father's psychological well-being significantly influences the well-being of his offspring.

Today, researchers from Harvard Medical School (HMS) an-



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nounced new findings that children whose parents (or caregivers) abuse alcohol—or use, produce or distribute drugs—face significantly higher risks of medical and behavioral problems, including substance abuse.

One in Five American Children Live in Homes with Parental Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is a significant public health problem for people of all ages and walks of life. Unfortunately, millions of American children live in homes with parents or caregivers who are regularly involved in alcohol or drug use, or the distribution, manufacturing, or cultivation of illicit substances. Kids who grow up in homes with prevalent substance abuse are more likely to begin misusing drugs and alcohol themselves, which leads to multigenerational cycles of addiction.

The double whammy of parental substance abuse on children is the combination of the toxic effects of exposure to drugs and alcohol, as well as the inability of parents strug-

The authors of the new study estimate that one in five U.S. children grows up in a household in which someone misuses alcohol or has a substance use disorder. The good news is that the researchers from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC) and Boston Children's Hospital have identified that pediatricians are in a unique position to assess substance abuse risk and intervene to protect children. These types of interventions could break the multigenerational cycle of addiction.

The new clinical report, "**Families Affected by Parental Substance Use**," is available online and will be published in *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Association of Pediatrics (AAP).



Source: Artem Furman/Shutterstock

This study reports that children whose parents use drugs and misuse alcohol are three times more likely to be physically,

ings as a call-to-action for pediatricians to begin including questions about every parent and caregiver's alcohol and drug use as part of routine family assessments.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

The latest research pinpoints various ways that children who are exposed to substance abuse commonly experience developmental and educational delays along with mental health and behavioral problems later in life. In a statement, **Vincent C. Smith**, a neonatologist at BIDMC and an professor of pediatrics at HMS, said:

"Alcohol misuse and substance use are exceedingly common in this country, and parents' or caregivers' substance use may affect their ability to consistently prioritize their children's basic physical and emotional needs and provide a safe, nurturing environment.

"Because these children are at risk of suffering physical or emotional harm, pediatricians need to

The authors have created sample scripts to help pediatricians kickstart the potentially awkward conversation about alcohol and drug use with parents. Previous research suggests that when clinicians do approach parents who have screened positive for substance use about seeking treatment, most parents tend to be open and cooperative to pursuing follow-up recommendations such as enrolling in community treatment programs or counseling.

THE BASICS

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After these conversations, even if parents don't opt for treatment or completely abstain from future substance abuse, the knowledge that their substance use directly impacts their children often results in decreased alcohol and/or drug use and lessened harm reduction for both the child and parent.

The AAP encourages every pediatrician in the country to begin including questions about the extent of substance use in a child's home as part of their routine family assessment. Often pediatricians are the only medical providers who interact with families affected by substance use. Therefore, they are in a unique position to identify kids endangered by parental substance abuse.

"Pediatricians who identify substance use problems in a family are not expected to solve, manage or treat these issues; rather, they can partner with other professionals to provide families access to resources," Smith and co-authors conclude. "By screening, pediatricians have the opportunity to make a significant difference in the lives of the entire family affected by substance use."

ADDICTION ESSENTIAL READS

Heeding the Distress Signals in Modern Addiction



Reading to Help Navigate Addiction

Resources for Alcohol and Drug Treatment

- [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#)
- [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#)
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)

- **Monitoring the Future**
- **Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance**
- **National Survey on Drug Use and Health**
- **National Resource Center for In-Home Services, In-Home Programs for Drug Affected Families**
- **Children and Family Futures**
- **National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children**
- **National Association for Children of Alcoholics**
- **Bright Futures**

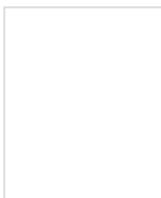
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About the Author



Christopher Bergland is a retired ultra-endurance athlete turned science writer, public health advocate, and promoter of cerebellum ("little brain") optimization.

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