

## **Families In Crisis:** How Parental Substance Abuse And Mental Health Impacts Kids

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February 12, 2020 By Dr. Todd Thatcher, DO, CMO



It's no secret that addiction ruins lives. The impact of addiction reverberates in every part of society, across cultures, socioeconomic levels, and age groups. When parents become addicted to drugs and alcohol, it impacts their physical and emotional health, behaviors, and ability to effectively parent their kids. One in five children in the U.S. live in a home with a parent who is addicted to drugs or alcohol. Parental substance abuse severely impacts

children's growth and development, it establishes an unspoken understanding of the role substances play in the adult world. Norms are established from a young age, and when the expectation of substance abuse is part of these norms, children learn to follow suit, often from a young age. Genetic factors also contribute to a child's likelihood for addiction. The combination of childhood experiences, environment, and genetic factors can increase children's likelihood of having addiction at some point in their lives. Children who come from homes in which parents were addicted to drugs or alcohol are more likely to start using drugs earlier in their lives and become addicted more quickly than peers from homes without substance abuse. If you are a parent dealing with substance abuse, contact a team member today for help.

**STOP THE IMPACT OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE ON FAMILIES TODAY**

## Parental Drug Use And How Children Are Affected

Children who grow up in a home with parental drug use often suffer from a variety of emotional and developmental delays. Parental drug use and child neglect are common co-occurring conditions within families. Children who grow up in a home with parents who are addicted to drugs or alcohol are three times more likely to suffer physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Whether it is at the hands of a parent who is using drugs or alcohol or due to exposure to others who abuse them, kids whose parents abuse substances are at greater risk. The lasting traumatic effects of these types of abuse can be devastating throughout the lifespan. These kids are also four times as likely to experience neglect than their peers in non-substance abusing homes. When drugs and alcohol become the priority, parents begin to lose focus on their role and how important it is to be physically and emotionally available to their children. Parents in these situations often feel incredibly guilty and ashamed of their addiction, and these feelings contribute to more substance abuse to mask the guilt and shame. It is a cyclical pattern that, when combined with the physical aspects of addiction, can keep people stuck. The emotional impact of substance abuse is severe, as children learn their needs are no longer a priority. Neglect has lasting effects on children emotionally and can even have physiological side effects and negative health outcomes. Often behavioral and emotional problems arise in children who live in homes with addicted parents; this may mean angry outbursts, depression, anxiety or detachment. It is difficult for children to articulate what they are feeling and thinking, and as a result, their behaviors are usually the best indicator of their emotional state. When children grow up in an environment in which neglect is the norm and substance abuse is the priority, their mental and physical wellbeing suffers and their ability to have a healthy attachment to other people is compromised. Kids in this situation are more likely to repeat these patterns in their own lives and it becomes an intergenerational problem.

When children are being neglected due to parental substance abuse, developmental problems often arise, such as speech delays, malnutrition, and cognitive functioning issues. Parental drug use during pregnancy can result in birth defects, attachment problems and drug-affected newborns. These are major health issues that can shorten children's lifespan and the ability to learn and function. Substance abuse's impact on children is severe and often irreversible. Parents certainly don't set out with a plan to become addicted, but often become

## Parents' Psychological Health Issues Impacts Kids

Parents with substance use disorder often struggle with other mental health conditions, and frequently, these factors contribute to the ongoing addiction. Parental substance misuse is often a challenge for parents who take medication for other conditions. People may wonder, what is parental substance misuse? It is the intentional misuse of a substance for the purposes of emotional escape or detachment. Substance misuse can occur when one takes a medication in excess, or beyond what is prescribed, for example. Whether it is a medication intended to ease physical pain or emotional distress, the misuse of a drug occurs when it is used outside of the scope of prescription. Any drug or alcoholic beverage that is consumed outside of the normal range of use is considered misuse. Parents who self-medicate with drugs and alcohol impact more than just their own physical and emotional health. Parental addiction, substance misuse, and mental health issues make a lasting impression on kids. Children who are exposed to drugs and alcohol are at possible risk for accidental ingestion, poisoning, and overdose, as well as the risk of finding their parental figure in this dire situation.

Kids whose parents struggle with mental health issues and addiction are more likely to experience their own challenges with depression, anxiety and addiction. Those who experience abuse may suffer the impact of trauma, becoming hypervigilant, having flashbacks and an exaggerated startle response. Parent mental health and substance abuse patterns directly impact children's wellbeing. A 2016 study found that parents' mental health issues had a significant impact on toddlers' wellbeing and resulted in increased behavioral problems. Fathers with mental health issues had a long-term impact on their children's social skills in areas such as self-control and cooperation by the time children reached 5th grade. When parents are struggling with mental health challenges and addiction issues, their availability to tend to their children's needs are limited. The focus on access to substances, plus the debilitating impact of mental health issues on energy and mood creates a distraction within the parent that overrules their capacity to be present for the kids in any meaningful way. Parental satisfaction and response to the burdens of parenting also impact the relationship and can influence the mental health of parents and their children. When parents are preoccupied with drug and alcohol addiction, their ability to prioritize their children's needs gets diminished. During childhood, parents are the most important factor in a child's life; the way parents function deeply impacts the way children think and feel about themselves and the world around them. Children who grow up in a home that is impacted by addiction quickly learn that they are not safe and that their parents are not able to put them first.

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When addiction is in control, everyone loses, parents and children, extended family and friends. Fortunately, people can heal from addiction. Families can become whole and cherished bonds can be mended when recovery is chosen. Substance use disorder is powerful and destructive, but it doesn't have to be the end of the story. Recovery is an option. Healing is possible.

## Treatment For Substance Use Disorder And Mental Health Needs

If you or a loved one is struggling with substance use and mental health needs, you don't need to face these challenges alone. Help is available, you and your family are worth it. Valley Behavioral Health understands the challenges parents with addiction face. The trained, experienced professionals at Valley Behavioral Health are ready to help you toward recovery and building the life you've always wanted. It all starts with making the decision to reach out for help. Recovery works best with the support of trained professionals and loved ones; no one should have to face it alone. We will work with you each step of the way, from making a plan to enter treatment, to building healthy coping skills to stay sober and everything in between.

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### About The Author

Dr. Todd Thatcher, DO, CMO

Dr. Todd Thatcher has worked at Valley for 8 years and has been the Chief Medical Officer for 5 years. He is triple board-certified in forensic psychiatry, general psychiatry, and addiction medicine. Currently, Dr. Thatcher is passionate about high-quality training of our employees and generating and tracking as much clinical data as possible to improve processes and procedures for increased ease, accessibility, and ultimately to better serve our clients and provide the best care possible.

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