

Drug Exposed Children: What Caregivers Should Know



What is a Drug Exposed Child?

A drug exposed child is one whose brain and/or body has been affected because his/her parents used drugs or alcohol during pregnancy, and/or who is living in a home where drugs are abused and/or are illegally made, sold, traded, or given away.

Fast Facts

- Substance abuse contributes to 75% of incidents of child abuse and neglect of children in foster care¹
- Nearly 80% of children in foster care have prenatal exposure to maternal substance abuse²
- 80% of the children in foster care have at least one long-term health problem²
- 25% of children in foster care have 3 or more long-term health problems, which is 3 to 7 times greater than the number of health problems found among other children living in poverty²

Understanding the Child You Care For

Drug exposed children may experience the following emotional, behavioral or cognitive problems:

Emotional:

- Worry a lot
- Seem sad or do not enjoy activities
- Feel bad about themselves
- Take on a lot of guilt and blame themselves for what goes wrong
- Feel like they have nothing to look forward to
- Feel their life will always be bad
- Attach to strangers too easily but have difficulty trusting caregivers

Behavioral:

- Like to be alone
- Eat too much or not enough
- Have a hard time paying attention
- Find any change difficult
- Don't get along well with other people
- Don't seem to care about what happens to them
- More interested in sex or know more about sex than most children their age
- Quickly change from being very active to being very tired-like

Cognitive:

- Difficulty talking and listening
- Trouble reading – especially learning to move from left to right
- Difficulty remembering a list of things
- Difficulty remembering what they were just told
- Often do not learn from mistakes or experiences
- Do not pick up on cues
- Difficulty paying attention – they may seem like they are in a fog

Helping the Child You Care For

Prenatal drug exposure can cause damage to the developing brain. The child's brain may be misfiring. What you think is odd or difficult behavior might be something the child cannot control. This is why getting professional help from someone that understands drug exposure (physical and mental health) is very important. (continued)

In the meantime, try to understand that the “behaviors” you see might be the only way that child can express their feelings. You can help them learn healthy ways to show their feelings, like talking, writing, and drawing pictures. Here are some other ways you can help:

- Do things the same way, every time, over and over again
- Keep things quiet and calm
- Use simple language and examples
- Use more than one way to help them learn
- Let them see it, touch it, taste it, feel it, or even act it out
- Be realistic about what you expect, and understand that drug exposed children may not act their age
- Give support and encouragement
- Help them feel safe
- Parent based on the child’s emotional age
- Teach with your actions, not just your words
- Help them separate the parent from the substance abuse
- Allow them periods of grief
- Teach empathy by showing understanding, sympathy and compassion

Helping Yourself

- Obtain a thorough medical history of each child and knowledge of the child’s background
- Get support from other caregivers
- Get additional training
- Use local resources
- Rest

Caregivers make a huge difference in the life of a child!

Resources

- National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children: www.nationaldec.org
- National Association for Children of Alcoholics: www.nacoa.org
- Child Trauma Academy: www.childtraumacademy.org
- The National Foster Parents Association: www.nfpaonline.org
- Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation: <http://www.hazeldenbettyford.org>

End Notes

¹*No Safe Haven: Children of Substance-Abusing Parents*, National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University, January 1999

²Dicker, Sheryl & Gordon, Elysa, “Building a Pathway of Well-Being: The Story of the Healthy Development Checklist for Children in Foster Care,” *Zero To Three Journal*, Vol. 22 No. 5, April/May 2002, p. 28

**For more information on drug endangered children, visit our web site:
www.nationaldec.org**

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