



## Helping Children Impacted by Parental Substance Use

### *Plymouth County, MA*

What should we be doing when we encounter a child who has a parent struggling with a substance use disorder? What should we look for? What can we say? If there are signs of neglect or abuse, what are the steps we should take? This toolkit is for adults who come into contact with children impacted by a parent's substance misuse and provides information about how to help. It is meant for anyone—daycare, school and after-school care staff, coaches, pastors, physicians, relatives, friends, neighbors.

"It often takes only one caring adult. Clergy, neighbors, grandparents, relatives, teachers, coaches, counselors, primary health professionals and other trusted adults can provide needed support, thereby breaking the silence that reinforces their sense of shame, stigma, and isolation, whether or not their parents find recovery. In other words, these potential influencers in a child's life matter - and they matter greatly. They have the power and opportunity to make the critical difference, to help grow healthy kids. Adults can - and do - change the trajectory of an impacted child's life, simply by caring and being there." - Sis Wenger, President/CEO, National Association for Children of Addiction (NACoA).

### **Parental Substance Use Disorder and Childhood Trauma**

Childhood trauma includes events and experiences that threaten the physical or emotional wellbeing of a child. In the U.S., a significant number of children are exposed to traumatic events, often related to parental substance misuse. Parental substance misuse can be associated with child neglect and abuse. Parents and caregivers with a substance use disorder (SUD) can increase demand for child welfare services. Since 2000, an extra 1.2 million children have entered the foster care system because of parental SUDs.<sup>i</sup> In a single year, the number of children in foster care because of parental SUD may be as high 30%, and over 60% in some states.<sup>ii</sup> In the U.S., over 8 million children have at least one parent with an SUD.<sup>iii</sup> This number may undercount the real amount of impacted children because of reluctance to self-identify as children of parents with a SUD.

Children who have a parent with a SUD are more likely to see and hear more fighting, witness more crime, suffer more from poverty, and lose more stable relationships with caring adults. The resulting trauma can last a lifetime, harming physical health, academic performance, employment status, and relationship formation. It also puts children at an increased risk for developing mental health and substance use disorders.

One of the most important things to remember is that parents struggling with drugs or alcohol are not "bad" parents. They love their kids, work hard to care for them, and want what's best for them. But drugs and alcohol can "hijack" the brain, making a person think that the substance is the most important thing for survival. Fortunately, there are effective ways for adults to respond to children impacted by parental substance misuse and begin the process of helping them on a better path. There are also innovative programs and services available to help. Healing from trauma takes time, but the support of a caring adult can make an important difference.

### **Understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences**

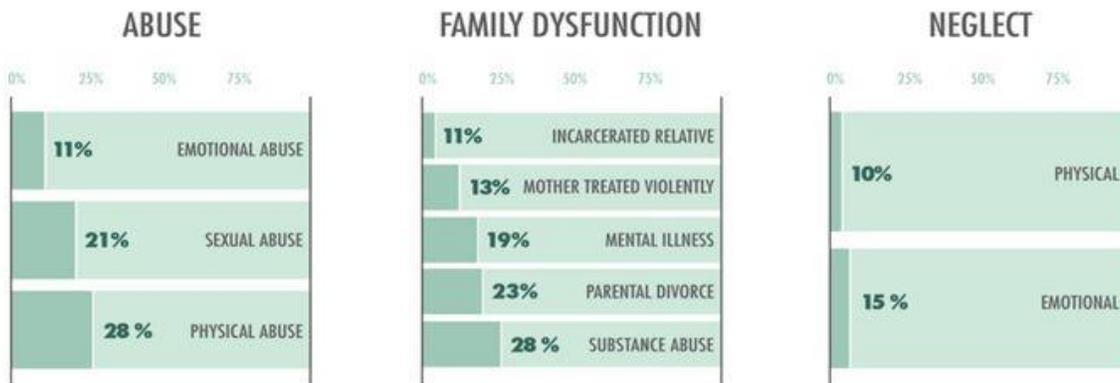
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur between the ages of 0-17.<sup>iv</sup>

There are many different kinds of ACEs, including losing a parent, neglect, sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, witnessing a parent being abused, mental illness in the family, and parental SUD. The more ACEs a child has, the more likely he or she is to experience adversity later in life. If left unaddressed, they can have lifelong negative effects, making injury, death, mental health problems, chronic diseases, and unemployment much more likely.

ACEs, like a parent's substance misuse, cause "toxic stress," which can change the way the brain develops. Some stress is natural and helps children develop the right emotional responses to life. But brain changes from toxic stress undermine

this healthy response process while harming learning and decision-making abilities. Over time, these brain changes may encourage bad decisions and dangerous behavior.

There are ten types of childhood trauma measured in the ACE Study that fall into three categories: abuse, neglect and household dysfunction.



### Children with a Parent Struggling with Substance Misuse: What to Look For

How would you recognize that a child may be struggling? For adults who come in contact with children and teens, signs to look for can vary.

"Children experiencing trauma from a parent's substance use disorder can have very different signs and symptoms," explains Jessica Hulseley, President of the Addiction Policy Forum. "One child may take the caregiver role for siblings and even their own parents. They may exhibit high-functioning skills yet show signs of stress and anxiety. Other children may show signs of substance misuse in the home through unkempt physical appearance or signs of hunger and malnutrition with no caregiver able to provide for clean clothes and care. Other signs may include absenteeism and tardiness from school and expressions of stress and concern about their parent or caregiver's substance misuse directly to teachers, coaches, and pastors," shares Hulseley.

Children who witness substance misuse at home may use language or gestures associated with substance use.

"Children of alcoholic and other drug abusing parents often come to the pediatrician, adolescent health or other primary care provider with recurring and vague symptoms, such as fatigue, abdominal pain, or musculoskeletal complaints, which may be indicative of psychosomatic illness. In addition, they may suffer from accidental injury, verbal abuse, physical abuse, or sexual abuse associated with parental drinking or drug use. Poor communication, permissiveness, under-socialization, neglect and violence-all potentially devastating-are common in children who live in alcoholic families."- Hoover Adger, Jr., MD, NACoA.

## What You Can Do

### Important Messages for the Child to Hear:

You have no control over your parent's substance misuse. You didn't cause the problem, and you can't stop it. What your parent does is not your responsibility or your fault.

You cannot make it better but can take steps to care for yourself.

You are not alone, and support is here.

Substance misuse is a disease of the brain. It causes changes in priorities or behavior, and loss of control.

Get involved in extracurricular activities and things you enjoy at school or near home, like the school band, sports, Boy or Girl Scouts, or others. These types of activities can help you balance your stress from the problems at home, while learning new things and seeing how other people live their lives.

### Other Things You Can Do:

Make sure the child has fun: Children of parents struggling with substance misuse tend to be stressed and anxious with adult-like problems weighing them down. Helping them "just be a kid" and have fun is important. By engaging in healthy ways to have fun you are showing them how other people live their lives.

Help the child feel understood and validated. Praise or support the child's actions to stay safe. Children impacted by substance misuse are often taught to cover for the behaviors of family members and, as such, expressing their emotions and feelings might be dissuaded by caregivers. Encourage them to share their feelings and emotions.

Practice self-regulation techniques with the child, such as "five finger breathing".



## The Seven Cs

Share the "7 Cs", which was developed by Jerry Moe and the NACoA, with the child. NACoA is a nationwide organization working to stop the effects of alcohol and drugs on children and families. The 7 Cs is a good way to remember how to talk to children. It is a quick, effective strategy to address what children often worry about deep down when their parents use substances problematically.

The 7 Cs mantra is:

**I didn't cause it.**

**I can't control it.**

**I can't cure it, but I can help take care of myself by communicating my feelings, making healthy choices, and celebrating me.**

**SESAME STREET** in Communities

### The 7 Cs

You didn't **Cause** the problem.  
You can't **Control** it.  
You can't **Cure** it.

**But...**

You can help take **Care** of yourself.  
You can **Communicate** your feelings.  
You can make healthy **Choices**.  
You can **Celebrate** yourself!

For more resources, go to [SesameStreetInCommunities.org](http://SesameStreetInCommunities.org) ©/TM 2019 Sesame Workshop. All Rights Reserved.

## Plymouth County Resources

### Plymouth County Outreach (PCO)

Plymouth County Outreach is a multi-faceted collaboration of the 27 municipal police departments in Plymouth County, as well as Bridgewater State University Police Department and the Plymouth County Drug Abuse Task Force, working together with Recovery Coaches and community organizations and coalitions to make treatment, resources and harm reduction tools more accessible to those living with substance use disorder and their loved ones. Our goal is to provide compassionate, judgement free support while reducing overdose fatalities.

The Plymouth County Outreach Teams go out to offer support and resources after an overdose occurs, but this isn't the only way to access PCO. Plymouth County Outreach also helps individuals who may be misusing a substance and are at-risk of an overdose or would like assistance navigating treatment options. This includes individuals in recovery who may want to explore a different pathway or access additional resources. An at-risk individual can be identified through self-disclose or referred by a family member or loved one. If you or a loved one is looking for assistance from PCO and their outreach team you can do so by calling any of our county Police Departments and asking to speak with a Plymouth County Outreach Officer or contacting us through our website, [Facebook page](#), by phone at (508)830-4218 x261, or by visiting the website: [www.plymouthcountyoutreach.org](http://www.plymouthcountyoutreach.org)

**Family Resource Centers** increase neighborhood-based networks of support to strengthen families, build communities, and prevent child abuse and neglect. Families can be connected to assistance for basic needs, resources and support. Programs include: diversion support (Child Requiring Assistance or CRA), parenting programs, support groups and more.

#### **Brockton**

The Family Center- Community Connections of Brockton

1367 Main Street

Brockton, MA 02301

(508) 857-0272

[www.uwgpc.org/frc](http://www.uwgpc.org/frc)

#### **Plymouth**

Plymouth Family Resource Center

430 Court Street, Suite 3A

Plymouth, MA 02360-7320

(774) 283-6531

[www.plymouthfamilyrc.org](http://www.plymouthfamilyrc.org)

**To The Moon and Back** (TTMAB) is a 501(c)3 dedicated to children born with in utero substance exposure and their families. Since 2017 we have been the leader in providing support, education, and advocacy for the littlest victims of the opioid epidemic. Programs include: support groups for caregivers, children's play group, Nurture a Superhero care packages, grants to fund unmet financial needs incurred due to a child's in utero substance exposure, educational advocacy and more. More information at website: [www.2themoonandback.org](http://www.2themoonandback.org)

**S.H.O.R.E Program (Supporting – Hope – Opportunity – Resilience – Empowerment)** Mission statement: To provide evidence-based, easily accessible treatment, and support to perinatal and postpartum patients experiencing mental health and/or substance use disorder in a stigma-free environment. The Perinatal Behavioral Health/SHORE program is part of the Grayken Center for Treatment at South Shore Health. We accept most major insurances. 797 Main Street, South Weymouth, MA 02190 781-624-5065 [www.SouthShoreHealth.org](http://www.SouthShoreHealth.org)

**Learn to Cope** is a non-profit support network that offers education, resources, peer support and hope for parents and family members coping with a loved one addicted to opiates or other drugs. Virtual and in-person meetings in English and Spanish. [www.learn2cope.org](http://www.learn2cope.org)

**Al-Anon** Support groups for people who are worried about someone with a drinking problem. Alateen is peer support group for teens who are struggling with the effects of someone else's problem drinking. Find local meetings: [www.al-anon.org](http://www.al-anon.org)

**William James INTERFACE Referral Service** is a mental health and wellness referral Helpline available Monday through Friday, 9 am-5 pm, at 888-244-6843 (toll free). This is a free, confidential referral service for residents of [participating communities](#). Callers from these participating communities are matched with licensed mental health providers from our extensive database, on average, within 2 weeks of their call to INTERFACE. Each referral best meets the location, insurance, and specialty needs of the caller. [www.interface.williamjames.edu](http://www.interface.williamjames.edu)

## **High Point Treatment**

Children's Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI) Serving families and youth (up to age 21).

CBHI services provide individualized, intensive therapy and support to youth and their families. CBHI connects families struggling with mental health and substance use to community resources, enabling them to work towards self-sufficiency. CBHI has two separate services which can be provided:

**In-Home Therapy (IHT)** is a team-based approach comprised of a Master's level or licensed clinician and paraprofessional therapeutic training and support staff working together with identified youth and their family to strengthen relationships, improve communication, learn to resolve conflicts, and develop healthy routines.

**Therapeutic Mentoring (TM)** is a 1:1 service between a paraprofessional staff member and the identified youth, working together to develop and improve the youth's coping skills, social skills, life skills, and communication skills. They work in conjunction with other providers, i.e. outpatient and in-home therapists, to coordinate care. Call 774-271-4868 for more information or access referral forms at [hptc.org](http://hptc.org).

### Home-Based Services Serving all ages

Home-based therapy provides traditional outpatient individual, couples, and family therapy for adults, adolescents, and children in the home and/or school setting. Our interdisciplinary team is comprised of licensed social workers, mental health clinicians, Master's level clinicians, and certified addiction specialists. Psychiatric referrals are made when appropriate. Call 774-271-4868 for more information or access referral forms at [hptc.org](http://hptc.org).

### School-Based Services

High Point understands the challenges of accessing mental health services in our communities. To meet the need, we have partnered with area schools to offer therapeutic services during school hours. Students can sit down with a clinician weekly to process any struggles they may be experiencing. Symptoms may include but are not limited to anxiety, depression, truancy/non-compliance, ADHD, and spectrum disorders.

School-based services also help support administrative staff, as well as the child's family by removing the burden of weekly scheduling and transportation to outside mental health services. Students are connected to services much quicker faster, thereby avoiding lengthy outpatient waitlists. Parents should contact their child's school to inquire about High Point's school-based program.

### Psychiatry Services

High Point has a child and adolescent psychiatrist on staff who is able to see children and youth for psychiatric services as well as other practitioners available to see adults. Referrals to be placed by clinician once they are opened for a clinical service.

### Prevention Services

Prevention Services of High Point Treatment Center provides substance use prevention services to eleven cities and towns in southeastern, Massachusetts. Prevention Services is comprised of the Brockton Area and Plymouth Area Prevention Collaboratives which are made up of their own autonomous coalitions. Prevention Services' mission is to save lives from substance use and prevent the damage it can do to individuals, families and the community at large. To do this, Prevention Services educates young people with accurate information and tools to cope with life's challenges, and to help them understand the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol. Staff connect individuals and families with the resources they need to become better informed and work with leaders to build a system of support in every neighborhood.

Our Central Admissions Department is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We serve Southeastern MA.

**The Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (GRG)** The purpose of the Commission is to be a resource to the Commonwealth on issues affecting grandparents raising grandchildren, and relatives, other than parents, raising kin. [www.massgrg.com](http://www.massgrg.com)

**Plymouth County GRG Support Groups** (see website [www.massgrg.com](http://www.massgrg.com) for more details on support groups.)

**Brockton** meets at the Family Center, call 508-857-0272 to register.

**Middleboro** starting April 2022, email Meg Quirke for more information: [mquirke@middleboro.k12.ma.us](mailto:mquirke@middleboro.k12.ma.us).

**Plymouth** meets at the Center for Active Living, call (508) 830-4230 to register.

**Plymouth** virtual, facilitated by Plymouth Family Resource Center, call (774) 283-6531 to register.

**Wareham** meets at Multi-Service Center, call (508) 291-3500 ext. 3556 to register.

**Kinship Navigator** is a program of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that assists all kinship caregivers (grandparents and other relatives) with accessing services for themselves and the children they are raising. [www.mass.gov/kinship-navigator](http://www.mass.gov/kinship-navigator)

**Health Law Advocates (HLA)** is a 501(c)(3) public interest law firm whose mission is to provide pro bono legal representation to low-income residents experiencing difficulty accessing or paying for needed medical services. HLA is committed to ensuring universal access to quality health care in Massachusetts, particularly for those who are most at risk due to such factors as race, gender, disability, age, or geographic location. With its partner organization, **Health Care For All**, HLA combines legal expertise with grassroots organizing and policy reform to advance the statewide movement for universal health care access. For inquiries related to children’s mental health or special education, call: 617-275-2919 or call toll-free 855-218-3965. For all other inquiries, call: 617-338-5241 or call toll-free 855-218-2519. [www.healthlawadvocates.org](http://www.healthlawadvocates.org)

**South Shore Peer Recovery** Creating a safe space in the heart of the community where people with lived experience join together to build skills, provide support and find hope in recovery. Programs for people in recovery and for family members and loved ones, including acupuncture, meditation, yoga, sober softball and more. Professionally facilitated family support group Sundays at 11:00 AM. More information at website: [www.southshorepeerrecovery.org](http://www.southshorepeerrecovery.org).  
51 Cole Parkway  
Scituate, MA 02066  
781-378-0453

**Plymouth Recovery Center** offers a safe and welcoming place for people seeking, or in recovery from substance use disorders. The center is a place where people come to give and get support, embrace hope, and find their unique pathways to wellness & recovery. Programs include drop-in, support groups for individuals and families, sober activities and more. Information at website: [www.plymouthrecoverycenter.org](http://www.plymouthrecoverycenter.org).  
5 Main Street Extension, Plymouth, MA 02360  
774-776-3515

**National Alliance for Children’s Grief** If you are supporting a child who is grieving, we are here to connect you to resources and local support. The alliance is a national organization of professionals dedicated to supporting children and the networks and communities surrounding them. [www.nacg.org](http://www.nacg.org)

**24 Hr. Power, Inc.** is a nonprofit 501 (c) (3) public charity which promotes hope and healing for recovering addicts/alcoholics, their families, friends, supports, and their communities with Recovery Graffiti. 24 Hr. Power, Inc. helps lessen stigma, promotes awareness of the opioid crisis, and creates fun, creative, sober activities that engage recovering addicts/alcoholics in healthy sobriety. 24 Hr. Power, Inc. offers local artists in recovery a unique opportunity to give back. For more information, visit [www.24hrPower.com](http://www.24hrPower.com).

*This document was adapted from the Addiction Policy Forum and Warren County, Ohio guide “Helping Children Impacted by Parental Substance Use Disorder” published in December 2021. Updated 9/8/2022*

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<sup>i</sup> Meinhofer, A., & Angleró-Díaz, Y. (2019). Trends in Foster Care Entry Among Children Removed From Their Homes Because of Parental Drug Use, 2000 to 2017. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 173(9), 881. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.1738>

<sup>ii</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2014). Parental substance use and the child welfare system. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/parentalsubabuse.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Parolin, M., Simonelli, A., Mapelli, D., Sacco, M., Cristofalo, P. (2016). Parental Substance Abuse As an Early Traumatic Event. Preliminary Findings on Neuropsychological and Personality Functioning in Young Drug Addicts Exposed to Drugs Early. *Front Psychol*, 7: 887. <https://doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00887>

<sup>iv</sup> Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. ACEs and Toxic Stress: Frequently Asked Questions.

Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/acesand-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/>