

Early Exposure to Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse

Executive Summary

Research shows that children in families with parental or carer substance abuse are at greater risk of a range of adverse developmental outcomes.¹ Living in a household where misuse of alcohol and other drugs occurs may increase the likelihood of children being substance misusers themselves and being involved in the juvenile justice system.²

The direct effects of childhood exposure to alcohol and other drug abuse may include:

- emotional and physical abuse;
- maltreatment;
- modelling of poor drinking and substance abusing behaviours;
- inadequate supervision; and
- separation from parents due to incarceration and hospitalisation.³

The separation of children from parents and caregivers through parental imprisonment for drug-related offences may result in a child remaining with the other parent, ending up in informal kinship care, or being placed in out-of-home care by care and protection authorities.⁴ Parental incarceration and experiences of out-of-home care are themselves factors which may increase the likelihood of a person coming into contact with the criminal justice system.⁵

The potential relevance of evidence of early exposure to alcohol and other drug abuse in sentencing proceedings includes an assessment of *moral culpability*; moderating the weight to be given to *general deterrence*; and determining the weight to be given to *specific deterrence* and *protection of the community*. There may also be issues relating to the likelihood of *hardship in custody*, a finding of *special circumstances* and the shaping of conditions to enhance prospects of *rehabilitation*.

¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies, [Child Maltreatment and Substance Abuse](#) (NCPC Discussion Paper No 2, 1996); Anne-Marie Laslett et al, [The Range and Magnitude of Alcohol's Harm to Others](#) (Report, AER Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre, Eastern Health, 2010); Australian Institute of Family Studies, [Improving Outcomes for Children Living in Families with Parental Substance Misuse: What Do We Know and What Should We Do](#) (NCPC Issues No 29, 2008); National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction, [From Policy to Implementation: Child and Family Sensitive Practice in the Alcohol and Other Drugs Sector](#) (ANCD Research Paper, October 2013) 1; Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, [The Hidden Harm: Alcohol's Impact on Children and Families](#) (Report, February 2015) 1.

² Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, [The Impact of Drug and Alcohol Misuse on Children and Families](#) (Report, December 2006) 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See, eg, Frank Ainsworth, 'Drug Use by Parents: The Challenge for Child Protection and Drug and Alcohol Services' (2004) 29(3) *Children Australia* 4, 7.

⁵ Refer also to Bar Book chapters [Incarceration of Parents and Caregivers](#) and [Out-of-Home Care](#).