

Early Exposure to Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse

The purpose of this document is to collate published research, the findings of government reports and inquiries, and academic commentary in relation to early exposure to substance and alcohol abuse, and the effects this may have on a person's behaviour; development; physical, mental and social well-being; and links to contact with the criminal justice system.

Introduction

- 1 It is well established that children in families with parental or carer substance abuse are at greater risk of a range of adverse developmental outcomes.¹
- 2 The direct effects of early exposure to substance abuse on children may include: emotional and physical abuse and other forms of maltreatment; modelling of poor drinking and substance abusing behaviours; inadequate supervision; and separation from parents due to incarceration and hospitalisation.² In turn, these factors increase the likelihood that children will themselves develop substance abuse problems, making it more probable that they will come into contact with the criminal justice system.³

Terminology

- 3 This document uses the term 'substance abuse', following the approach taken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, to refer to those who are regularly misusing alcohol or illicit drugs, and those who have progressed to a clinically defined chemical dependence.⁴
- 4 The term 'illicit drugs' is used to refer to illegal drugs such as cannabis, MDMA, cocaine, heroin and amphetamine-type stimulants; misuse or use for non-medical purposes of pharmaceuticals; and inappropriate use of other psychoactive substances such as kava,

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 Australian Institute of Family Studies, '[Child Maltreatment and Substance Abuse](#)' (NCPC Discussion Paper No 2, September 1996).

synthetic drugs, or inhalants.⁵ In recent years, this has come to incorporate substances known as ‘new psychoactive substances’, which mimic other well-known illicit drugs (such as MDMA and LSD) and are available through the internet.⁶

Prevalence

- 5 Reliable estimates of the number of children exposed to parental alcohol and drug use in Australia are difficult to ascertain due to the hidden nature of illicit drug use, associated stigma, and reliance on self-reporting by parents.⁷ Although data on the number of children coming into contact with child protection services due to parental alcohol and drug use are not routinely collected in Australia,⁸ it can be inferred from the results of numerous household surveys that a substantial number of Australian children live in households where adults routinely use alcohol and other drugs at problematic levels.⁹
- 6 In 2015, the [Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation](#) (‘AER’) Centre for Alcohol Policy Research predicted that over one million children (22 per cent of all Australian children) are affected in some way by the drinking of others; 142,582 children (3 per cent of all Australian children) are substantially affected; and 10,166 (0.2 per cent of all Australian children) are already within the child protection system where a carer’s problematic drinking has been identified as a factor.¹⁰
- 7 The [2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey](#) (‘NDSHS’) found that 16.9 per cent of Australian single parents with dependent children and 14.3 per cent of parents in couple households with dependent children reported consuming alcohol at a rate that increases immediate risk of alcohol-related harm or injury at least once per week.¹¹
- 8 Based on a national random sample of 2,649 Australians aged 18 years or older, the [2008 Harm to Others Survey](#) showed that the majority of Australians had been affected by others’ drinking in the last year and many had been seriously affected.¹² Among those most seriously affected were family members, including children.¹³
- 9 The most recent [National Drug Strategy Household Survey](#) found that cannabis was the most commonly used illicit drug in 2015/2016, followed by painkillers and opioids, cocaine and

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2016: Detailed Findings](#) (Report, September 2017) 53.

⁶ See European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, ‘[New Psychoactive Substances \(NPS\)](#)’ (Web Page).

⁷ 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) 3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, [The Hidden Harm: Alcohol’s Impact on Children and Families](#) (Report, February 2015) 9.

¹¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey](#) (Report, July 2011) 61.

¹² 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) 53.

¹³ Ibid 8.

ecstasy.¹⁴ Heroin and methadone users comprised the highest proportion of survey respondents reporting they were unable to stop or reduce their substance use, despite attempts to do so, attesting to the highly addictive nature of opioids.¹⁵

Effects

Physical abuse

- 10 Studies have found that alcohol consumption increases aggression, and that alcohol misuse, by male partners in particular, has the potential to increase family conflict and to contribute to physical abuse of partners and children.¹⁶
- 11 In a 2010 report, the [AER Centre for Alcohol Policy Research](#) noted that '[i]n 2006-07 (using the best and most recently available data), 10,166 substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect across Australia are estimated to have involved alcohol.'¹⁷
- 12 In 2006, the [NSW Department of Community Services](#) considered that parental alcohol misuse has been linked to an increased risk of child abuse including physical abuse and exposure to family violence:

There are two situations of concern in terms of substance abuse and violence towards children: the possibility of children being physically abused by a parent, and the possibility of children witnessing violence.¹⁸
- 13 Illicit drug use may also lead to physical abuse of children, depending on the nature of the substance and the addiction. In a 2010 report, [NSW Community Services](#) explained that 'drugs such as amphetamines and cocaine, that are associated with serious disturbances of mental state, may be more likely to result in physical abuse.'¹⁹
- 14 The Council of Australian Governments [National Ice Action Strategy 2015](#) notes that methamphetamine ('ice') 'is a potent stimulant that, for some people, can trigger psychological issues or violent aggressive behaviour, putting others in danger.'²⁰ The use of ice is known to

¹⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2016: Detailed Findings](#) (Report, September 2017) 51. Cannabis and meth/amphetamine users were much more likely to use the drug regularly with 36 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, using it as often as weekly or more often (compared with ecstasy and cocaine users where only 2 and 3 per cent, respectively, used weekly or more frequently): 51.

¹⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2016: Detailed Findings](#) (Report, September 2017) 51.

¹⁶ Community Services, Department of Human Services (NSW), '[Working with Parental Substance Misuse](#)' (Research to Practice Note, February 2010) 1. **Refer also to Bar Book chapter *Childhood Exposure to Domestic and Family Violence*.**

¹⁷ 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) 93.

¹⁸ Department of Community Services (NSW), '[Parental Alcohol Misuse and the Impact on Children](#)' (Research to Practice Note, October 2006) 1.

¹⁹ Community Services, Department of Human Services (NSW), '[Working with Parental Substance Misuse](#)' (Research to Practice Note, February 2010) 4.

²⁰ Council of Australian Governments, '[National Ice Action Strategy](#)' (2015) 1.

cause '[d]istress for children, families and communities including family breakdown, financial distress and concern over users' erratic and at times violent behaviour.'²¹

Psychological impacts and maltreatment

- 15 A 2003 report by the Victorian Department of Human Services described a range of ways that children in families may be affected by exposure to alcohol or drug use:

a parent's overriding involvement with alcohol or drugs (AOD) may leave the parent emotionally and physically unavailable to the child; a parent's mental functioning, judgement, inhibitions, and/or protective capacity may be seriously impaired, placing the child at increased risk of all forms of abuse and neglect; a parent may disappear for hours or days, leaving the child alone or with someone unable to meet the child's basic needs; excessive responsibility may be placed on young children to care for themselves and/or young siblings; a parent may spend the household budget on alcohol and drugs, depriving the child of adequate food, clothing, housing and health care; and consistent exposure in the home may contribute to the child eventually developing AOD problems.²²

- 16 When a carer is intoxicated, their ability to provide adequate care and protection of children is compromised.²³ The [AER Centre for Alcohol Policy Research](#) found that alcohol was recorded as a factor in 33.2 per cent of all substantiated cases of child maltreatment.²⁴ Factors that contribute to a child's maltreatment when living with a carer with an alcohol or substance abuse problem include:

- disruptions to family rituals such as birthdays;
- changes in and reversal of parent-child roles;
- disturbed school attendance;
- eating and bedtime routines;
- limited or more aggressive communication;
- diminished social connectedness; and
- lack of finances and worsening relationships.²⁵

- 17 The [NSW Department of Community Services](#) in 2006 stated that:

In general, families with parental alcohol misuse are characterised by poorer family functioning, perceive their environment to be less cohesive, lack rituals and routines, have lower levels of physical and verbal expressions of positive feelings, warmth and caring, and

²¹ Ibid 11.

²² Department of Human Services (Vic), 'Public parenting: A review of home based care services in Victoria' (Report, 2003) xxiii, quoted in Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, [The Impact of Drug and Alcohol Misuse on Children and Families](#) (Report, December 2006) 14.

²³ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, [The Impact of Drug and Alcohol Misuse on Children and Families](#) (Report, December 2006) 5.

²⁴ 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) 104.

²⁵ Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, [The Hidden Harm: Alcohol's Impact on Children and Families](#) (Report, February 2015) 18 citing Richard Velleman and Lorna Templeton, 'Understanding and Modifying the Impact of Parents' Substance Misuse on Children' (2007) 13(2) *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* 79.

- higher levels of unresolved conflict. Parents who misuse alcohol may be inconsistent in expressing warmth and affection towards their child.²⁶
- 18 Problems associated with a parent's substance abuse may be limited (e.g. affecting supervision at one-off social functions) or ongoing, such as potentially affecting a child's development over many years if the child is inadequately fed, educated, clothed and looked after.²⁷
- 19 Respondents to the [2008 Harm to Others Survey](#) reported fear, behavioural problems, and shame as some of the outcomes for children raised by carers with substance abuse problems.²⁸
- 20 Regarding illicit drug use, the [NSW Department of Human Services](#) in 2010 noted that:
- The degree to which parenting is affected by substance misuse will be related to the parent's patterns of use and the type of substance ingested...All substances will alter to different degrees an individual's state of consciousness, memory, affect regulation and impulse control. The consequences of this may be reflected in more extreme styles of parenting, either authoritarian, over-controlling or under-involved.²⁹
- 21 Similarly, the [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#) states that the psychological effects of the substance used may impair a carer's ability to supervise for their child in varied ways:
- ... substances that result in a state of extreme drowsiness and impaired concentration and attention, such as alcohol and perhaps heroin, clearly impact on aspects of parental capacity, such as parental supervision, thus increasing risk of injury, neglect or harm by others. Substances such as amphetamines may be even more problematic as their regular use is associated with a state of agitation, restlessness and impaired judgement. A considerable proportion of regular users experience heightened levels of suspiciousness and hostility, sometimes accompanied by subclinical features of psychosis that include delusional beliefs of persecution. These states are clearly incompatible with sensitive and responsive parenting and may indeed increase the risk of neglect and abuse due to the misinterpretation of child behaviour and language on the part of the parent.³⁰
- 22 The [NSW Department of Human Services](#) made the following observations regarding parenting within families where substance misuse is present:
- Opioids may be more likely to be associated with child neglect, while drugs such as amphetamines and cocaine, that are associated with serious disturbances of mental state, may be more likely to result in physical abuse ... The parenting style of opiate and cocaine addicted mothers has been described as vacillating between the extremes of authoritarian over control and excessive permissiveness or neglect.³¹

²⁶ Department of Community Services (NSW), '[Parental Alcohol Misuse and the Impact on Children](#)' (Research to Practice Note, October 2006) 1.

²⁷ Anne-Marie Laslett et al (n 22) 95.

²⁸ Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, [The Hidden Harm: Alcohol's Impact on Children and Families](#) (Report, February 2015) 11.

²⁹ Community Services, Department of Human Services (NSW), '[Working with Parental Substance Misuse](#)' (Research to Practice Note, February 2010) 3.

³⁰ 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).

³¹ Community Services, Department of Human Services (NSW), '[Working with Parental Substance Misuse](#)' (Research to Practice Note, February 2010) 4.

Intergenerational cycles of substance abuse and modelling behaviour

- 23 Children of parents who misuse alcohol and drugs are at greater risk of subsequently developing alcohol and other drug problems themselves.³²
- 24 Generational patterns of drug use have been recognised by parliamentary inquiries. The final report of the 2007 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services [Inquiry into the Impact of Illicit Drug Use on Families](#) found:
- Family history of substance abuse is an important family-level risk factor for substance abuse. Australian data confirm parent substance use to be an important predictor of more frequent youth substance use. The more members of a household, including siblings, who use a drug, the greater the child's risk of early initiation of use of that drug.³³
- 25 The inquiry heard that parental use of drugs can normalise their use and cause children to model a particular kind of coping behaviour:
- We have observed a dynamic where illicit drug-using parents use drugs to manage challenging personal experiences and pass this form of coping behaviour onto their children.³⁴
- 26 The 2016 [National Drug Strategy Household Survey](#) found that 'the most common reason that an illicit substance was first used was curiosity (65%), followed by friends of family offered it or were using it (50%).'³⁵

Implications for household dynamics

- 27 Studies have identified that a further consequence of early exposure to substance abuse can be the separation of children from parents and caregivers through parental imprisonment for drug-related offences.³⁶ Separation 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.³⁷
- 28 In 2003, the [Victorian Department of Human Services](#) noted that substance misuse is associated with an increased risk of child protection interventions in families, finding that '65 per cent of

³² 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) 9.

³³ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, Parliament of Australia, [The Winnable War on Drugs: The Impact of Illicit Drug Use on Families](#) (Final Report, September 2007) 300, quoting National Health and Medical Research Council, *The Role of Families in the Development, Identification, Prevention and Treatment of Illicit Drug Problems* (Report, 2001) 6.

³⁴ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, Parliament of Australia, [The Winnable War on Drugs: The Impact of Illicit Drug Use on Families](#) (Final Report, September 2007) 301.

³⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2016: Detailed Findings](#) (Report, September 2017) 53, 74.

³⁶ Frank Ainsworth, '[Drug Use by Parents: The Challenge for Child Protection and Drug and Alcohol Services](#)' (2004) 29(3) *Children Australia* 4, 7. Refer also to Bar Book chapter [Incarceration of Parents and Caregivers](#).

³⁷ *Ibid.* Refer also to Bar Book chapter [Out-of-Home Care](#).

foster family clients presented with family violence issues and drug and alcohol misuse' from their biological family.³⁸

- 29 A [1999 study](#) into the needs of children and families of prisoners in Victoria considered the available literature in the field and found that parental imprisonment had profoundly negative behavioural and emotional effects on children including 'aggressive behaviour, learning difficulties and maladaptive patterns including offending behaviour.'³⁹
- 30 The [NSW Department of Community Services](#) found that substance abuse may also have repercussions on families' financial stability:

The income of the family and the ability to provide for children's material needs may be affected, as the substance user's unpredictable behaviour can make employment difficult to maintain and the cost of drugs may mean there is not enough money left to buy necessities like food. Parents can also experience considerable conflict between meeting the physical and emotional needs of their children and sustaining their drug habit; buying food or clothing and paying bills may be sacrificed in order to sustain parental habits.⁴⁰

- 31 One of the major factors contributing to the development of behaviours of substance misuse was found to be an individual's environment: '[p]roblematic adolescent drug use is more likely among those who are raised in extreme poverty, by sole parents, or where other family members use drugs.'⁴¹

Links to Contact with the Criminal Justice System

- 32 There is a well-established, but complex, link between alcohol and substance abuse and criminal offending. This link may develop when children who have been exposed to substance abuse at an early age go on to model their carer's poor behaviours. The [NSW Department of Community Services](#) found that:

Poor parental modelling and supervision may in turn impact on peer relationships that children develop. For example, children whose parents misuse alcohol tend to engage in significantly more deviant behaviour and belong to more deviant peer groups.⁴²

- 33 The [Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth](#) in 2006 found that:

The likelihood of adolescents being substance misusers and involved in the juvenile justice system is also reported to increase in situations where the adolescent has lived in families where substance misuse occurs.⁴³

³⁸ Department of Human Services (Vic), 'Public Parenting: A Review of home based care services in Victoria' (Report, 2003) xxiii, quoted in Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, [The Impact of Drug and Alcohol Misuse on Children and Families](#) (Report, December 2006) 14.

³⁹ Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, ['Doing It Hard': A Study of the Needs of Children and Families of Prisoners in Victoria](#) (Report, March 2000) 8.

⁴⁰ Community Services, Department of Human Services (NSW), ['Working with Parental Substance Misuse'](#) (Research to Practice Note, February 2010) 3.

⁴¹ Ibid 1.

⁴² Department of Community Services (NSW), ['Parental Alcohol Misuse and the Impact on Children'](#) (Research to Practice Note, October 2006) 1.

⁴³ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, [The Impact of Drug and Alcohol Misuse on Children and Families](#) (Report, December 2006) 1.

- 34 The [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#) considered that '[i]llicit drugs such as opioids and amphetamine-type substances often require engagement in a range of illegal activities, such as theft or prostitution, in order to support the habit.'⁴⁴
- 35 The [Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth](#) found that New South Wales and Queensland studies indicated that a high proportion of domestic violence, assault, malicious damage and noise complaints were a result of alcohol use.⁴⁵ The same report also referred to a Victorian study which found that most drug-related offences for which young people are detained are a consequence of possession of small amounts for personal use.⁴⁶

Co-morbidity

- 36 The [Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth](#) has noted that:

The term 'dual diagnosis' refers to people who present with both psychiatric and substance misuse issues and is a growing problem. Dual diagnosis or co-morbidity of substance misuse and mental health issues has become significantly more prevalent and reported in recent years. The interconnectedness between mental illness, substance misuse, criminal activity and parenting is raised in a range of national and international literature.⁴⁷

- 37 These findings are supported in the literature, with a [2013 report commissioned by the Australian National Council on Drugs](#) finding:

Problematic drug use rarely occurs in isolation, and families in which alcohol and other drug misuse occurs are also more likely to experience a range of other problems. These include mental illness, unemployment, social isolation, poverty and domestic violence.⁴⁸

- 38 The [NSW Department of Community Services](#) identified co-morbidity as an additional risk factor that further compounds the effects of a parent's substance abuse on children:

[C]hildren of parents with dual diagnosis, particularly alcohol misuse and ASPD [antisocial personality disorders], are more likely to develop externalising behaviours and oppositional defiant disorder than children of parents who misuse alcohol but do not have a mental health problem.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Australian Institute of Family Studies, '[Child Maltreatment and Substance Abuse](#)' (NCPC Discussion Paper No 2, September 1996).

⁴⁵ Ibid 20.

⁴⁶ Ibid 21.

⁴⁷ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, [The Impact of Drug and Alcohol Misuse on Children and Families](#) (Report, December 2006) 1.

⁴⁸ 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) 3.

⁴⁹ Department of Community Services (NSW), '[Parental Alcohol Misuse and the Impact on Children](#)' (Research to Practice Note, October 2006) 1, citing Alexandra Loukas et al, 'Developmental Trajectories of Disruptive Behavior Problems among Sons of Alcoholics: Effects of Parent Psychopathology, Family Conflict, and Child Undercontrol' (2003) 112(1) *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 119.