



# research review

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## Parental substance misuse and child protection: what are the impacts?

### The impact on children

Parental substance misuse has the potential to impact on virtually all aspects of a child's health and development from conception onwards.

Common risk factors include:

- the adverse effect of pre-natal exposure to drugs and alcohol on the developing brain
- compromised parenting practices ie physically or psychologically unavailable parents
- increased risk of child abuse and neglect
- disruption to children's primary care
- neglect where household resources are invested in the pursuit and use of drugs
- exposure to activities related to drug use or drug seeking behaviour including violence within the home and other criminal activity
- risk of infectious diseases
- risk of developing early conduct and behavioural problems
- risk of failing at school
- elevated risk for developing substance use problems themselves.

### The impact on the child protection system

Families with parental substance misuse have high rates of child abuse and neglect, posing specific challenges for child protection workers.

- Few parents voluntarily seek or complete treatment and many are resistant to change.
- Substance use can limit a parents ability to collaboratively engage in a planned decision making process.
- Accurate risk assessment can be difficult due to the high likelihood of relapse.
- Children of substance misusing families tend to stay in care longer and are less likely to be reunified.
- Child protection issues may be the catalyst that bring drug and alcohol issues to light and may also provide the motivation to change.
- Child protection workers are in a unique position to support families on a pathway to treatment.
- Family engagement and the development of a collaborative working alliance are key to an effective intervention.

These key messages are part of the larger research report *Parental substance misuse and children's entry into Alternative Care in South Australia, 2006*.

A full copy of the report can be obtained from the Department for Families and Communities Research Unit website  
[www.dfc.sa.gov.au/research/](http://www.dfc.sa.gov.au/research/)

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Burke, S, Schmied, V & Montrose, M 2006, *Literature Review: Parental Alcohol Misuse and the impact on children*, Department of Community Services, NSW. Discusses the impact on children and the effectiveness of interventions designed to support parents and carers managing alcohol misuse within families.

Dawe, S, Atkinson, J, Frye, S, Evans, C, Best, D, Lynch, M, Moss, D & Harnett, P 2007, *Drug use in the family: impacts and implications for children*, Australian National Council on Drugs, Canberra.

A comprehensive Australian report on the estimated prevalence and impact of substance use on families, with a detailed description of the potential impact parental substance use has on children through developmental stages.

Department of Child Safety 2007, *Parental Substance Misuse and Child Protection: Intervention Strategies*, Practice Paper, Queensland Government.

Practice paper developed specifically to assist practitioners to implement evidence based interventions where children have been harmed or at risk due to parental substance misuse.

Dodd, J & Sagers, S 2006, *The impact of drug and alcohol use on children and families*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, Centre for Social Research, Edith Cowan University, WA.

First of a two part series on the impact of substance misuse on children and families.

Gruenert, S, Ratnam, S & Tsantefski, M 2004, *The Nobody's Clients Project: identifying and addressing the needs of children with substance dependent parents*, Odyssey House Institute of Studies, Odyssey House, Victoria.

Collaborative, targeted and early intervention project aimed at 4-13 year old children whose parents were in treatment for drug or alcohol dependency.

Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs 2003, *Hidden Harm: Responding to the needs of children of problem drug users*, London: Home Office. Pioneering British report on an inquiry that placed the children of problem drug users at the centre of attention.

Hogan, D & Higgins, L 2007, *When parents use drugs: Key Findings from a Study of Children in the Care of Drug-using Parents*, The Children's Research Centre, University of Dublin.

Highlights the diversity in family functioning of drug using parents and the practice and policy responses required.

Ryan, J 2006, *Illinois Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse (AODA) Waiver Demonstration: Final Evaluation Report*, Illinois Department of Family and Children's Services.

An evaluation report of a demonstration project aimed at improving family reunification, permanency and safety outcomes for children of substance users.

Semidei, J, Radel, L & Nolan, C 2001 'Substance Abuse and Child Welfare: Clear Linkages and Promising Responses', *Child Welfare*, Vol. 80, Issue 2.

Explores the prevalence of substance abuse amongst families served in the child welfare system and the impact on child welfare practice.

Taylor, A & Knoll, B 2004, 'Working with Parental Substance Misuse: Dilemmas for Practice', *British Journal of Social Work*, 34, pp 1115-1132.

Explores the dilemmas faced by social welfare professionals who work with substance misusing individuals in the statutory and voluntary sectors.

Tunnard, J 2000, *Parental problem drinking and its impact on children*, *Research in practice*, UK.

UK review of research on parental problem drinking aimed at front-line social workers and managers in the child welfare field.

Tunnard, J 2002, *Parental drug misuse: a review of impact and intervention studies*, *Research in practice*, UK.

UK review that examines the available research about the impact of problem drug use on individuals and children, and interventions designed to reduce the impact.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1999, *Blending Perspectives and Building Common Ground: A Report to Congress on Substance Abuse and Child Protection*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

Describes the extent and scope of the problem of substance abuse in the child welfare population, the types of services provided and outcomes for families.