

THE PARENTING EDUCATION PROGRAM

PARENTING AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Everyone is affected to some degree by the environment they live in. These environments include the physical things, people, activities, emotions, and thoughts that surround us. Because of the child's limited experience in the world, and their limited power, they are very strongly influenced by their environment. This is especially true of their family environment. The family environment includes the people, things and activities that are most important to the child. They shape the personality, behavior, thoughts and emotions of the child for the rest of their life.

This does not imply however, that individuals cannot overcome their past and change what they learned during their childhood. As adults we have choice and can change our way of thinking, process and heal our emotions, and redirect our behaviors. Many adults were damaged as children by their family environment and need to heal and grow, and change. For many adults this means unlearning many things from our childhood and relearning more effective and healthy ways of living.

One of the most damaging things to the family environment and to children is substance abuse. If any member of the household uses drugs, such as cocaine, crack, speed, or marijuana, or drinks excessively, the entire household is effected. Substance abuse by parents however, has extensive and severely damaging effects on the children and the family itself. In this booklet we will explore the ways in which the family is affected by substance abuse. In particular, we will address what happens to children growing up in a family where drugs are used and how that changes their development.

Throughout this booklet we will be referring to substance abuse. Since the idea of substance abuse has different interpretations, and

meanings, we will clarify what is included as substance abuse for the purposes of this material.

Substance abuse will include not only the use of illegal drugs and alcohol, but also the abuse of some legal, or prescription drugs. Prescription and over-the-counter drugs are often misused. They are misused when not taken as directed by the physician or as recommended by the manufacturers. When a patient lies to, or misrepresents their illness to a doctor in order to get more medications, they are abusing the medicines. Tranquilizers, sedatives, and pain relievers are often abused by patients. Legal drugs are often abused when they are taken in combination with other drugs or alcohol, especially when it is done to enhance the psychological affects of the drug. Substance abuse also of course refers to the use of any illegal drugs whether they are smoked, injected, snorted or taken orally. Substance abuse will also refer to the misuse or overuse of alcohol in any form, from beer to hard liquor.

Since alcohol can be legally purchased and is commonly used, many people fail to recognize that it is a drug. It is a very powerful drug and even minimal use has physical and psychological effects. A person does not need to be an alcoholic to abuse alcohol or to be affected by it. The psychological affects of alcohol can affect the user and the rest of the family even if the user does not become intoxicated or drunk. Therefore, the legal criteria for intoxication are not important and useful ways to determine the effects of alcohol use for our purposes. To clarify, a person can be under the influence of alcohol without being legally drunk. We are not concerned with the legal aspects of intoxication, but with the influence alcohol use has on the individual and their family. We will consider alcohol as a drug and any reference to substances or drugs includes alcohol.

In addition to the many physical effects of substance abuse, there are also many psychological effects. We will briefly address a few of these physical and psychological effects in order to have a basis for understanding how the entire family is affected. The physical and psychological effects of the drug depend upon a variety

of things such as the type of drug, the amount taken, the individual's tolerance for the drug and the physical and psychological health of the user.

No matter if the user is on a downer or an upper, their thinking, emotions, behaviors, and interactions with others will be altered.

In a family system any change in one member will have an affect on other family members. Sometimes these effects are obvious and at other times they are hard to notice. One person under the influence of a mind or mood altering substance may be quiet, sullen, or withdrawn, while another may become loud, excited, or even aggressive. Family members have to adapt to the mood and behavior changes of these people. The crazy-making part of it is that they have to learn (usually through bad experiences) to anticipate in advance the mood or behavior of these substance abusing members of the family. Substance abuse can bring on sudden changes in mood or behavior and therefore makes it hard for family members to adapt to them. In ideal families, members are concerned about what is happening to each other and try to assist each other where needed. So in unhealthy families, where each of the members is usually only "guessing" what is going on, it is not possible for them to do much to help out. Even if they know that substance abuse is a part of the problem, they may not know how to help.

Families may pull together to try to help the substance abuser. In doing so many other important issues for the family may be neglected. Often parents who are worried about and trying to help a troubled family member wind up not being available to others who also need them. The substance abuser gets all of the family attention and others with legitimate needs and concerns are left out or neglected. At other times, the family may be divided in their loyalties or values and beliefs about how to deal with a substance abuser. The family may be torn apart, resulting in more worry and hurt and less support and strength for everyone. When a family begins to live in worry, fear, and blame, they lose touch with the love that binds them together and gives them hope, direction and strength. Sometimes when they need

each other the most they are not available to love and support each other.

Substance abuse can also have a devastating financial impact upon the family. The cost of the drugs is only a part of the financial cost.

Lost income from missed time at work and the cost of treating medical conditions that arise from substance abuse can be very high. There are also the legal costs for those who break the law while under the influence or break the law in order to get drug money, or drugs. Although substance abuse treatment may be a very important and can have great results, it is very costly. Many families continue to survive even with the financial, and emotional costs of substance abuse. Although they survive, they operate in a very dysfunctional way. In a family where one or more of the parents are abusing a substance the costs to the family and especially the children are even greater.

Children need parents who are dependable, reliable, responsible and competent. When parents are abusing a substance, they cannot be dependable, reliable, responsible, or competent. When they are under the influence, they cannot do a good job of taking care of their own needs, let alone taking care of the needs of their children. In many situations, they are also not fully competent even when they are not under the influence. They may be coming down from a high or picking themselves up from a downer or otherwise trying to recuperate from the drugs. Regardless, they become so self focused that they are not able to really recognize and follow through with taking care of their children's needs. They often force their children to take care of them and their needs because they can't or won't do it themselves. It should never be the child's job or responsibility to take care of their parents. This robs the child of one of the most important aspects of being a child, that of being carefree. Whenever a child is placed in the position of having to take care of their parents, other siblings or themselves, they are no longer able to be carefree. They lose out on experiencing their childhood as a child and become a

parentified child. A parentified child is a child who has to behave like a parent or an adult because the parents are not doing their job of parenting.

This does not imply that children should not learn how to take care of themselves or to cooperate and help out within the family.

There is a big difference between parents teaching children how to care for themselves, and making children assume adult responsibilities of caretaking. When parents are teaching, they are present and actively guiding their children by showing them how and what to do, and preventing them from making dangerous mistakes. When parents dump responsibilities on children before they are ready, or fail to guide and teach them, or are not emotionally involved with them, they are not doing their job as parents. Being emotionally present is far more important than being physically around. To be emotionally present, they need to be paying attention, monitoring and capable of making sound judgements and decisions about things. Parents who are under the influence or recovering from the influence of substances are not capable of properly caring for their children.

Children need a safe, stable, environment where there is both freedom and structure together. They need to be able to play a lot and work a little and to be able to give and receive love freely. They need parents and family who accept and love them as they are, and do not imply that they must act grown up or mature in order to be OK, or to be valuable.

Parents who are substance abusers do not provide a home environment where the child feels safe. Children have great dependency needs that parents need to meet. Children often feel strongly that they cannot survive without having these needs met. But when children see that their parents are not capable of taking care of them, they learn and adapt quickly to act grown up and try do it themselves. Many feel as though that they are in danger. They know that they are inexperienced and often feel and, learn (many times in

hurtful ways) that their best may not be good enough. The child lives in the constant fear that at any moment something can go terribly wrong and they won't be able to handle it, and they don't know if their parents will be able to either.

Children also need stability to feel secure. Stability allows them to be able to predict what is going to happen and how they should react or behave. Parents who are substance abusers cannot provide this stability. They often do not know themselves when they will be sober or under the influence.

They cannot predict their own behavior or moods. This puts the child in a position of being constantly on guard. The child is always watching trying to figure things out and make sense of things. The child grows up in a state of confusion, turmoil, and anxiety, feeling like they must be crazy. It is their situation that is crazy and crazy making.

Children need to feel free. They cannot feel free when they have to be in charge because their parents are not. They need structure to feel free. Structure allows them a way to know how and when things work and what to do. They know someone else is watching out for them.

Children need safety, stability, and structure to be able to play freely. Playing is the natural way that children express and learn about themselves and others. For their healthy development, they need the freedom to play.

Children who grow up with parents who abuse drugs also have other areas of their development harmed. Children are very egocentric. This means that they naturally tend to think and feel that things that happen in their families happen because of them. If someone gets sick, they may worry that they caused the illness or that it is their fault. They need to be told and reassured that they are not to blame. In many dysfunctional families, the children are constantly blamed by the parents for all of the problems that occur. When their parents abuse drugs, children often believe that it is their own fault. They believe that if they were better their parents would not use drugs. It is never the child's fault that their parents use drugs

or do anything else for that matter. This is very damaging to the child's self-esteem. This places the child into a mode of trying desperately to be good enough and do good enough so that things will be OK at home. They can never win at this. This child is set up to possibly spend a lifetime desperately working to do enough, yet never feeling good enough.

It is very difficult for these children to have normal, healthy, close relationships with friends. They may seem to have friends but lack a sense of belonging with them. They are usually guarded about what is happening at home.

They don't feel comfortable with other children and can't tell them what their life is really like. They seldom bring other children home. They don't want the secret out or to be embarrassed by what their parents might say or do in front of their companions.

The following is a list of thirteen characteristics that are common among adults that grew up in a home where one or more of the parents were substance abusers. This information is from the book Adult Children of Alcoholics written by Janet Geringer Woititz. Although it refers specifically to children of alcoholics, the same damaging results are felt by children whose parents are not alcoholics but who abused some other substance.

1. *Adult children of alcoholics learn to "guess" at what is normal. Nothing is ever for "certain".*
2. *Children of alcoholics have difficulty in following a project from beginning to end.*
3. *Adult children of alcoholics lie when it is just as easy to tell the truth.*
4. *Adult children of alcoholics judge themselves without mercy.*
5. *Adult children of alcoholics have difficulty having fun.*
6. *Adult children of alcoholics take themselves very seriously.*

7. *Adult children of alcoholics have difficulty with intimate relationships.*
8. *Adult children of alcoholics over-react to changes over which they have no control.*
9. *Adult children of alcoholics constantly seek approval and affirmation.*
10. *Adult children of alcoholics feel that they are different from other people.*
11. *Adult children of alcoholics are either super responsible or super irresponsible.*
12. *Adult children of alcoholics are extremely loyal, even in the face of evidence that the loyalty is undeserved.*

13. *Adult children of alcoholics are impulsive. They tend to lock themselves into a course of action without giving serious consideration to alternative behaviors or possible consequences. This leads to confusion, self-loathing and loss of control over their environment. In addition, they spend an excessive amount of energy cleaning up the mess of their lives caused by all this.*

Parents are the leaders of the family. When the leaders of any group cannot do their job, new leaders must come forward or the group will not function or survive. When parents turn to substance abuse, either to help them to cope with their lives or to escape from their reality, they cannot effectively parent their children. When children take over their parent's job of parenting, the "family" usually continues and survives in some manner or another. However, the child's growth and welfare are always sacrificed in the process.

In the substance abuse environment, children give up their childhood to save their parents and their family. They become adult children. They appear to be adults, but are still children inside, unsure, insecure and struggling with life. They still need to be told that what happened in their homes was not their fault, that they are not responsible for their parent's substance abuse. In order to grow in healthy ways, children need to be encouraged to find themselves, to learn to play and laugh, and to discover normal, natural, healthy ways to communicate with others and get their needs met. They need parents to take care of them and teach them about the world and life.

ADULT CHILDREN OF DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

Unfortunately, without healing and relearning, the future of these adult children is bleak. Although they have survived and made it to adulthood, they behave in a dysfunctional manner. Unless something changes, they will most likely marry a substance abuser or become one themselves. If they have children, they will pass on to their children the same painful childhood they had, not knowing how to do parenting any differently. Their hope is in their recovery of what

was lost in their childhood. They can re-parent themselves, work on their personal growth and learn how to do life differently.

STUDY QUESTIONS - STUDY GUIDE TEN
PARENTING AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

1. Because of the child's limited experience in the world and their limited power, they are _____ by their environment.
 - a) hardly influenced
 - b) not influenced
 - c) very strongly influenced
 - d) seldom influenced

2. A child's personality, behavior, thoughts and emotions are shaped by _____ for the rest of their life.
 - a) the family environment
 - b) birth experiences
 - c) their decisions
 - d) limited power

3. One of the most damaging things to the family environment and to children is _____.
 - a) the environment
 - b) parent's personality
 - c) substance abuse
 - d) limited power

4. Substance abuse by parents has _____ effects on the children and the family itself.
 - a) very little
 - b) moderate
 - c) positive
 - d) extensive and severely damaging

5. When patients lie to, or misrepresent their illness to a doctor in order to get medications, _____.
 - a) there is no serious problem
 - b) they may be abusing the medications
 - c) this is not substance abuse
 - d) this is the most common type of substance abuse

6. Alcohol is a very powerful drug and _____ has physical and psychological effects.
 - a) only heavy use
 - b) even minimal use
 - c) daily use
 - d) occasional

7. The psychological effects of alcohol can affect the user and the rest of the family:
 - a) even if the user does not become drunk
 - b) only if the user becomes drunk
 - c) only if the user drinks extreme amounts
 - d) if the user does not eat before drinking

8. In addition to the many physical effects of substance abuse, there are:
 - a) no other effects from alcohol
 - b) no serious health effects
 - c) also many psychological effects
 - d) very few psychological effects

9. The thinking, emotions, behaviors, and interactions of substance abusers are _____.
 - a) not affected by substance abuse
 - b) only affected by the use of alcohol
 - c) affected by the use of only illegal drugs
 - d) affected no matter if the drug is a downer or upper

10. In a family system, any change in one member will:
 - a) have no effect on the other family members
 - b) have an affect on other family members
 - c) destroy the family system
 - d) always be resisted by the other members

11. When family members pull together to try to help a substance abuser, _____.
 - a) they are usually successful
 - b) the family usually falls apart
 - c) other important issues for the family may be neglected
 - d) the substance abuser usually quits

12. When a family begins to live in worry, fear, and blame, they loose touch with _____.
- a) chances for survival
 - b) the love that binds them together
 - c) the problems of substance abuse
 - d) important issues
13. Substance abuse often has _____ impact on the family financially.
- a) very little
 - b) a devastating
 - c) a positive
 - d) no connection to the
14. When parents are under the influence, they cannot do a good job of taking care of their own needs _____.
- a) but their children will be OK
 - b) let alone the needs of their children
 - c) but this is not a serious problem
 - d) and their children should take care of them
15. It _____ the child's job or responsibility to take care of the parents needs.
- a) is always
 - b) always has been
 - c) should never be
 - d) should be
16. When a child takes on the responsibility of taking care of their parents they are robbed of one of the most important aspects of being a child, _____.
- a) being silly
 - b) being parentified
 - c) being immature
 - d) being carefree

17. A _____ is a child who has to behave like a parent or adult because the parents are not doing their job of parenting.
- a) carefree child
 - b) responsible child
 - c) dethroned
 - d) parentified
18. Parents who are under the influence or recovering from the influence of substances _____.
- a) are still capable of taking care of their children
 - b) should have their children take care of them
 - c) are not capable of properly caring for their children
 - d) sober up quickly when their children are around
19. Children need a safe, stable environment where there is both:
- a) control and restriction
 - b) freedom and structure together
 - c) criticism and lectures
 - d) freedom and no rules
20. Children recognize how much they need their parents and that they:
- a) cannot survive without them
 - b) should take care of their parents too
 - c) should learn not to need their parents
 - d) are willing to do their parents jobs for them
21. Children need _____ to feel secure.
- a) strength
 - b) money
 - c) stability
 - d) responsibilities
22. The child who grows up without stability is put in the position of:
- a) not caring what happens to them
 - b) not knowing what to do for themselves
 - c) feeling safe and secure
 - d) being constantly on guard
23. Children need safety, stability and _____ to be able to play freely.
- a) responsibilities
 - b) love
 - c) a routine
 - d) structure

24. _____ is the natural way that children express themselves, and learn about themselves in relation to others.
- a) playing
 - b) working
 - c) helping
 - d) learning
25. It is _____ the child's fault that parents are substance abusers.
- a) sometimes
 - b) seldom
 - c) never
 - d) occasionally
26. Children who believe they have some responsibility for their parents substance abuse are set up to possibly spend a lifetime working desperately to do enough and:
- a) feeling good about themselves
 - b) always succeeding
 - c) enjoying their successes
 - d) never feeling good enough
27. Children who grow up in homes with substance abuse may seem to have friends but:
- a) don't get along with them well
 - b) prefer to be with adults rather than children
 - c) lack a sense of belonging with them
 - d) blame their friends for their problems
28. Adult children of alcoholics have _____ having fun.
- a) a lot of time
 - b) difficulty
 - c) no problem
 - d) no time to waste on
29. When children take over the parents jobs of parenting, the family may survive in some manner, :
- a) and the children grow up stronger
 - b) and the children are better off
 - c) however, the children are sacrificed in the process
 - d) however, the parents are sacrificed in the process
30. Without healing and relearning, children who grow up in substance abusing families are most likely:
- a) to marry a substance abuser
 - b) to become a substance abuser themselves
 - c) to pass on their painful childhood to their children

d) all of the above