

Substance Abuse/Addiction Issues

What a CASA Volunteer Can Do. Children in substance-abusing families need help to address these issues and begin to heal their wounds.

Services for which the CASA might advocate include:

- Thorough assessment and treatment by a provider who has expertise in working with substance abuse issues.
- Substance abuse treatment services (especially programs where the child can be with the parent, if appropriate)
- Home-based services to build family skills
- Relocation out of an environment where drug or alcohol use is pervasive
- Financial assistance and childcare while parents are in treatment
- Support services such as SSI (Supplemental Security Income), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), food stamps, job training and child support
- When a child is in foster care, frequent visitation in a homelike atmosphere or a natural setting such as a park
- Assistance for the parent seeking to flee a domestic violence perpetrator – for example, obtaining a protective order, securing alternative housing, and taking other necessary steps (substance-abusing domestic violence victims are more likely to remain sober away from the abuser).

Definitions. Psychoactive substances, whether legal (for instance, alcohol) or illegal, impact and alter moods, emotions, thought processes, and behavior. These substances are classified as stimulants, depressants, opioids and morphine derivatives, cannabinoids, dissociative anesthetics, or hallucinogens based on the effects they have on the people who take them.

Substance abuse occurs when a person displays behavior harmful to self or others as a result of using the substance. This can happen with only one instance of use, but it generally builds over time, eventually leading to addiction.

Addiction, also called chemical dependency, involves the following:

- Loss of control over the use of the substance
- Continued use despite adverse consequences
- Development of increasing tolerance to the substance
- Withdrawal symptoms when the drug use is reduced or stopped

Causes. There are different theories about how abuse/addiction starts and what causes substance abuse/dependency. According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, substance-related disorders are biopsychosocial, meaning they are caused by a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors.

It is important to remember that people suffering from abuse/addiction are not choosing to be in the situation they are in. Try to see those who are addicted as separate from their disease. In other words, they should be seen as “sick and trying to get well,” not as “bad people who need to improve themselves.” This will help you to remember to be compassionate and nonjudgmental in your approach.

Treatment. The field of addiction treatment recognizes an individual’s entire life situation. Treatment should be tailored to the needs of the individual and guided by an individualized treatment plan based on a comprehensive assessment of the affected person, as well as his/her family. Treatment can include a range of services depending on the severity of the addiction, from a basic referral to 12-step programs to outpatient counseling, intensive outpatient/day-treatment programs, and inpatient/residential programs.

Treatment programs use a number of methods, including assessment; individual, group, and family counseling; educational sessions; aftercare/continuing-care services; and referral to 12-step or Rational Recovery support groups. Recovery is a process—and relapse is part of the disease of addiction.

The process of recovery includes holding substance abusers accountable for what they do while using. While it is important to act in an empathetic manner toward people with addictions, they must be held accountable for their actions. For example, a mother who is successfully participating in treatment may have to deal with her children being temporarily taken from her because of how poorly she cared for them when using. In most cases, successful recovery efforts can be rewarded.

Impact on Children. Children whose parents abuse drugs and alcohol are almost three times likelier to be abused and more than four times likelier to be neglected than children of parents who are not substance abusers.

It is helpful to remember that children of parents with abuse/addiction problems still love their parents, even though the parents may have abused or neglected them. However, the volunteer must always consider the impact that substance abuse has on children.

What the Child Experiences. From a child's perspective, a parent's substance abuse is usually characterized by the following:

- **Broken Promises.** Parents may break their promises to go somewhere with the family, do something with the children, not drink that day, or not get high on some occasion. The children grow up thinking they are not loved or important enough for their parents to keep their promises.
- **Inconsistency & Unpredictability.** Rules and limits may seem to change constantly, and parents may be loving one moment and abusive the next.
- **Shame & Humiliation.** Alcohol or drugs may take over and suddenly turn an otherwise lovely parent into a loathsome embarrassment.
- **Tension & Fear.** Because the children of substance-abusing parents never know what will happen next, they typically feel unsafe at home, the environment in which they should feel most protected.
- **Paralyzing Guilt & an Unwarranted Sense of Responsibility.** Many children think they cause their parents' behavior. Part of the disease is to blame someone else for it, and the children grow up thinking that if they were better students, more obedient, neater, more reliable, or nicer to their siblings, their parents would not use alcohol/drugs.
- **Anger & Hurt.** Children may feel neglected, mistreated, and less important in their parents' lives than the alcohol or drugs. They grow up with a profound sense of abandonment.
- **Loneliness & Isolation.** Because the family denies or hides the problem and often will not even discuss it among themselves, the children, with no one to talk to about the most important thing in their lives, think they are the only ones with this problem.
- **Lying as a Way of Life.** Children may feel they have to constantly cover for the failure of the parent, or account for his/her deviant behavior.
- **Feeling Responsible.** Often children feel that it is their job to organize and run the home and care for younger siblings.
- **Feeling Obligated.** Children feel they must hide the problem from authorities in order to protect the parent.

Adapted from *When Your Parent Drinks Too Much: A Book for Teenagers*, Eric Ryerson, New York: Facts on File, 1985.

Can the Child Return Home? Key Points to Consider. In deciding whether a child can return home to a family where substance abuse occurs, a number of factors should be weighed. These include:

- The parent's ability to function in a caregiving role
- The child's health, development, and age
- Parental history of alcohol or other drug abuse and substance abuse treatment
- Safety of the home
- Family supports
- Available treatment resources
- Treatment prognosis and/or length of sobriety

A dilemma that often arises is the conflict between the legal mandate (and the child's need) for permanency (ASFA) and the long-term treatment (including inpatient treatment) that substance-abusing parents may need. If a parent is in treatment, consideration should be given to placing the child with the parent rather than in foster care.

Although it is often the only available option, the child may feel punished when he/she is placed in foster care or away from the parent. The focus should be to support success in treatment, not to punish the parent by withholding the child.

Volunteer Training Curriculum, The National CASA Association

Local Resources

Klamath Alcohol & Drug Abuse, Inc. (KADA)
882-7248

Klamath Community Treatment Center (KCTC)
883-2795

Klamath Tribes
783-2219

Life Recovery Network
882-4646

Lutheran Community Services
883-3471

Alcoholics Anonymous
883-4970

Alateen
850-3932

Narcotics Anonymous
883-4976