

CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS

Important Facts

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

◆ Alcoholism affects the entire family.

Living with a non-recovering alcoholic in the family can contribute to stress for all members of the family.

Each member may be affected differently. Not all alcoholic families experience or react to this stress in the same way. The level of dysfunction or resiliency of the non-alcoholic spouse is a key factor in the effects of problems impacting children.



Children raised in alcoholic families have different life experiences than children raised in non-alcoholic families.

Children raised in other types of dysfunctional families may have similar developmental losses and stressors as do children raised in alcoholic families.

Children living with a non-recovering alcoholic score lower on measures of family cohesion, intellectual-cultural orientation, active-recreational orientation, and independence. They also usually experience higher levels of conflict within the family.

Many children of alcoholics (COAs) experience other family members as distant and non-communicative.

Children of alcoholics may be hampered by their inability to grow in developmentally healthy ways.

◆ Many people report being exposed to alcoholism in their families.

Seventy-six million Americans, about 43% of the U.S. adult population, have been exposed to alcoholism in the family.

Almost one in five Americans (18%) lived with an alcoholic while growing up.

Roughly one in eight American adult drinkers is an alcoholic or experiences problems due to the use of alcohol. The cost to society is estimated to be in excess of \$166 billion each year.

There are an estimated 26.8 million COAs in the United States. Preliminary research suggests that over 11 million are under the age of 18.

◆ There is strong, scientific evidence that alcoholism tends to run in families. Children of alcoholics are more at risk for alcoholism and other drug abuse than children of non-alcoholics.

Children of alcoholics are four times more likely than non-COAs to develop alcoholism.

Genetic factors play a major role in the development of alcoholism. There is an expanding base of literature that strongly supports a heritable basis for alcoholism and a range of family influences that may direct the development of children of alcoholics.

Children's perceptions of how much, when, and where their parents drink appear to influence their own drinking frequency.

Children become aware of their parents' drinking patterns at a very early age.

Parental alcoholism and other drug dependencies have an impact upon children's early learning about alcohol and other drugs.

Family interactions also may influence the COA's risk for alcohol abuse. It has been found that families with an alcoholic parent displayed more negative family interaction during problem-solving discussions than in non-alcoholic families.

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Almost one-third of any sample of alcoholics has at least one parent who also was or is an alcoholic.

Children of alcoholics are more likely than non-COAs to marry into families in which alcoholism is prevalent.

Parental alcoholism influences adolescent substance use through several different pathways including stress, negative affect and decreased parental monitoring. Negative affect and impaired parental monitoring are associated with adolescent's joining in a peer network that supports drug use behavior.

After drinking alcohol, sons of alcoholics experience more of the physiological changes associated with pleasurable effects compared with sons of non-alcoholics, although only immediately after drinking.

◆ **Alcoholism usually has strong negative effects on marital relationships.**

Separated and divorced men and women were three times as likely as married men and women to say they had been married to an alcoholic or problem drinker.

Almost two-thirds of separated and divorced women, and almost half of separated or divorced men, under age 46, have been exposed to alcoholism in the family at some time.

◆ **Alcohol is associated with a substantial proportion of human violence, and perpetrators are often under the influence of alcohol.**

Alcohol is a key factor in 68% of manslaughters, 62% of assaults, 54% of murders and attempted murders, 48% of robberies, and 44% of burglaries.

Studies of family violence frequently document high rates of alcohol and other drug involvement.

COAs may be more likely to be the targets of physical abuse and to witness family violence.

Compared with non-alcoholic families, alcoholic families demonstrate poorer problem-solving abilities, both among the parents and within the family as a whole. These poor communication and problem-solving skills may be mechanisms through which lack of cohesion and increased conflict develop and escalate in alcoholic families.

COAs are more at risk for disruptive behavioral problems and are more likely than non-COAs to be sensation seeking, aggressive, and impulsive.

◆ **Based on clinical observations and preliminary research, a relationship between parental alcoholism and child abuse is indicated in a large proportion of child abuse cases.**

A significant number of children in the United States are being raised by addicted parents. With more than one million children confirmed each year as victims of child abuse and neglect by state child protective service agencies, state welfare records have indicated that substance abuse is one of the top two problems exhibited by families in 81% of the reported cases.



Studies suggest an increased prevalence of alcoholism among parents who abuse children.

Existing research suggests alcoholism is more strongly related to child abuse than are other disorders, such as parental depression.

Although several studies report very high rates of alcoholism among the parents of incest victims, much additional research is needed in this area.

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