

NSPCC

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National Assembly for Wales / Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru

[Health and Social Care Committee / Y Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol](#)

[Inquiry into alcohol and substance misuse / Ymchwiliad i gamddefnyddio alcohol a sylweddu](#)

Evidence from NSPCC Wales - ASM 12 / Tystiolaeth gan NSPCC Cymru - ASM 12

Response to the Inquiry into Alcohol and Substance Misuse

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**MAE POB PLENTYNDOD WERTH BRWYDRO DROS
EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR**

About the NSPCC

We're leading the fight against child abuse in the UK and Channel Islands. We help children who've been abused to rebuild their lives, we protect children at risk, and we find the best ways of preventing child abuse from ever happening.

Abuse ruins childhood, but it can be prevented. That's why we're here. That's what drives all our work, and that's why – as long as there's abuse – we will fight for every childhood.

We help children rebuild their lives, and we find ways to prevent abuse from ruining any more. So when a child needs a helping hand, we'll be there. When parents are finding it tough, we'll help. When laws need to change, or governments need to do more, we won't give up until things improve. Abuse changes childhood. But so can we.

The NSPCC welcomes the opportunity to input into the Health and Social Care Committee's inquiry into alcohol and substance misuse to highlight the impact of parent/ carer substance misuse on children.

Children and young people can be affected by alcohol and substance misuse both as misusers themselves and as victims of the effect parental misuse can have. We are focusing on the latter in this written evidence.

Prevalence and impact

The precise number of children affected by, or living with parental substance or alcohol abuse is difficult to establish. It is estimated that 2 million children and young people in the UK are affected by parents' drug or alcohol misuse.¹ Parental substance misuse can harm children's development in two very distinct ways: directly through exposure to substances in utero and also indirectly through its impact on parenting capacity.

Research has clearly linked maternal alcohol use in pregnancy with impaired brain development in the foetus.² Most drugs cross the placenta, so the misuse of drugs during pregnancy affects both the mother and the foetus. Research evidence into the misuse of drugs by pregnant women show a range of negative impacts on the foetus, including congenital malformations, low birth weight, poor growth and premature delivery.³ In addition, children exposed to drugs before they are born may suffer from

¹ Manning, V., Best, D., Faulkner, N. and Titherington, E. (2009). 'New Estimates of the Number of Children Living with Substance Misusing Parents: Results from the UK National Household Surveys'. *BMC Public Health*. 9 (377).

² National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2006) *Early exposure to toxic substances damages brain architecture*. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu and Welch-Carre, E. (2005) "The neurodevelopmental consequences of prenatal alcohol exposure," *Advances in neonatal care* 5(4): 217-29

³ Greenough, A. et al. (2005) "Effects of substance misuse during pregnancy" in *The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health* 125(5): 212-13

drug withdrawal after birth and exhibit a variety of negative effects including irritability, inability to sleep, poor feeding and weight gain, and regurgitation.⁴

Research has shown that parents misusing substances are at risk of a wide range of difficulties associated with their role as a parent. These may include a lack of understanding about child development issues, ambivalent feelings about having and keeping children and lower capacities to reflect on their children's emotional experience.⁵

Whilst harm from parental substance use is not inevitable, children living in these circumstances are at increased risk of harm and neglect. Drug misuse can manifest itself in a variety of ways including physical ailments such as infections, overdoses and accidental and non-accidental injuries and psychological impairments such as being dominated by the drug and addiction, withdrawal symptoms such as erratic and irritable behaviour, psychosis and serious memory lapses.⁶ These symptoms show how it is very likely that children living with parents who engage in drug misuse are at high risk of significant harm. Evidence also generally shows that parents who misuse substances often suffer other adversities, such as domestic violence or mental ill health, which makes the outcome of abuse or neglect more likely.⁷

The Wales Children in Need Census 2013 showed that of the 19,920 children in need included in the Census, parental substance or alcohol misuse was present in 20 per cent of all referrals (3890 children).

Child neglect

Parental abuse of drugs or alcohol, or both, is found in more than half of parents who neglect their children⁸. NSPCC funds Cardiff University to undertake child protection systematic reviews and summarises the research into bilingual leaflets for practitioners to help them identify the signs of abuse and neglect⁹. In November 2014 NSPCC launched the latest systematic review into child neglect and emotional abuse in children aged 5-14 which complements the leaflet that summarises the features of emotional neglect and abuse in pre-school children launched in 2012. The research reports that the key features of emotional abuse and neglect are poor school performance and lower IQ, impact on behaviour (may present

⁴ Hunt, R.W. et al (2008) "Adverse neurodevelopmental outcome of infants exposed to opiate in-utero" in *Early Human Development* 84: 29-35

⁵ Suchman, N.E. et al (2005) How early bonding, depression, illicit drug use and perceived support work together to influence drug-dependent mothers' caregiving, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 73(3) 431-445.

⁶ ACMD. (2003) *Hidden Harm. Responding to the Needs of Children of Problem Drug Users: The Report of an Inquiry*. Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), London.

⁷ Kroll, V. (2004) *Living with the elephant: Growing up with parental substance misuse*, *Child and Family Social Work* 9(2):129-40

⁸ Greenough, A. et al (2005) *Effects of substance misuse during pregnancy* in the *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health* 125(5): 212-13

⁹ <http://www.core-info.cardiff.ac.uk/category/leaflets>

as aggressive or be quiet and withdrawn), difficulty with friendships and have few friends. NSPCC Cymru/ Wales recommend that these Welsh produced research and leaflets are made available to all professionals who work with families; these bilingual leaflets are available to download free of charge from the website:

<http://www.core-info.cardiff.ac.uk/category/leaflets>

NSPCC Cymru/ Wales in 2015 will be providing a range of neglect assessment and intervention services in both our Cardiff and Swansea Service Centres and is pleased to have been commissioned by Welsh Government, alongside Action for Children, to deliver the Welsh Neglect Project. The project aims to improve multi-agency responses and services for neglected children and their families, and it works across the spectrum of need. In 2015 the project will produce a range of practical resources to help practitioners identify, assess and address neglect. For further information please contact Vivienne Laing, Policy and Public Affairs Manager [REDACTED].

Contacts to ChildLine

Through ChildLine, the NSPCC has a unique insight into how children and young people experience the effects of parental alcohol and substance misuse. In 2012/13, ChildLine dealt with 3,930 contacts from young people across the UK who were concerned about their parents' drinking. This was almost twice as many as in 2011/12.

One young person who spoke to ChildLine said:

"My mum drinks all the time and leaves me alone lots of times. I feel scared and lonely. I look after my mum when she drinks. I put her to bed. Mum shouts and hits me; she is worse on a Friday. I don't want to feel pain. I want to die." (Angel, aged 10)

Another said: *"I want to run away from home. Both my parents use drugs and alcohol and they fight. My mum brings men home all the time. I really hate their way of living and would like to get away. I did try to get away with my sister but my sister is partly disabled so she couldn't keep up and we came back home. I am really unhappy to be left alone in the house all night."* (Sanjay, aged 14)¹⁰

Those children who are cared for by habitual alcohol or drug users are also at risk of turning to alcohol and drugs themselves in order to cope with life's challenges – for children contacting ChildLine, if a significant person in their life is misusing drugs, there is almost six times the

¹⁰ Mariathasan, J. Hutchinson, D. (2010). *Children talking to ChildLine about parental alcohol and drug misuse*. London: NSPCC. 33.

likelihood that the young person will discuss themselves misusing drugs compared with all children counselled by ChildLine.¹¹

Services available for families affected by parent/ carer substance misuse

NSPCC Cymru/ Wales welcomes the Welsh Government's Intensive Family Support Service which focuses on families where parents have substance misuse problems that affect the welfare of their children.

The NSPCC is looking at solutions to reduce the negative impact of parental alcohol and drug misuse on children. As part of this work, the NSPCC provides FED UP – Family Environment: Drug Using Parents. The NSPCC runs the programme at a number of its UK service centres, including in Cardiff.

FED UP (Family Environment: Drug Using Parents) Programme

This is a face-to-face intensive intervention for families in which there is parental substance misuse. It aims to reduce the negative impact of parental alcohol and drug misuse on children and ensure they are kept safe. Children aged between 5 and 12 years can be referred to FEDUP, if they have a parent who is dependent on drugs or alcohol. The programme is delivered over 12 weeks. Specially trained NSPCC practitioners work with the child to provide emotional support, improve self-esteem, help the child make sense of their world and offer a space for them to talk about their experiences. At the end of the group work programme two sessions will be spent with the parent and child to put in place an agreed safety plan.

The work with parents can begin before the child starts the group and will continue throughout the programme. As well as helping parents understand the effect the substance misuse has on the child, the NSPCC will work with them to improve their parenting skills.

An interim evaluation of the programme was published in October 2014. Our interim findings provide promising evidence that FEDUP can help reduce the negative impact of parental drug and alcohol misuse on children. Key findings include:

- Children and young people reported a decrease in their emotional and behavioural problems at the end of the programme. At the start of the programme 37 per cent of children and young people reported a clinical level of difficulties, but by the end of the

¹¹ Ibid.

programme only 25 per cent still reported a clinical level of difficulties.

- The factors identified by children that helped facilitated change included: developing their skills to deal with their emotional wellbeing; providing a safe space to discuss issues that they previously found difficult to talk about; enabling them to meet other children in similar situations, thereby helping them realise that they were not alone and to build new friendships; and having supportive practitioners who made them feel valued.
- Parents reported being less unhappy; being more confident about their parenting; and having a greater knowledge about children's needs at the end of the programme.
- The factors parents identified as helping them bring about changes in their parenting included: having the time to reflect on how their drug/alcohol taking behaviour impacted on their child; beginning to see situations from their child's perspective; learning new skills to address challenging behaviours; having a greater understanding about their strengths, thereby increasing their confidence; and having supportive practitioners.

A final evaluation report will provide more insight into whether the programme was effective in changing parents' understanding, attitudes, and behaviour in the long-term.

The full interim report is attached for your information.

We hope that the Committee will place a high importance on the considerable impact of alcohol and substance misuse on children and young people as part of the inquiry.

We are happy to provide further information and would like to offer members of the Committee the opportunity to meet FED UP practitioners, together with parents and children who have participated in the programme in our service centre in Cardiff. Please don't hesitate to contact us if this would be of interest.