

# Impact of parental substance misuse on children

## INFORMATION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PROFESSIONALS

Early childhood education and care professionals may observe certain signs or behaviour by a parent that indicates substance misuse. While there is no checklist to tell if a parent is misusing substances, it is important to monitor the impact on children.

### What are alcohol and other drugs?

Alcohol and other drugs are psychoactive substances that have a physiological and psychological effect when ingested into the body. They act on the central nervous system and change the way a person thinks, feels and behaves.

- Psychoactive substances include:
  - alcohol
  - tobacco
  - prescribed or over the counter medication (painkillers such as aspirin, Panadol and morphine; sleeping tablets such as Valium; dexamphetamine and antidepressants)
  - illegal drugs such as cannabis, ice, heroin, cocaine, ecstasy and GHB
  - performance and image enhancing drugs, such as steroids
  - new psychoactive substances, such as synthetic or herbal cannabis or cocaine, and bath salts
  - caffeine.

### Parental substance misuse

The use of alcohol or other drugs by a parent does not solely result in poor parenting practices.

It can be one of several factors that increase the risk of child abuse and neglect. If parents are misusing substances, such as being heavily intoxicated or under the influence of substances, it can affect their ability to care for a child.

Parental substance misuse is often an indication that a family may be experiencing other issues, such as poor mental or physical health, domestic and family violence, poverty and have limited social support.

It can be a sensitive issue for parents, due to the illegality, secrecy, shame, guilt and fear surrounding substance misuse.

Signs of intoxication or withdrawal are varied, and often vague. Some parents may not display any signs of substance misuse, or they may hide the signs well. Signs of substance use may be mistaken for other physical, intellectual or mental health issues.

The more obvious physical signs that may indicate substance misuse include:

- shaking or shivers
- red or watery eyes
- dilated or tiny pupils
- unusual smells on breath, body or clothes (like smoke, alcohol, petrol or paint fumes)
- extreme hyperactivity, excessive talking, fast/slow movements or reactions

- extreme tiredness or drowsiness
- weight loss
- injection marks
- changes in behaviour.

Assessments about substance use or misuse should only be made by qualified professionals, such as a doctor or clinician experienced in specialist alcohol and other drugs treatment.

## Impact of parental substance misuse on children

You may observe certain signs or behaviours by a child that indicates they are not receiving adequate parental care, or they are experiencing child abuse and neglect. This could be due to a number of parental issues, including substance misuse. Common indicators include:

- the child's medical and/or nutritional conditions of varying degrees of severity
- the child's attendance at day care is inconsistent
- neglect (the child is not being fed or clothed properly, has poor personal hygiene)
- reluctance of the child to leave with a particular parent
- a parent's difficulty or inability to provide for the child's material needs
- the child or parents may disclose substance use.

## Supporting children who are experiencing parental substance misuse

Childcare or kindergarten may be the only stable, secure and safe place for children experiencing parental substance misuse. You may be the first person the child talks to about what is happening.

If a child discloses that there is parental substance misuse in their home, take time to

listen to what the child tells you, and offer support.

If you have concerns about the child, you should discuss your concerns with the parents and let them know that you are there to help, with their consent.

Depending on the circumstances, it is important that you share relevant information with colleagues who are responsible for the safety of the centre. This will ensure that appropriate measures are in place to maintain the safety of staff and children, if necessary.

## Responding to disclosure by a parent

If a parent discloses alcohol and other drug use, you can:

- refer them to the **Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)** for confidential information, advice, referral and support 24 hours a day, seven days a week. ADIS provides contact information for the nearest specialised alcohol and other drugs treatment service. Freecall 1800 177 833.
- contact **Family and Child Connect** for information and advice. Call 13FAMILY or 13 32 64.

## Further information

For information about alcohol and other drugs services in Queensland, you can contact:

- **Queensland Health Service Directory:** to find your nearest service, go to [www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/service-finder](http://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/service-finder)
- **Family Drug Support:** Freecall 1300 368 186
- **Lifeline:** Call 131 114