

Supporting Kids From Families Affected by Drugs

Five-year-old Shadia and her two-year-old brother Kyle were left at home unsupervised and caring for each other for two days. Their mom and dad were partying with friends, using meth, and lost all track of time. Their parents were arrested, and the children were taken into custody. As a result, the kids are now in foster care.

Some children may have been exposed to drugs while their mom was pregnant and others could have witnessed drug use by family members. Perhaps the children you are caring for lost one or both of their biological parents due to an overdose.

Regardless of the exact details, if you are caring for children whose families have been affected by drug use or abuse, you may be searching for the best ways to help and support them.

Researchers estimate that one in four children live in homes with chemical dependency issues. Studies by the Child Welfare League of America have found that substance abuse is a factor in at least 75% of all placements in out-of-home care.

Recognize that many children who come from drug-affected families have backgrounds of unpredictability, chaos, and danger. Additionally, people who use drugs often promote secrecy, and there is often a lot of mistrust and shame. Try to gather as much information as possible from your

social worker about the child in your care (or who will likely be in your care) and his or her family history.

Children will be affected by their parents' drug use in various ways, depending on their age when the problem developed and escalated and the parents' pattern of use, as well as their drug of choice and how fast a person using that drug can become addicted.

Not all children are affected in the same ways. Drug exposure is just one factor that creates a person, along with culture, environment, support, caregivers, and more.

However, when children are exposed to drug use, their physical, emotional, behavioral, and educational development is often affected and interrupted.

Recognizing Effects

Delays in cognitive development, speech and language, and

motor skills are often seen in kids who have been exposed to drugs. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, audio and visual processing disorders, and sleep and eating disorders are just some of the physical issues.

Kids can also experience:

- Stress-related health issues like headaches, stomach aches, or asthma
- Seizures
- Problems transitioning from activities



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- Cognitive delays or impairments
- Failure to thrive (in infants)

Emotionally, children may often be overwhelmed by sights and sounds and have a hard time identifying and expressing feelings. You might also see mood swings and attachment issues. In reacting to drug exposure, children may take on the role of an adult (“parentification”), cry often and be inconsolable, or be aggressive in their actions.

Other characteristics can include:

- Hoarding or stealing food
- Difficulty listening and taking directions from others
- Limited social skills
- Short attention span
- Irritability

Children often experience learning problems. They are often unable to focus on their school work due to worries, conflicts, and tensions within their family home. They may not have attended school regularly and, as a result, may have repeated grades, transferred schools, and have even been suspended and/or expelled.

Interventions and Strategies

Every child has unique strengths and challenges. As a foster, adoptive, or kinship family, you can have a significant impact on the lives of children in your care by providing support and guidance.

Creating a positive environment for infants and pre-school children who have been drug exposed often relieves some of the symptoms. Following are some techniques you might try with infants and pre-school children:

- Provide a calm environment with low lights, sounds, minimal stimulation (no mobiles or bright colors), and slow transitions.
- Note signs of stress by increased sneezes,

- yawns, muscle tone and flailing, hiccoughs, irritability, sucking, and crying.
- On a regular basis, use consistent, calming techniques for infants by swaddling blankets tightly around them. You might also try using a pacifier.
- Rock the child (including vertical rocking at times), hold them, or try placing them in a swing or carrier.
- Give massages and learn about infant massage techniques.
- Bathe in warm water and soothe with lotions.

Often school-age children have questions and worries about their parents who use drugs. By answering their questions, they can have a better understanding of their situation. Here are a few suggestions that you may find helpful:

- Talk to children about addiction, alcohol, and drugs.
- Acknowledge their feelings.
- Let the children in your care know it is not their fault for parents or others in their lives are abusing drugs.
- Teach healthy ways to identify feelings and solve problems. Use storybooks with younger children and ask, “How do you think this character feels?” or, “How can the character handle and solve the problem?”
- For adolescents, discuss the safe use of prescription drugs and alcohol.
- Prepare kids for visits or their return home by creating a list of emergency phone numbers and addresses of people for safety and support.
- Suggest that children in care talk with their parents about their worry and hurt when the parent is using—hopefully in combination with a supportive person like a family member, a therapist, or social worker.
- Use community resources for support such as Alateen, a therapist, or AODA counselor.

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For more behavioral techniques, check out the Wisconsin Family Connections Center tip sheet, [Working With Children Who Have Been Traumatized](#), on our website.

Many children in foster care have been exposed to drug and alcohol abuse. Learning more about how this can affect a child's development can help you continue to develop strategies to support healing.



Resources

From our [Resource Library](#)

- *Methamphetamine & Drug Endangered Children: Breaking the Cycle*
- *Understanding the Drug-exposed Child: Approaches to Behavior and Learning*, by Ira Chasnoff, Amy Anson, Kai Moss Iaukea
- *Adoption & Prenatal Alcohol and Drug Exposure*, by Richard P. Barth, Madelyn Freundlich & David Brodzinsky
- *Street Drugs: A Drug Identification Guide*
- *Methamphetamine Awareness and Prevention*
- *Recognizing and Managing Children with Fetal Alcohol Effects*, by Brenda McCreight
- *The Mystery of Risk—Drugs, Alcohol, Pregnancy, and the Vulnerable Child*, by Ira J. Chasnoff, M.D.

Tip Sheet

- [Caring for a Child with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome \(NAS\)](#)

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Creating Space for Healing: Helping Adolescents and Teens Thrive](#)
- [Relationship Resilience: Thriving in Your Parenting Partnership](#)

- [Relative Caregiver Series: Navigating the Change in Roles](#)
- [Working in Partnership With Birth Parents](#)

Inspiration & Hope From [No Matter What Families](#)

- [Everyone Needs Support: A Birth Mom's Story](#)
- [The Complexities of Caring](#)
- [Take Time to Recharge](#)

Additional Resources

- [Partnership to End Addiction](#)
- [National Association for Children of Addiction \(NACoA\)](#)
- [Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse \(AODA\) Treatment Programs](#)
- [Intelligence—DEA](#)
- [Children Living in Families Addiction Issues](#)
- [Parental Substance Abuse](#)