



Supporting Kids from Families Affected by Drugs

If you search far enough in your family tree, you are almost sure to find someone who struggles with Substance Use Disorder (SUD). Research shows that one in eight children has a parent struggling with addiction.

Addiction is a family disease. It impacts the entire family by disrupting the stability, attachment, and nurturing typically found within a family unit. Substance use disorders alter brain function and decision-making, leading to unpredictable and unreliable behaviors. When children who have experienced this instability enter out-of-home care, they may carry emotional and behavioral challenges stemming from their past experiences.

Foster parents and relative caregivers of children play a vital role in providing stability, understanding, and healing as children adjust to their new environments. This tipsheet will help you:

- Understand the experiences of children in your care
- Recognize how those experiences may influence their emotional and behavioral responses
- Learn strategies to support children in their healing journey

What Children May Have Experienced

Substance use can deeply affect family dynamics, and many children enter foster care due to a parent's struggle with drugs or alcohol. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, approximately 40% of children in the foster care system are placed there because of parental substance use disorder.

SUD can alter parenting skills and decision-making, often leading to unpredictability and inconsistent care. Children whose parents have struggled with addiction may be at increased risk for:

- Experiencing neglect or inadequate supervision
- Suffering physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Cognitive or developmental delays
- Developing behavioral or emotional challenges

As you care for a child whose family has a history of SUD, you may notice struggles with unpredictability, secrecy, and shame. Some children may also experience parentification as they have taken on the role and responsibilities of a caregiver. Additionally, they may experience the lasting effects of trauma after being exposed to dangerous situations.

Common Emotional and Behavioral Responses in Children

Children may demonstrate the following reactions after being exposed to SUD:

Hypervigilance

Sometimes, in a home where a family member has struggled with addiction, children will feel unsafe due to chaos and a lack of predictability and structure in the household. When children are raised in these environments, they can develop a heightened state of alertness or anxiety known as hypervigilance.

You may notice overly cautious behaviors, such as reacting strongly to sudden movements or noises, or struggling to relax and play. They may have difficulty sleeping. These reactions may occur even in safe and secure environments. These behaviors reflect the child's need to stay on high alert for potential threats, even when none are present.

Fight, Flight, Freeze

Children in your care may respond to everyday stress in ways that seem disproportionate to the moment. They may display a fight, flight, or freeze response, even when no danger is present. In their previous home, their brains adapted to constant uncertainty, keeping them in a heightened state of survival. Over time, this response becomes automatic, occurring even when no real danger is present.

This survival response may look like a child becoming defiant or aggressive, withdrawing from interactions, or shutting down completely when they experience stress or discomfort. Recognizing these responses as survival mechanisms, rather than misbehavior, can help you approach challenges with patience and support.

Guilt and Shame

As stated earlier, addiction is a family disease, meaning an individual's substance use disorder impacts the entire family unit. Often, the family becomes focused on the member who is struggling with substance use disorder. Due to shame, some families adopt the "no talk" rule, which can lead to secrecy and isolation.

Children who witness a parent's SUD may internalize some of the shame that comes with secrecy and isolation. They may blame themselves for their parents' substance use, for telling someone about their situation, or even for being placed in out-of-home care. This may make it hard for children to accept support, build trust, and develop a strong attachment with caregivers.

Supporting Healing and Stability

Creating a nurturing environment that promotes healing and stability is essential. Here are some things to consider:

Mutual Respect and Open Communication

Showing respect for a child's birth parent nurtures trust and stability. You may feel uncertain about maintaining contact with a child's parent, but setting clear, healthy boundaries while keeping communication open can ease tensions and help both the child and the parent feel more secure.

Encourage the parent to focus on their health and recovery. Reassure them that their child is safe and cared for by sharing updates on school, upcoming appointments, and milestones. When children see their parents and you working together, it reinforces a sense of security, stability, and belonging, benefiting everyone involved.

Felt Safety

Creating an environment where a child feels safe takes time, repetition, routine, and nurturing. Here are a few ways to support this:

- **Consistency and Reliability:** Establishing routines and clear expectations provides children with predictability and a sense of control over what comes next. You could try having a daily routine chart posted on the fridge or narrating the things that are coming next. First, we will put our shoes on, then we will grab our backpack and a snack, and get in the car to drive to school.
- **Practice Co-Regulation Strategies:** Co-regulation means helping a child regulate their emotions by modeling calm and patient responses using a trauma-informed approach. You can do this through gentle touch (if the child is open to it), deep breathing, counting, or describing ways the child can emotionally process their feelings.
- **Offer Choice:** Providing choices empowers children and gives them a sense of control during a time that they may feel powerless. This can be as simple as a choice between two possible snacks or the option to brush their teeth before or after breakfast.
- **Be Playful:** Play allows children to build connections and experience joy. Even amid challenges, playfulness can create moments of trust and bonding. This can look like tossing a ball back and forth while they tell you about their day, doing a silly dance in the kitchen, or singing a song while cleaning up toys.
- **Empathy and Validation:** Even when a child's response or dysregulation doesn't make sense to us, offering empathy and validation lets them know their feelings are acknowledged and respected.

Caring for children affected by a parent's substance use disorder requires patience, mindfulness, and a commitment to creating a stable and trauma-informed environment where healing can happen. The Wisconsin Family Connection Center is here to support you at every stage of this journey, offering resources, guidance, and encouragement as you help children find healing and security.

Resources

Tip Sheets

- [Helping to Heal Invisible Hurts: The Impact of In-Utero Stress & Trauma](#)

Learn in [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [An Introduction to Trauma's Influence on the Brain, Body, and Behavior](#)
- [Creating Felt Safety](#)
- [Foster Parents Supporting Birth Parents: Considerations for Success](#)
- [Working in Partnership with Birth Parents](#)
- [Addiction, Family Separation, and the Path to Healing](#)
- [Building Relationships: Connecting With Your Child Through Play](#)

Additional Resources

- [Empowering Kinship Caregivers: Navigating Substance Use Disorders](#)
- [Foster/Kinship Caregivers: Supporting Children Impacted by Substance Use](#)
- [A Toolkit for Supporting Children Impacted by Addiction](#)
- [Resources for Families Coping with Mental and Substance Use Disorders](#)
- [CheckDEC](#)