

Quick Reference Guide:

Supporting Children Affected by Parental Substance Use

The Reality

- 1 in 8 children has a parent with addiction issues
- 40% of children in out-of-home care are there due to parental substance use
- Addiction is a family disease. It disrupts stability and attachment.



Common Responses You May See



Hypervigilance

- Being overly cautious
- Reacting strongly to sudden movements or noises
- Difficulty sleeping or relaxing
- Trouble playing normally



Fight, Flight, or Freeze

- Becoming defiant or aggressive when stressed
- Withdrawing from social interactions
- Shutting down during discomfort
- Remember: These are survival mechanisms, not misbehavior



Guilt and Shame

- Blaming themselves for a parent's addiction
- Difficulty accepting help
- Trouble trusting caregivers
- Feeling shame from family secrets

Key Support Strategies

Create Felt Safety

- Consistency: Set clear routines and expectations
- Co-regulation: Model calm responses; use gentle touch (with permission from the child) and deep breaths
- Choice: Offer simple options to help them feel in control
- Play: Build connections through joyful activities
- Validation: Acknowledge their feelings, even if extreme

Foster Positive Relationships

- Keep communication open with healthy boundaries
- Share updates about the child's progress
- Encourage parents to focus on recovery



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For more tips and resources, see the complete tip sheet: "[Supporting Kids from Families Affected by Drugs](#)."

The Wisconsin Family Connections Center offers support for your caregiving journey.