

Improving outcomes for the children of substance misusing parents

Engagement and Assessment Practice Tips

These suggestions are aimed at any front line practitioner coming into contact with adults who misuse substances or their children.

- Don't ignore substance misuse.
But don't over-react either. There is something to be assessed.
- Use pre-birth assessments.
These can provide a valuable opportunity to engage parents, who are often very highly motivated to make changes in their lives.
- Remember substance users want to be good parents.
But be aware that their expectations may be too high; that the child will compensate for past unhappiness or provide an incentive to remain substance free. They may set themselves unrealistic goals. This may lead to attempts to become abstinent too rapidly, with considerable risk of relapse.
- Consider the importance of substance misuse in the parent's life.
If a parent's primary relationship is with a substance, then it will adversely affect their relationship with others – including children. If household resources – financial, practical and emotional – are diverted to substance misuse, there will be deficits for the children.
- Ask for details of the substances used and their effects.
'Substance misuse' is not a single phenomenon but includes a wide range of behaviours. Specific information about the nature of substances used, and the lifestyle implications of such use, is needed in order to assess the impact on parenting.
- Do not assume that abstinence will always improve parenting skills.
There may be risks of relapse, or parents may struggle to adjust to a substance free lifestyle or relationship. Withdrawal from substances can significantly impair capacity to tolerate stress or anxiety. Stability in treatment might be a more realistic option.
- Find out whether substance misuse is the only parental problem.
If so, the prospects for success are higher. Where there are multiple parental problems (e.g. mental health difficulties, domestic violence), the prospects of

being able to offer safe and long-term care to children are significantly reduced. Substance use makes all other problems worse.

- **Base your judgements on evidence not optimism.**
If substance use is enduring and chaotic, and there is no evidence of improvement, then this will undermine other interventions or support offered.
- **Be aware of your own views and feelings about substance misuse.**
Consider how these might affect your judgements.
- **Recognise that parents are likely to be anxious.**
They will worry about losing their children. This 'fear factor' is likely to lead to reluctance to seek help or a denial or minimisation of problems. Children may share this fear of being separated from their parents.
- **Don't forget fathers/partners.**
Assessment can sometimes focus on mothers, but others may have an equal impact on children. They may also affect treatment outcomes if one partner is more motivated than another to address their substance misuse problem.
- **Don't forget extended family.**
They are likely to be a source of useful information – and may also be a vital support to the children. Family group conferences may make a real contribution to decision making.
- **See life from the child's point of view.**
What is life like when they wake up? When they go to bed? When parents are intoxicated or withdrawing? What are their hopes and fears? Who can they turn to?

(NB. Taken and adapted from an NCB Toolkit "Building Resilience in Families Under Stress: supporting families affected by parental substance misuse and/or mental health problems (2009))