The Risk to Children of Parental Substance Abuse

When assessing the impact of parental substance abuse on a child’s development, there are multiple risk factors to consider. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, these risks include:

- Use during pregnancy can harm the fetus
- Use of prescription pain medication per the instructions from a prescribing physician can sometimes have unintended or unexpected effects, e.g., a parent caring for children may find that he or she is more drowsy than expected and cannot respond to the needs of children in his/her care
- Driving with children in the car while under the influence
- Children may be left in unsafe care, such as with an inappropriate caregiver or unattended, while a parent is under the influence
- Parent may neglect or sporadically address the children’s needs for regular meals, clothing, and cleanliness
- Even when the parent is in the home, the parent’s use may leave children unsupervised
- Behavior toward children may be inconsistent, such as a pattern of violence and then remorse
- Despite a clear danger to children, the parent may engage in addiction-related behaviors, such as leaving children unattended while seeking drugs
- Funds are used to buy alcohol or other drugs, while necessities, such as buying food, are neglected
- A parent may not be able to think logically or make rational decisions regarding children’s needs or care
- A parent may not be able to prioritize children’s needs over his or her own need for the substance


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