

**This factsheet looks at the effects of living with a problem drinking parent and examines alcohol's role in troubled families and shows how the negative consequences of problem drinking extend well beyond the drinker.**

## Children of problem drinking parents

Research in this topic is not lacking. Families where one or both parents are problem drinkers have been studied in relation to:

- children's behaviour, especially
- subsequent alcohol and drug use
- emotional and psychological functioning in childhood, adolescence and into adulthood
- family life
- factors that enable children to weather the problems of their childhood.

Several reviews<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> have tried to synthesise rather disparate findings and to disentangle the results of growing up in a drinking environment from any possible genetic factors and any effects associated with mothers' drinking in pregnancy. The key findings are described below, but overall it seems children of problem drinkers have higher levels of behavioural problems, school-related problems and emotional disturbances than children of non-problem drinkers – or than children whose parents have mental or physical problems.

## Research evidence

### Behaviour

One study cited by Barber and Crisp<sup>1</sup> found that three-year-olds from alcohol dependent families were more likely to fall in the extreme range for behaviour problems.

A New Zealand study found that at age nine children from families with severe parental alcohol problems were more likely than other children to have behaviour difficulties at school. At 13 children of heavy drinking parents displayed more behavioural problems at home, but their school behaviour was no more problematic than other children's<sup>5</sup>.

Some studies suggest higher rates of hyperactivity and attention deficit disorder when there is a history of parental alcohol abuse, but these are not conclusive<sup>4</sup>.

### Alcohol and drug use

In a detailed study, Velleman compared 160 young people with problem drinking parents to a matched group whose parents had no drink problems<sup>6</sup>. On the whole there were few differences between the two groups in terms of alcohol and drug use. Young people with problem drinking parents started using alcohol and drugs at a younger age than the others and were more likely to use alcohol in a risky or problematic way, especially young men.

### Emotional and psychological functioning

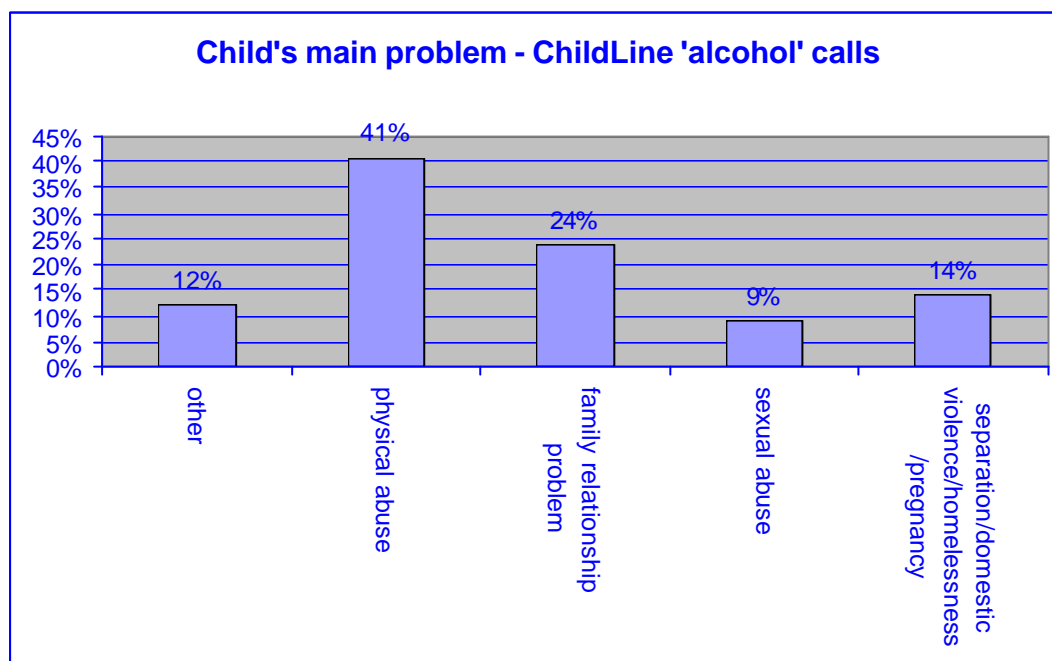
A New Zealand study found clear evidence to suggest that teenagers whose parents reported alcohol problems were more likely to experience psychiatric problems, including mood disorders, depression, anxiety, substance use, and behaviour problems<sup>7</sup>. Over half the children of problem drinkers appeared to have been affected in at least one of these areas.

A range of emotional effects has been described especially in adult accounts of childhood in problem drinking families – low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, relationship problems etc.

In his research described above, Velleman found no real differences between the two groups of young adults in terms of self-esteem, life satisfaction, anxiety, depression and delinquency<sup>6</sup>. However, those who were depressed or anxious, had relationship difficulties or were generally more dissatisfied with their lives tended to be young people where both parents had an alcohol problem or where the problem drinking took place in their childhood home. Crucially, it appeared that living in a family enduring conflict and disruption was a far more important precursor of difficulty in adult life than parents' problem drinking as such.

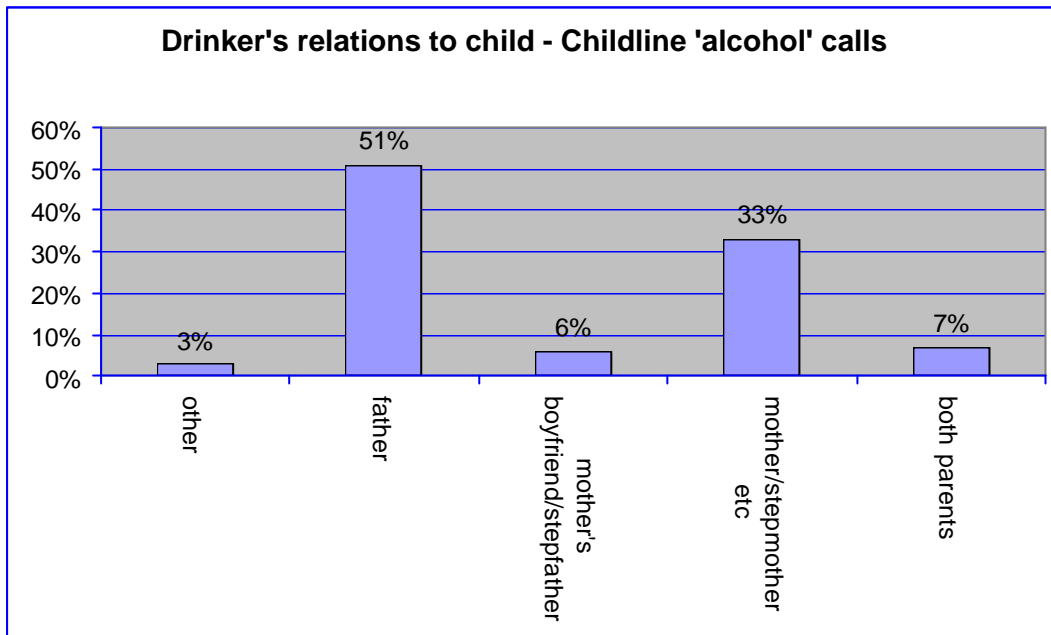
### Family life

Velleman also summarises the effects of problem drinking on key practical aspects of family life: roles, routines such as getting to school or preparing meals, communication, social life and celebration, and finances. These are likely to affect nearly every family with a problem drinker to some degree. How deeply their effects will be felt depends on whether the drinking also leads to violence (against the child or partner); marital conflict; inconsistent, ambivalent and unpredictable parenting; separation, divorce and parent loss.



### Factors that enable children to weather the problems of their childhood

Some studies show that children of problem drinkers may exhibit undisturbed psychological functioning over time despite having a problem drinking parent. Those least at risk appear to be from families with high levels of family support, control and cohesion; where there is a non-drinking parent who can mitigate the effects of the problem drinker<sup>8</sup> and those with fewer socio-economic stresses<sup>9</sup>.



## Child abuse

This section brings together evidence from childcare organizations and from social service records.

**Childline** looked at the nearly 90,000 calls it received between April 1995 and March 1996<sup>10</sup>. In at least 5% of calls children mentioned misuse of alcohol by parents or carers. Children don't call specifically about their parents' drinking, but about the effect it has on their lives: physical and sexual abuse, neglect, looking after younger siblings and household chores, the death or departure of a parent, being responsible for their drinking parent, coping with bullying and loneliness at school. Childline's report *Beyond the limit: children who live with parental alcohol misuse* studies nearly 3,000 of these calls in more detail. Many of these children face multiple problems, with over half reporting physical violence.

In just over half the calls, the father is the problem drinker and in about a third, the mother. This is a higher proportion of calls about mothers than would be expected, given the numbers of men and women problem drinkers in the population as a whole.

The NSPCC studied 2,234 calls about child abuse and neglect made to its Child Protection Helpline over a four month period in 1995-6<sup>11</sup>. Parental alcohol misuse was mentioned in:

- 23% of calls about neglect
- 13% of calls about emotional abuse
- 10% of calls about physical abuse and
- 5% of calls about sexual abuse.

Alcohol was mentioned far more frequently than illicit drugs. The NSPCC believes these figures are, if anything, an under-estimate: one team manager states 'Alcohol misuse is present in two out of three families we work with, but it often comes out only after we have been working with the families for some time.' Most commonly it was the mother who was reported as neglecting her child while drinking heavily. Fathers who misused alcohol were more likely to be reported for physical abuse.

## Social services

Evidence from social service organizations is rarely collated and presented in this way. One review estimates alcohol is involved in 20% to 25% of general family and child work and about 30% of specific child protection work<sup>3</sup>. Three specific examples are given where alcohol misuse has been recorded.

Powys SSD examined 31 child protection case conferences held in 1991<sup>12</sup>. Alcohol played a role in 74% of cases of child mistreatment, assuming major or moderate significance in 46% of cases. In nearly half of the cases in which alcohol was identified, no response was made to the alcohol issue; in about a third of cases counselling was offered, but very few referrals to alcohol services were made, even to the SSDs own specialist substance use worker.

Kingston SSD found that in 1996/7, 30% of all cases brought to initial child protection conferences featured parental alcohol abuse<sup>13</sup>.

In Exeter SSD, research in the late 1980s showed that drinking problems were recognized in 32 out of 123 families with child protection concerns. Of the 82 children in these families 26 had spent periods in care and 32 out of 39 still living at home were thought to be at risk of physical injury or neglect<sup>14</sup>.

## Children's voices

While ChildLine's report illuminates crises in children's lives, the child's experience of everyday life with a drinker was missing for a long time... how it affects their lives, what they would like to happen, what their needs are. A Scottish study investigated children's perspectives on growing up with a problem drinker for a parent<sup>15</sup>. With some difficulty, they contacted and interviewed twenty children (plus parents) from fourteen families with at least one identified drinker.

### Hurting on the inside – key findings

- Various drinking patterns including constant opportunistic drinking, binges lasting days at a time and regular drinking either nightly or at weekends were noted. The first two patterns took least account of children's routines, whereas in the other cases, some attempt was made to prevent drinking interfering with children.
- The general pattern was for men to drink outside the home, women to drink at home.
- In spite of parents' attempts to hide their drinking, children were very aware of it from an early age and could explain it in terms of personal and social stress. Children did not blame themselves for parents' drinking.
- Despite occasionally appreciating a general loosening up when parents drank, the children made it clear that the drinking was something they disliked and wanted to stop. They expressed worry, anger, fear and sadness about it.
- The most serious and common problem experienced involved drunken violence. Children were distressed by physical outbursts, even though in this sample these were mostly not directed at themselves
- Indirect effects were very disruptive – separations, parents leaving, moving home and schools. Only a few children noted worries about money.
- Many children took over for a while at least, care of the parent, other siblings or household tasks.
- Some children acted to protect the non-drinking parent or siblings or took on the role of mediator or confidant.
- Persistent drunken behaviour led to loss of respect for the parent.
- These families were willing to talk to researchers on a confidential basis but even so most tried to keep the drinking a secret from outsiders, and it was not discussed much within the family.

Alcohol Concern also found it hard to access families prepared to talk about their problem for publication<sup>2</sup>. Children who took part in discussions felt they received very little support or explanation during or after their parents' treatment. They described their fear of losing their parent through drink; and felt signs of their distress had been ignored. They wanted to keep their parent's drinking a secret.

Two recent studies from Denmark and Portugal echo Laybourn's findings almost completely so though in each case the sample is quite small, they appear to speak for many<sup>16, 17</sup>.

## Parents voices

Laybourn talked to parents as well as children and noted that non-drinking parents often made huge efforts to keep the structures of normal family life going. The drinking parents when sober often felt intense guilt and remorse<sup>15</sup>.

A study based at a drug and alcohol service also talked to parents and carers about the effects they believed their problems had on the children<sup>18</sup>. 46 out of 101 clients had children living at home – 88 in all. Parents reckoned that a quarter showed signs of emotional or behavioural disturbance, ten of whom has in fact received help from some source. Six out of 10 parents felt their substance use affected their children in some way, either because the children had witnessed drunken or aggressive behaviour or conflict from the parents, or because they had suffered from lack of parental care and attention. The Danish study notes that parents often go to some lengths to ensure their children's physical needs are met, but are still emotionally neglectful.

## Identifying the problem

Children of problem drinkers have problems which are insidious rather than overt and when they do surface, they are not unique to them. Only a minority of parents are themselves in contact with services and may actively avoid seeking help; children themselves feel very inhibited about discussing their parents drinking and find it hard to define what kind of help they need. Professionals that children come into contact with as a matter of course such as teachers may have only a limited understanding of problem drinking and its effects. For all these reasons, children's problems are hard to recognise and their needs hard to address.

## Service needs

Overall the impression given to Alcohol Concern when investigating services was of extremely patchy provision and a carousel of 'referring on'. Specialist alcohol services often have no tradition of working with young people, though a few are now starting to employ specialist young people's workers or set up family services. Some children say they would like to meet others in the same position<sup>15</sup>. Other agencies set this in a broader context. Alcohol Concern and ChildLine found children need practical, emotional and social support, as well as help and protection in crisis. They need a chance to talk about their concerns and fears, and to get support and advice about coping. This kind of service is rare. One example is a befriending scheme where adult volunteers take children on outings, attend school events and give general support<sup>19</sup>. ChildLine also recommended a change in approaching child protection issues. 'We have to make such protection [temporary protection while a parent is drunk] accessible to children without always rolling out the child protection process in a way which increases stigmatisation and reduces people's willingness to ask for help'<sup>10</sup>.

## Alcohol Concern recommends

- The government should require that the needs of these children are addressed in Children's Services Plans and Community Care Plans. It should also offer guidance on how local service providers view their obligations under children's legislation and ensure there are resources available to respond to identified needs.
- Intensive training and awareness raising is needed for doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, lawyers and the police so they can understand the needs of children whenever adult drinking is identified or suspected.

- Specialist alcohol staff should be encouraged to develop their role in supporting other professionals and in working in partnership with other agencies to assist clients who are parents
- Finally counselling and other services for children and families which are easy to access and can deal properly with children's need for confidentiality should be available locally. The voluntary sector has a central role to play here.

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<sup>1</sup> - Barber, J.G and Crisp, B.R (1994), The effects of alcohol abuse in children and the partner's capacity to initiate change, Drug and Alcohol Review no.13, pp409-416

<sup>2</sup> - Brisby, T et al (1997), Under the influence: coping with parents who drink too much, available from the Alcohol Concern bookshop, £7

<sup>3</sup> - Simpson, M et al (1993) Social work responses to the misuse of alcohol: a literature review, Scottish Office

<sup>4</sup> - Zeitlin, H (1994), Children with alcohol misusing parents, British Medical Bulletin, vol.50, no.1, pp139-151

<sup>5</sup> - Connolly, G.M et al (1993) The effects of parents' alcohol problems on children's behaviour, Addiction, vol.88, pp1383-90

<sup>6</sup> - Velleman, R (1993) Alcohol and the family, Institute of Alcohol Studies

<sup>7</sup> - Lynskey, M.T et al (1994) The effect of parental alcohol problems on rates of adolescent psychiatric disorders, Addiction, vol.89, pp1277-1286

<sup>8</sup> - Foxcroft, D and Lowe, G (1991), Adolescent drinking behaviour and family socialisation factors: a meta-analysis, Journal of Adolescence vol.14, pp255-273

<sup>9</sup> - Hill, E.M et al (1997), Adulthood functioning: the joint effects of parental alcoholism, stress and childhood socio-economic stress, Addiction, vol.92, no.5, pp583-596

<sup>10</sup> - Housten, A et al (1997), Beyond the limit: children who live with parental alcohol misuse, Childline

<sup>11</sup> - NSPCC (1997), A cry for children, press release, 30<sup>th</sup> December

<sup>12</sup> - Davidson, G (1994), Alcohol and child mistreatment. Powys Social Services Department.

<sup>13</sup> - unpublished, but cited in Alcohol services: a new era: Alcohol Concern conference report, July 1997

<sup>14</sup> - Mather, B. (1998), Child mistreatment and the misuse of alcohol (unpublished dissertation)

<sup>15</sup> - Laybourn, A et al (1996), Hurting on the inside: children's experiences of parental alcohol misuse

<sup>16</sup> - Christensen, E (1997), Aspects of a preventive approach to support children of alcoholic parents, Child Abuse Review, no.6, pp24-34

<sup>17</sup> Malpique, C et al (1998), Violence and alcoholism in the family: how are the children affected? Alcohol and Alcoholism, vol.33, no.1, pp 42-46

<sup>18</sup> - Thompson, A.E and Blennerhassett, R (1996), Mental health needs for children of parents seeking help for substance abuse, Psychiatric Bulletin, no.20, pp1370-1390

<sup>19</sup> - McKellar, S and Coggans, N (1997), responding to family problems, alcohol and substance misuse: a survey of service provision in the Glasgow area, Children and Society, no.11, pp53-59.

