

Alcohol and the Family



Background information on alcohol and the family

The adverse impact of alcohol misuse on families, and its role in family break-up are factors when considering the contribution of alcohol to social exclusion. Heavy drinking is a common factor in family break-up, and marriages where one or both partners have an alcohol problem are twice as likely to end in divorce as marriages where alcohol problems are absent.

An estimated 920,000 children are currently living in a home where one or both parents misuse alcohol, with 6.2% of adults having grown up in a family where one or both of their parents drank excessively. Serious problems are experienced by children as a result of the drinking behaviour of their parents. An analysis of NSPCC helpline calls showed parental alcohol misuse to be a factor in 23% of child neglect cases, and parental alcohol misuse was also reported in 13% of calls about emotional abuse, 10% of calls about physical abuse and 5% of calls about sexual abuse. Heavy drinking by parents was identified as a factor in over 50% of child protection case conferences.

The psychological impact on children can be immense, often leading to the development of alcohol problems later in their own lives. By the age of 15 young people in families with a problem drinking parent have rates of psychiatric disorder between 2.2 and 3.9 times higher than other young people. Higher rates of alcohol use among teenagers of problem drinking parents have been found than among other teenagers, and men have double the risk of becoming an alcoholic by the age of 30 if their parents drank heavily. Children of problem drinkers have higher levels of behavioural difficulty, school-related problems and emotional disturbance than children of non-problem drinking parents, and higher levels of dysfunction than children whose parents have other mental or physical problems.

In order to minimise the negative impact of intoxication and to prevent problems of dependency from developing as young people get older, a focus on increasing awareness of potential harms and learning safe drinking techniques while still at school is vital. In addition, appropriate support services need to be made available to young people experiencing problems because of their parents' drinking to be run alongside help and support for the problem drinkers themselves.

Alcohol also has a significant role in the occurrence of domestic violence against partners. Research has found that 60 to 70% of men who assault their partners

do so when under the influence of alcohol. Despite this, the role of alcohol is rarely highlighted in discussions on addressing domestic abuse, partly because of the difficulty in proving a causal link between domestic violence and alcohol misuse, and in understanding the ways in which the two are connected. The role of alcohol, however, should not be ignored when developing effective interventions. Co-ordinated responses are required that address both the violent behaviour and, where relevant, the alcohol problem.