



Patrons: Mr Tony Adams MBE, Mr Calum Best, Ms Lauren Booth, Ms Geraldine James OBE, Ms Elle Macpherson, Dr D Samways MB BS, Mrs S Stafford CQSW

INFORMATION FOR PROFESSIONALS

The National Association for Children of Alcoholics (Nacoa) is a registered charity founded in 1990 to address the problems of children growing up in families where one or both parents suffer from alcoholism or a similar addictive problem. This includes children of alcohol-dependent parents of all ages, many of whose problems only become apparent in adulthood.

Nacoa's services include:

- Free, confidential telephone, email and letter helpline providing information, advice and ongoing support for children of alcohol-dependent parents and people concerned with their welfare.

Phone	0800 358 3456
Email	helpline@nacoa.org.uk
Post	PO Box 64, Fishponds, Bristol BS16 2UH

- Website www.nacoa.org.uk providing information and advice, including personal experiences, training materials, factual and resource information, research and links to other organisations.
- Comprehensive volunteering programme
- Foundation and ongoing training programmes for volunteers and professionals
- Information packs specific to individual callers
- Nacoa UK Resource Database listing local and national organisations and agencies
- Poster projects to advertise the Nacoa helpline and website
- Presentations and talks
- Publications for children of alcohol-dependent parents and people concerned with their welfare
- Research into
 1. the particular problems associated with parental alcoholism
 2. the prevention of alcoholism developing in this vulnerable group of children

PO Box 64, Fishponds Bristol, BS16 2UH **Tel:** 0117 924 8005 **Fax:** 0117 942 2928 **Email:** admin@nacoa.org.uk
Helpline: 0800 358 3456 **Helpline email:** helpline@nacoa.org.uk **Website:** www.nacoa.org.uk

Providing information, advice and support to children of alcohol-dependent parents and people concerned with their welfare

Registered Charity No: 1009143



RESEARCH

Our research indicates that there are:

- 2.8 million adult children of alcohol-dependent parents and
- 920,000 children and young people (0 to 18 years) living with parental alcoholism

The effects of growing up in a family where one or both parents are dependent on alcohol are wide-ranging and can affect all areas of a child's life, from school life through to behavioural problems and compulsive disorders. The number of children who report being 'not particularly' happy or 'not at all' happy at school is approximately double.

Age	Children of alcohol-dependent parents	Control group
0 – 7	29%	13%
8 - 12	40%	16%
13 - 18	53%	25%

Although many children of alcohol-dependent parents grow up to be successful and productive members of society, others develop serious problems both as children and adults:

Eating disorders	Children of alcohol-dependent parents	Control group
Children	15%	3%
Adults	20%	6%

Considered suicide	Children of alcohol-dependent parents	Control group
Children	29%	9%
Adults	42%	14%

In trouble with police	Children of alcohol-dependent parents	Control group
Children	20%	9%
Adults	11%	6%

Alcoholism	Children of alcohol-dependent parents	Control group
Children	3%	2%
Adults	13%	4%

Drug addiction	Children of alcohol-dependent parents	Control group
Children	4%	2%
Adults	12%	4%

These problems prove particularly worrying in light of the increasing consumption of alcohol, particularly amongst young people. According to a recent government report into the economic costs of alcohol abuse (September 2003), the average Briton drank 151% more, in terms of alcoholic content, in 2001 than in 1951. Furthermore, drinkers under the age of 16 drink twice as much today compared to 10 years ago.



COMMON PROBLEMS

- **Lack of money**

Significant amounts of money are often spent satisfying the addiction of the parent(s). This may take priority over everything else, leaving the rest of the family, sometimes one of the children, to make sure that their basic needs, such as food and clothing, can be met.

'The only source of income she's got is by Dad giving her money, and it's unfair on him because he works so hard, and all she uses the money for is alcohol. I've told him not to give her any money because he's feeding her addiction, but I know he's only doing it because otherwise she'll give him a hard time.' (Cathy, 15)

Alcoholism affects families from all strata of society, regardless of wealth, class or regional differences. However, financial problems are present amongst the majority of families affected by alcoholism, with 64% of adults reporting that there was a shortage of money during their childhood. In comparison, this was true of only 15% of the control group.

- **Unpredictable behaviour – lack of structure, wild mood swings – inconsistency**

Life can be confusing for children living in an environment where alcohol affects the behaviour of their parents. It is difficult to predict what state parent(s) will be in when they get home from school – they might be in a good mood, and wanting to do something fun; but they might be violent or irrational. What confuses things even further is the family's collusion in telling lies to cover up for that person's drinking, and to keep it secret from outside society. As a result, many children feel unable to take friends home, as they are embarrassed or fearful about their parents' behaviour.

'Everything revolves around mum's drinking. We pretend it's not happening. I can't stop thinking about what's happening at home when I'm not there. Sometimes I think I'm going mad.' (Paul, 15)

Our research shows that secrecy, manipulation and an inability to identify one's feelings are twice as likely to be prevalent in an alcohol-dependent family system. Irrational behaviour is five times more likely within an alcohol-dependent family, and 89% of children of alcohol-dependent parents claimed that their childhood household was not a place to be proud of.

- **Aggression and violence – arguments between parents**

Many children of alcohol-dependent parents may not experience obvious forms of abuse, but suffer from neglect or a chronic lack of little things, which are so crucial to the wellbeing of us all. Some are exposed to rage, violence and abuse on a daily basis, which become part of the unpredictable and inconsistent environment in which they live.

Our research shows that aggression within the family environment is six times more common where one or both parents suffer from alcoholism.

Social Services report that alcohol is a factor in:

- 40% domestic violence incidents

- 40% child protection cases

- 74% child mistreatment cases

- In 50% of these cases, no action is taken to address alcoholism



'My strongest childhood memory is one of fear. My father was a huge man and always angry... He would sit up drinking late at night. My brother, sister and I were terrified of being beaten...' (Tim, 53)

A 2003 Alcohol Concern report found that 30-60% of child protection cases involve alcohol, and the government's Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy (2004) reports that there are 1.2m incidents of alcohol-related violence every year.

'...depending on the excess of alcohol, the bigger the fight. She hit me once but she generally just calls me terrible names; that hurts more. I stopped having a childhood years ago. I'm 15 going on 25...' (Regan, 15)

- **Silent withdrawal – anxiety and depression**

Children of alcohol-dependent parents may grow up feeling anxious, depressed, emotionally detached and socially isolated without knowing why. They feel that there is no one to turn to, as this would amount to the betrayal of their family. Some may have taken on responsibilities within the family, which means that they do not have time to spend with their friends, even if they wanted to.

'I was never allowed to be a child: I had to spend every night keeping my parents from fighting. I never learned to play. Now I can't make friends; I never learned to let people close to me. Even my relatives seem to live in a different world.' (Andrew, 35)

Research shows that incidences of depression are likely to be almost four times more frequent in a family affected by alcoholism. In later life, children of alcohol-dependent parents are twice as likely to suffer from depression.

'My mother's drinking remains a taboo subject within our fragmented and secretive family. I am haunted by the idea that telling these dark truths is an unwarranted betrayal of my mother. I am convinced that these experiences have played a major role in allowing my life to be consumed by misery, fear and despair.' (June, 25)

- **Guessing at 'normality'**

Children who have grown up around alcoholism often know no different. If this is the only 'normality' that they have experienced, how should they know that this is not the way that all families function?

'I wish when I was a child I could have rung someone for advice but I must admit I thought all dads were like mine so saw nothing wrong in his behaviour – although inside I always thought there was something wrong with me.' (Chris, 32)

Co-dependency, or adaptation to a dysfunctional family system, is a learned behaviour which, in the absence of any other model, is often passed from one generation to the next.

Later in life, many children of alcohol-dependants thus find themselves drawn towards others who have grown up in similar environments, and sometimes towards alcohol-dependants themselves.

Research has also identified a family 'trail' with respect to divorce, finding that this is more likely phenomenon amongst all generations of families affected by alcoholism.



- **Guilt and shame – feel to blame**

It is common for children of alcohol-dependants to feel that they are the problem, that they are to blame, and that they are the cause of the problem.

'I thought I was the reason he drank. I thought that if I tried harder, was nice enough or clever enough, he wouldn't need to drink. But however hard I tried, I was never good, nice or clever enough because he always drank.' (Alice, 31)

Our research found that these children feel six times more responsible for conflict in the home and seven times more likely to try to resolve arguments within the family.

'Tonight another huge argument erupted in our house – I begged my mum to stop drinking, and the only answer she gave me was 'IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT!' She cannot take responsibility over anything herself, it's always someone else's fault.' (Cathy, 15)

Some children live in fear, sometimes they are simply ignored; deprived of the ordinary things essential to the wellbeing of us all – being loved, cared for, clothed, given food and warmth, feeling wanted and cherished for who we are. Research indicates that 70% of these children follow the patterns of their parents and successfully hide their problems from the outside world. They cannot ask for help – they remain isolated and alone.

There is a powerful social stigma against admitting to alcoholism (or drug addiction) in the home. It is common for children to conceal their difficulties and sense of inferiority, colluding with their parent's secrecy and denial of problems. The result is that children get neither recognition nor support. Compounding matters still further is that without help, these children are likely to repeat dysfunctional patterns when they become parents.

Nacoa is committed to breaking this destructive cycle.

'Like so many of the 920,000 children of alcoholics in the UK today, as children my siblings and I were never allowed to talk openly about our mothers' drinking. I remember my brother being slapped very hard when he asked my father if she was drunk. We were told 'never use that word in this house again.'

I was lonely, ashamed and frightened. I remember feeling unsafe, unprotected, unloved and unlovable. There was literally no one to turn to – we all conspired to keep 'the secret' and remained hidden from view.

I learned to cope by pretending to be grown up, by putting on a brave face and by looking after everyone else – by becoming the parent. This helped us to look good as a family but inside I felt lost. There was no one there, inside or out.'

Geraldine James OBE, Nacoa Patron

'Finding someone who I felt comfortable talking to was the beginning of everything changing for me. Speaking to someone who listened without interruption and who understood the suffocation of keeping secrets was brilliant. Things could have been very different for both of us. Without your help and support, mum could have drunk herself to death and I could have spent the rest of my life watching her. Now I know there is help for mum and for me. Now I can get on with my life.'

Paul, 15 years, helpline caller



ALCOHOL AND THE FAMILY

'Alcoholism, and the effects on dependent children, is one of the best-kept secrets in our society today.'

Mo Mowlam, Nacoa Patron 1995 - 2004

There is no definitive profile of children of alcohol-dependent parents. However the following impression has been adapted from family systems work pioneered by Virginia Satir, and forms the basis of our foundation training programme for volunteer helpline counsellors.

Identifying a caller's motivations and symptoms helps us to provide focussed listening and ongoing support. These children have issues with trust. They are often looking for someone who understands without the need to explain. Using the 'alcohol-dependent family system' as a tool to identify the role(s) adopted by children, we have provided a safe space for callers to disclose their problems and fears since 1990. Success can be measured by the annual increase in calls.

When alcoholism is the family secret, disclosure of what is happening within the family is extremely difficult. The family becomes socially isolated, with a negative impact on family functioning, friendship formation and relationship development for the children. These children are frequently in a self-protective denial of the situation. Talking to someone is often seen as betrayal of the parent.

Alcoholism affects the entire family. As the alcohol-dependant organises his/her life around alcohol, the family organises its life around the alcohol-dependant.

This results in family adaptation creating an environment for the development of the unspoken family rules to protect the illusion of a 'normal' family:

Don't talk
Don't trust
Don't feel

As the family progressively adapts to alcoholism, a parallel path develops in family members - thoughts, feelings and actions become prescribed and proscribed by alcohol and its effects. The family copes by the adoption of rigid roles for family members.

Family members often become addicted to their roles, seeing them as essential to survival and playing them with the same compulsion, delusion and denial as the dependant plays his or her role as drinker.

These family roles occur in all troubled families and occasionally in healthy families in times of stress. However, in families coping with alcoholism (and the absolute need for secrecy from the outside world) the roles are more rigidly fixed and are played with greater intensity, compulsion and delusion.

Despite the difficulties of growing up with familial alcoholism, some children (usually the hero child – see below) achieve success in adulthood. For some, however, their image of 'looking good' and high achievement masks inner pain and conflict.

All family members are affected in different ways, but everyone becomes part of the system. A number of 'typical' characteristics can be identified for each family member and the following chart may be useful for identifying children of alcohol-dependent parents.



Role	Motivating Feeling	Identifying Symptoms	Pay Off		Possible Price
			For Individual	For Family	
Alcohol dependant	Guilt Shame	Chemical Use	Relief of pain	Known/familiar behaviour	Addiction
Spouse	Anger Despair	Powerlessness	Importance Self-righteousness	Responsibility	Illness; 'Martyrdom'
Child 1 Hero	Inadequacy Guilt	Over-achievement	Attention (Positive)	Self-worth	Compulsive Drive
Child 2 Scapegoat	Hurt	Delinquency	Attention (Negative)	Focus away from parental alcoholism	Self-destruction; Addiction
Child 3 Lost Child	Loneliness	Solitary; Shy	Escape	Relief – no attention demanded	Social isolation
Child 4 Mascot	Fear	Clowning; Hyperactivity	Attention (Amused)	Relief - fun	Immaturity; Emotional Illness Addiction

"Nacoa isn't an organisation that goes out of its way to court the headlines. It prefers to work quietly and patiently. But it does the most extraordinary job creating an emotional and spiritual place of safety for those who grow up in alcoholic homes. For those who know the loneliness, the confusion and pain, which can come from being the child of an alcoholic, Nacoa is a vital resource. It tells people that they are not alone."

Fergal Keane OBE, Nacoa Patron 2002 - 2009



Helpline: 0800 358 3456

www.nacoa.org.uk

Email: helpline@nacoa.org.uk

Information, advice and support to children of alcohol-dependent parents and people concerned with their welfare

COAP (Children of Addicted Parents and People)

www.coap.co.uk

Online forum for young people affected by someone else's drinking or drug use

ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics)

Tel: 07071 781899

www.adultchildren.org

Support group for people who grew up in alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional homes

Action on Addiction

Tel: 0845 126 4130

www.actiononaddiction.org.uk

Support for people suffering from an addiction problem

Adfam

Tel: 0207 553 7640

www.adfam.org.uk

Support families affected by substance misuse

Al-Anon Family Groups

Helpline: 0207 403 0888

www.al-anonuk.org.uk

Support for anyone whose life is, or has been, affected by someone else's drinking

Alcohol Concern

www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

Campaign for effective alcohol policy and improved services for people affected by alcohol problems

ChildLine

Helpline: 0800 1111

www.childline.org.uk

Free, national helpline for children and young people

Drinkline

Helpline: 0800 917 8282

Information and advice to callers concerned about their own or someone else's drinking

FRANK (National Drugs Helpline)

Helpline: 0800 77 66 00

www.talktofrank.com

Information and advice for anyone concerned about their own or someone else's drug use

NSPCC

Helpline: 0808 800 5000

www.nspcc.org.uk

Help and support for anyone concerned about the welfare of a child or young person

The Medical Council on Alcohol

Tel: 0207 487 4445

www.m-c-a.org.uk

Charity concerned with the education of the medical professions about the effects of alcohol upon health