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## INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

The National Association for Children of Alcoholics 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 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

## RESEARCH

Our research indicates that there are:

- 2.8 million adult children of alcohol-dependent parents and
- 920,000 children and young people up to 18 years living with one or both parents who have a problem with alcohol

The effects of growing up in a family where one or both parents are dependent on alcohol are extremely wide-ranging. Statistics from our latest research reveal that the problem can affect all areas of a child's life, from school life through to behavioural problems and compulsive disorders.

The number of children of alcohol-dependant parents who report being 'not particularly' happy or 'not at all' happy at school is approximately double that of children who do not have alcohol-dependent parents:

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

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**Helpline:** 0800 358 3456 **Helpline email:** [helpline@nacoa.org.uk](mailto:helpline@nacoa.org.uk) **Website:** [www.nacoa.org.uk](http://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



Although many children of alcohol-dependent parents grow up to be successful and productive members of society, a number also develop serious problems both as children and later in life as adults:

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

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

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

<b>Alcoholism</b>	<b>Children of alcohol-dependent parents</b>	<b>Control group</b>
Children	3%	2%
Adults	13%	4%

<b>Drug addiction</b>	<b>Children of alcohol-dependent parents</b>	<b>Control group</b>
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 region. However, financial problems are present in 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 very confusing for children living in an environment where alcohol affects the behaviour of their parents. It is difficult to predict what state Mum and Dad 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 of alcohol-dependent parents 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 to be the case 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.

*'I have found myself becoming a person I don't like. I'm moody, depressed and always on edge. As soon as I arrive home from school I change into a different person, I'm nasty and I don't speak to mum at all.'* (Cathy, 15)

- **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)

An Alcohol Concern report from 2003 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 wouldn't have the 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 alcohol. In later life, children of alcohol-dependents are also twice as likely to suffer from depression than children of non alcohol-dependent parents.

*'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 alcohol and its effects 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?

*'If I asked what was wrong, why Dad was lying in the middle of the kitchen floor with his eyes shut, I was told 'nothing, everything's fine'. I wondered if I could see something they couldn't or perhaps this was normal. I guessed at what normal was.'* (Sam, 24)

*'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 to follow, is often passed from one generation to the next.

Later in life, many children of alcohol-dependent parents thus find themselves drawn towards others who have grown up in similar environments, and sometimes towards alcohol-dependence 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-dependent parents to feel that they are the problem, that they are to blame for it, 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 children of alcohol-dependent parents are likely to feel almost 6 times more responsible for conflict in the home and are 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 terror, sometimes they are simply ignored; deprived of the ordinary things in life we accept as the norm – 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.

*'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, Nacoa helpline caller



## **ALCOHOL AND THE FAMILY**

Alcoholism, and the effects on dependent children, is one of the best-kept secrets in our society today. There is no definitive profile of children of alcohol-dependent parents. However the following 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 – since 2000 calls have increased 315%.

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. Children of alcohol-dependent parents 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 - and stress is a part of our everyday reality. 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 form a useful tool when planning support in the schools.

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

*'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



## **CHILDREN OF ALCOHOL-DEPENDENT PARENTS IN THE CLASSROOM**

### **Identifying children of alcohol-dependent parents**

One in eleven children live with parental alcoholism. The following may help you to identify them.

- A child fails to get excited about an anticipated class trip or event (because promises are so often broken at home).
- A child acts very differently during alcohol and drugs education from the way he or she usually reacts (for example, a talkative child becomes quiet, or a quiet child becomes animated).
- A child gets upset around his or her birthday and /or holidays (because special days are filled with disappointment for the child).
- A child wants time alone with the teacher or clings to a teacher or an aide (this may represent an effort to secure the nurturing they are not getting from a parent).
- A child has unrealistic expectations of other children and may often be disappointed in others (children of alcohol-dependent parents may look to friends to provide the nurturing they are not getting at home).
- A child may not be able to comply with the requests of the school when it involves parents (for example, a student may not bring a permission slip).
- A child may act out one of the adaptive roles (for example, the hero, the scapegoat, the lost child or the mascot).
- A child may act out a variety of the adaptive roles (for example, the hero, the scapegoat, the lost child or the mascot).
- A child is fearful of school-parent contact (because he or she fears that the parent will be drunk and the school will find out, or that the parent will behave inappropriately towards the teacher or abuse the child).
- A child talks back to a teacher or fights with other schoolchildren (because he or she is angry with his or her parents, but can't express the anger and comes to school like a "time bomb").
- A usually responsible child may inexplicably fail (for example, may offer no excuse or a far fetched excuse for not having done homework or for doing poorly on a test either of which may be covering up the real reason related to a parent's alcohol or drug use).

Of course, all children may present with one or more of these features at certain times. However, the appearance of some of above in a consistent way could alert you that the child may be living with parental alcoholism.



## Guidelines for teachers

The key to helping is to be able to recognise the nature of the child's family life. Being able to listen is vital. Children of alcohol-dependent parents are guarding a family secret that is struggling to come out. Being able to listen, understand and support in a non-judgemental way, will make a difference.

The following facts have proved a lifeline to many young callers to the Nacoa helpline:

- Alcoholism is like an illness. People who are alcohol dependant drink because they have lost control over alcohol, not because they are bad people or do not love their children.
- Children are not responsible for their parent(s)' drinking. Nothing the child does or says causes a parent to drink, or to stop.
- Children of alcohol-dependent parents are not alone, although it may feel like it. There are at least 920,000 children and young people living with alcohol-dependent parents in the UK today.
- There are people who can help and all children deserve help and support. The Nacoa helpline 0800 358 345 offers free, confidential information, advice and support for as long as is needed. A list of resources is listed later.

Sometimes simple actions make a profound difference in the life of a troubled child. The following ideas may prove helpful to you.

- Listen in a non-judgement way and follow through if a child asks for help. You may be the only person the child has approached about the family problem.
- Provide information and advice. Maintain a small library of books and pamphlets, and reprints of articles on alcohol-related problems (age appropriate to the child). Nacoa will be happy to provide their publications and relevant press articles and will be aware of what is available elsewhere.
- Explore coping mechanism with the child. Try not to react negatively to disclosures – coping mechanisms keep children alive. Help the child to work out what helps and what doesn't.
- Assist the child in 'thinking through' the sympathetic adults who play significant roles in his or her life (a favourite aunt or uncle, older brother or sister etc.).
- Help the child contact the Nacoa helpline 0800 358 3456.
- Refer the child to an appropriate helping professional. Knowing which organisations have resources to help children will make it easier when a child comes to you. Nacoa will provide a list of local resources.
- Be sensitive to possible cultural differences. Cultural differences may influence how you can most effectively help the child.



- Try not to react negatively when the child asks you for help. A negative response may discourage the child and increase his or her sense of isolation and hopelessness.
- Don't criticise the child's parents or be overly sympathetic. The child may gain the greatest benefit just from having someone to talk to, with an understanding ear, who will advise where further help can be found.
- Don't share the child's problems with others who do not have to know. This is not only important in terms of building trust with the child, but also protects the child from being labelled by peers or other adults.
- Don't make plans with the child if you can't keep them. Stability and consistency in relationships are necessary if the child is to develop trust.
- Don't try to counsel the child unless you are trained to do so. Refer the child to someone with specialist skills, or help the child to contact the Nacoa helpline.
- Call the Nacoa helpline for support for yourself in supporting the child.

*'Change does not happen in an instant but never doubt that a simple action like talking to someone who cares, can make a difference.'*

Hilary Henriques MBE, Nacoa CEO



Nacoa's foundation training programme, principally for volunteer helpline counsellors, takes place three times a year.

Two places are available for concerned professionals working with children of alcohol-dependent parents on each course.

Visit [www.nacoa.org.uk](http://www.nacoa.org.uk) for future training dates

For more information, please contact Nacoa:

Admin: 0117 924 8005

Fax: 0117 942 2928

Helpline: 0800 358 3456

Email: [training@nacoa.org.uk](mailto:training@nacoa.org.uk)

Website: [www.nacoa.org.uk](http://www.nacoa.org.uk)



## THE NACOA HELPLINE

The Nacoa helpline provides information, advice and support for children of alcohol-dependent parents and people concerned with their welfare. The helpline is free and confidential and can be accessed by phone (0800 358 3456), email (helpline@nacoa.org.uk) and post (PO Box 64, Fishponds, Bristol BS16 2UH).

We are a people-led organisation working with the following guidelines to help callers through the process of seeking help and improving their own situation, with ongoing support.

### 1. Listen and explore in a non-judgemental way

We provide callers with the opportunity to express themselves and explore their actions and feelings at their own pace. It is a huge step for many callers to pick up the telephone (or email or write) and tell a helpline counsellor about their feelings and problems. Many find, however, that to be heard (or responded to by email or post) and to have their experiences validated is a tremendous help.

### 2. Provide information and advice

We provide callers with information on issues surrounding alcoholism and the alcohol-dependent family system. We also publish a number of publications, which are available free of charge - many are available on [www.nacoa.org.uk](http://www.nacoa.org.uk).

### 3. Explore coping mechanisms

Volunteer helpline counsellors help callers to explore different ways of dealing with their specific situation, and to find ways of improving their own lives, irrespective of whether their parent(s) continue to drink. Callers often find that talking to someone outside their immediate personal sphere can be very helpful, and allows them to see their situation from a different perspective.

For example, we help callers to identify 'safe places' where they might be able to do homework uninterrupted, or where they could go after school if it is unsafe to go home. Taking part in outside activities can help callers to put their problems at home 'on hold' for a while, helping them feel better about themselves.

### 4. Explore social support – family and friends

We encourage callers to explore their social network of friends and family, to identify 'safe people'. For example, is there a friend, a teacher, an uncle or an aunt who is approachable, and would be a good person to talk to?

Callers are encouraged to talk about their feelings and to accept this is not about 'telling on their family' – it is about taking care of themselves. Talking to someone can help him or her to feel less alone, and that person might be able to help in a number of ways.

### 5. Refer to other agencies

Nacoa has access to a range of resources and services around the country through our UK Resource Database. We help callers to find services such as drop-in centres, self-help groups or resource centres in their local area. Unlike other agencies, callers can continue to call the Nacoa helpline to access help and support on an ongoing basis for as long as they wish.



**Nacoa**

Helpline: 0800 358 3456

[www.nacoa.org.uk](http://www.nacoa.org.uk)

Email: [helpline@nacoa.org.uk](mailto:helpline@nacoa.org.uk)

Nacoa provides information, advice and ongoing support to children of alcohol-dependent parents and people concerned for their welfare

**ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics)**

Tel: 07071 781899

[www.adultchildren.org](http://www.adultchildren.org)

Email: [info@adultchildrenofalcoholics.co.uk](mailto:info@adultchildrenofalcoholics.co.uk)

Self-help group for young people and adults

**Adfam**

Tel: 0207 553 7640

[www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)

Adfam supports families affected by substance misuse

**Al-Anon**

Helpline: 0207 403 0888

[www.al-anonuk.org.uk](http://www.al-anonuk.org.uk)

Email: [enquiries@al-anonuk.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@al-anonuk.org.uk)

Al-Anon Family Groups provide understanding for everyone whose life is, or has been, affected by someone else's drinking

**Alcohol Concern**

[www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk)

Email: [contact@alcoholconcern.org.uk](mailto:contact@alcoholconcern.org.uk)

Alcohol Concern is the national agency on alcohol misuse, providing information, and promoting public debate on alcohol-related issues

**ChildLine**

Helpline: 0800 1111

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

ChildLine is the UK's free, national helpline for children and young people in trouble or danger

**Drinkline**

Helpline: 0800 917 8282

**FRANK (National Drugs Helpline)**

Helpline: 0800 77 66 00

[www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

Email: [frank@talktofrank.com](mailto:frank@talktofrank.com)

FRANK provides information and advice to children, parents and carers concerned about their own, or someone else's drug use

**NSPCC**

Helpline: 0800 800 500

[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

Email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)

The NSPCC specialises in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children

**Samaritans**

Helpline: 08457 90 90 90

[www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk)

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

The Samaritans provide confidential emotional support to anyone in crisis or at risk of suicide