

Overwhelming problems damaging children's well-being

Spotlight on the impact of parents' alcohol abuse on children

"She couldn't really help us with anything. We had to do lots of things on our own. Nothing was really getting done. I had to get up on my own and help my little sister get ready for school. Sometimes I had to miss the morning off school to take my sister"

– Young woman aged 17

"(I needed someone to) come and sit and talk to me... ask me what was wrong with me... everything was all about my mum and dad... nothing was about me... why was no one asking why I wasn't coming to school, down in the dumps or why I was kicking off?"

– Young woman aged 18

Quotes from a consultation with young people living with a parent who abuses alcohol

The scale of the problem

The Children's Society estimates there are 700,000 young people aged 10–17 with a parent who abuses alcohol, according to analysis undertaken as part of the [Good Childhood Report 2017](#). This is equivalent to one in eight (12.4%) adolescents in the UK.

Alcohol misuse was more likely to be reported by male parents or carers than females: two thirds of parents reporting alcohol misuse were male, despite males making up only half of the total sample.

Outcomes in childhood

Young people whose parents misuse alcohol can suffer a range of difficulties and poor outcomes. These will vary according to the child's stage of development, but include behavioural and/or psychological problems, poor educational attainment, low self-esteem, offending behaviour, exposure to sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

The Good Childhood Report 2017 found children living with a parent/carer with alcohol misuse were seven times more likely to have low well-being (22%) than children with no disadvantages (3%).

In terms of their overall well-being, young people living with a parent or carer who misused alcohol had an average well-being score of 6.2 out of 10, compared to a score of 7.4 out of 10 for children with no disadvantages, a difference of 1.2 points out of 10.

Outcomes in adulthood

The relationship between parental substance abuse and subsequent alcohol problems in their children is well documented. Moreover, the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study found that childhood exposure to extreme family dysfunction (including parental substance abuse) is highly associated with health risk behaviours, such as smoking, drinking and overeating, and, consequently, to disease.

Experiencing parental alcohol misuse as well as other disadvantages

Young carers

The Good Childhood Report 2017 found 23% of children living with a parent/carer with alcohol misuse were also young carers. This is 2.5 times the comparable rate for the sample as a whole. If this proportion is applied to the UK population, more than 150,000 10-17 year olds could be experiencing these two disadvantages.

Young carers may undertake tasks such as household chores, managing bills, or nursing a parent suffering from drug or alcohol withdrawal, as well as provide emotional support.

Like many young carers, those looking after a parent affected by drug or alcohol problems may experience bullying, stigma and isolation, and display behavioural difficulties. Where children are caring for a relative with drug or alcohol problems, the incidence of missed school and educational difficulties is much more marked, with 34% missing school and 40% in total missing school or having other indicators of educational difficulties. Like many young carers, these young people need someone to talk to and for their needs to be understood. They need to understand they are not responsible for their parents' circumstances and any problems they face are not their fault.

This combination of disadvantages is associated with lower well-being. Almost a fifth (19%) of all children experiencing these two disadvantages had low well-being, compared to just 3% of children who had no disadvantages.

Link between safeguarding and alcohol misuse

There are strong links between parental substance misuse and children being placed on a child protection plan, undergoing care proceedings and adoption. In a [study of four London Boroughs](#), almost two thirds of all children subject to care proceedings had parents who misused substances. Moreover, [alcohol misuse was identified as a factor](#) in over 82,000 children in need and child protection assessments between March 2015 and April 2016.

The misuse of alcohol may adversely affect the ability of parents to attend to the emotional, physical and developmental needs of their children in both the short and long term, leading to attachment problems in their children.

Criminalisation

Of those children living with a parent or carer who misuses alcohol, 16% had also experienced a household member in prison in the last five years. This is four times the comparable rate of the whole sample. If applied to the UK population more than 100,000 10-17 year olds could be experiencing these two disadvantages together.

We know that having a parent in prison can make the transition into adulthood for young people [particularly challenging](#). In addition, there is a relationship between parental alcohol misuse and early entry into the criminal justice system. In [a study of young offending cases](#) where the young person was also misusing alcohol, 78% had a history of parental alcohol abuse or domestic abuse within the family.

Food bank usage

There is a [well-established link](#) between poverty and alcohol abuse. We found 28% of children living with a parent/carer with alcohol misuse had also used a food bank in the last five years. This is almost four times the comparable rate for the whole sample. If this proportion is applied to the UK population, more than 180,000 10-17 year olds could be experiencing these two disadvantages. This combination of disadvantages is associated with lower well-being. Over a fifth (22%) of all children experiencing these two disadvantages had low well-being, compared to just 3% of children who had no disadvantages.

Homelessness

We found 29% of children living with a parent/carer with alcohol misuse had also been homeless in the last five years. This is over 3.5 times the comparable rate for the whole sample. If this proportion is applied to the UK population, more than 160,000 10-17 year olds could be experiencing these two disadvantages. This combination of disadvantages is associated with lower well-being. Over a fifth (22%) of all children experiencing these two disadvantages had low well-being, compared to just 3% of children who had no disadvantages.

Domestic violence

Alcohol use is a [feature in a majority of domestic abuse offences](#). The Good Childhood Report 2017 found that 39% of children living with a parent/carer with alcohol misuse were also living in households where there had been domestic violence in the last five years. This is almost three times the comparable rate for the whole sample. If this proportion is applied to the UK population, more than 250,000 10-17 year olds could be experiencing these two disadvantages. This combination of disadvantages is associated with lower well-being. A quarter of all children experiencing these two disadvantages had low well-being, compared to less than one in thirty (3%) children who had no disadvantages.

Bereavement

One in five children living with a parent/carer with alcohol misuse were also living in households where someone had died in the last five years. This is almost three times the comparable rate for the whole sample. If this proportion is applied to the UK population, more than 130,000 10-17 year olds could be experiencing these two disadvantages. This combination of disadvantages is associated with lower well-being. Over a fifth (22%) of all children experiencing these two disadvantages had low well-being, compared to just 3% of children who had no disadvantages.

Parental depression

Alcohol can both be used as a form of self-medication when people are suffering with mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression, or it can develop mental health problems in the abuser. It is, therefore, [important to maintain effective links](#) between all agencies involved to provide extra support should they need it.

In our sample, 59% of parents or carers with alcohol misuse problems had also experienced depression and/ or serious anxiety in the last five years. This is twice the comparable rate for the whole sample. If this proportion is applied to the UK population, more than 280,000 10-17 year olds could be experiencing these two disadvantages. This combination of disadvantages is associated with lower well-being. Almost a quarter (24%) of all children experiencing these two disadvantages had low well-being, compared to 3% of children who had no disadvantages.

Parental ill-health/disability

We found that 44% of children living with a parent/carer with alcohol misuse lived in households where there was a parent/carer with a long-standing illness or disability. This rate is twice the comparable rate for the whole sample. If this proportion is applied to the UK population, more than 280,000 10-17 year olds could be experiencing these two disadvantages. This combination of disadvantages is associated with lower well-being. Over a quarter (26%) of all children experiencing these two disadvantages had low well-being.

Support for children with parents who abuse alcohol

Young people we interviewed as part of [our research](#) into the effects of harmful parental drinking on children identified the serious and hidden consequences of alcohol misuse on their health and well-being. Yet it also demonstrated that with the right support the harm to children can be significantly reduced.

“alcoholism is hidden because it’s legal – it’s swept under the carpet”

- Girl aged 13

Poor identification of need

Children living with parents who abuse alcohol may not be in contact with health or social care services until problems escalate and even then, parental alcohol misuse is not always recognised or recorded.

There may also be the feeling among agencies that if the adult is receiving an intervention then it will immediately impact positively on the child, without giving due consideration to a child’s additional emotional needs or caring responsibilities.

The lack of available help

Preventative substance misuse services are among some of the vital early intervention services affected by local authority cuts. Without early help, the needs of vulnerable children and young people affected by parental alcohol misuse may escalate and result in increased overall costs to public services due to the higher level of intervention required. Early intervention should also be seen as early response to emerging problems, not just targeted help in the early years.

Findings from the Good Childhood Report 2017 highlight the multiple disadvantages faced by many young people who grow up households where a parent abuses alcohol. Additional support for young people affected by parental alcohol misuse, such as counselling services, youth services, young carers groups and supported accommodation, and removal of the Severe Disability Premium, are all impacted by local authority cuts.

Addressing these service shortfalls simply will not be possible without appropriate funding. The Government should make more funding available to support children and young people who are experiencing multiple disadvantage, with a particular emphasis on early help services.

Recommendations

- In the Autumn Budget, the Government should address the expected financial shortfall in children’s services in England.
- The Government should use local variations in the well-being of children experiencing multiple disadvantage to determine how this additional funding will be allocated. Particular emphasis should be placed on the provision of early help services to help prevent needs from escalating.