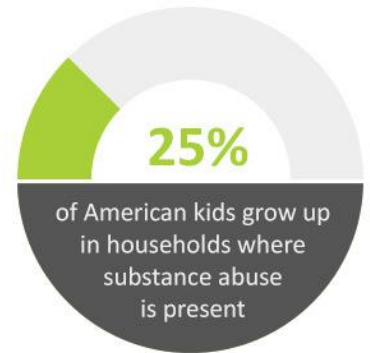


## Substance Abuse and Addiction: The Ripple Effect

Alcohol and/or drug abuse can touch anyone, regardless of age, gender, race, or socioeconomic status. The National Institute on Drug Abuse estimates that 25% of American kids grow up in households where substance abuse is present. Children and adolescents are deeply influenced by the people they are raised by and it is not surprising that in homes where one or more adults abuse alcohol or drugs, children are approximately twice as likely to develop addictive disorders themselves. While some view substance abuse and addiction as a personal experience, causing the most damage to the one using, research highlights the harmful effects that substance abuse can have on the entire family system. When a loved one abuses drugs and/or alcohol, everyday life can feel out of control.



Parental (or caregiver) substance abuse can adversely influence the development of children and future life outcomes. Recent research from Harvard Medical School affirms that children whose parents (or caregivers) abuse alcohol or use, produce or distribute drugs, face significantly higher risks of medical and behavioral problems. Parental and caregiver substance abuse has also been linked to a higher incidence of emotional and mental health issues in children.

According to the American Addiction Centers, children who grow up in a home where parental (or caregiver) substance abuse is present are more likely to experience:

- Poor school performance
- Emotional and behavioral problems
- Low self-esteem
- A higher risk of developing anxiety and depression
- Earlier onset of experimentation with drugs or alcohol

As drugs and/or alcohol become a caregiver's priority, children's basic physical, psychological and emotional needs may not be met, putting them at increased risk for emotional and mental stress. A family impacted by substance abuse can spiral into a dysfunctional system. According to SAMHSA, children may take on one or more "roles" as a means to cope in an unhealthy family environment. Typical roles include:

- **The Hero**- usually the oldest child and most identified with the parental role. They sacrifice and do the right thing. They make good leaders, are driven and successful and feel like they need to take on more responsibility, but internally struggle with feelings of anxiety, stress and loneliness.
- **The Adjuster**- rather than be in charge like the hero, the adjuster tries to fit in and adapt and rarely complains.
- **The Placater**- most sensitive to others' feelings and tries to meet others' emotional needs, neglecting their own.
- **The Scapegoat**- acts out negative behavior to express feelings he/she can't communicate and to distract the family from the parent/caregiver who is abusing substances.
- **The Lost Child**- usually a younger child who withdraws into a world of fantasy, music, video games or the Internet as a means to be alone. Their relationships and social skills may suffer.

- **The Mascot**- a younger or youngest child who manages fear and worry by being funny or cute to relieve family tension.

It should be noted that all of these roles may not be present in all homes where parental or caregiver substance abuse is present. Individual roles within the family may differ according to family structure (single-parent families, multigenerational families, stepfamilies, foster families, traditional nuclear families, etc.).

While addiction is now recognized as a chronic disease of the brain, the stigmas surrounding drug and alcohol abuse is a major factor preventing individuals from seeking and completing treatment. Due to the negative feelings that family, friends and the general public may carry about drug use behavior, parents and caregivers may be especially vulnerable to harsh labels, judgment and criticism because of the effects of substance abuse on their children. Feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt or fear over potential legal repercussions may discourage parents and children alike from reaching out for help. In other situations, parents and caregivers may be in such deep denial about their use that they may not be aware of the effects of their substance abuse on their kids. It is important to remember that addiction can distort the user's sense of reality making it difficult to see the chaos that has ensued within the family system. People can and do recover from alcohol and drug dependence problems and intervention is often the first step. Treatment can look different, depending on each individual's level of use, but most programs include providing life skills, behavioral therapy, relapse prevention strategies and peer support. Family therapy can help repair damaged relationships, teach healthy communication skills and improve the home environment. It may take multiple attempts to convince a loved one to agree to accept help.

Children of families experiencing alcohol or drug abuse also need attention, guidance and support. Teachers and school professionals are often on the frontline when it comes to recognizing when a family might be struggling and can serve as an avenue to offer supports and resources to students. Validating a child's experiences, listening and helping to connect kids to people and activities that will promote feelings of self-efficacy, and connecting youth and families to professionals who are trained to help, are important strategies of support. The National Association for Children of Addiction (NACoA) offers the following resource for schools: "Children Impacted by Addiction: A Toolkit for Educators"  
[https://www.addictionpolicy.org/hubfs/Kit4Teachers\\_Alt\\_2018-4.pdf](https://www.addictionpolicy.org/hubfs/Kit4Teachers_Alt_2018-4.pdf).

SAMHSA's National Helpline- 1-800-662-HELP (4357) also offers a free confidential, 24/7, 365- day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

References:

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; American Addiction Centers; National Association for Children of Addiction (NACoA); National Institute of Health; National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA); Psychology Today; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA); The Journal of the American Association of Pediatrics.