



## **Alcohol and Families Alliance**

### **Response to Department of Health and Social Care's Early years healthy development review – October 2020**

#### **4) What outcomes do you think are most important for an early years vision?**

In ensuring that every child has the best start in life, and is given the opportunity to thrive and achieve their full potential regardless of their circumstances, it is essential to support children of parents with an alcohol problem.

The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS) in 2014 estimated that there are 595,000 adults with alcohol dependence in England and 189,119 children living with at least one alcohol dependent adult. Whilst these figures apply to children as a whole, they also include younger children.

It is common for these children to experience neglect, physical and emotional abuse. Many develop both mental health and their own substance use problems as a result of their experiences, in turn increasing the likelihood of negative outcomes as they grow older.

Furthermore, alcohol use can affect parents' ability to look after their children, in some cases becoming less responsive, more unpredictable and less interactive. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) Parental Alcohol Misuse and Children report in 2018 noted that parental alcohol misuse can sometimes lead to inconsistent and unpredictable parenting, and physical and mental health impacts. The same report described how parental alcohol misuse can also lead to children being taken into care and around 61% of care applications in England involve the misuse of alcohol and/or drugs.

Although there is currently a lack of evidence on the impact of parental alcohol use on children in the early years, there is clear evidence that these children will experience difficulties at an older age. The APPG on Children of Alcoholics' 2017 Manifesto for Change indicated that compared to other children, children with a parent with an alcohol problem are twice as likely to experience difficulties at school, three times more likely to consider suicide, and five times more likely to develop eating disorders. Public Health England's 2018 rapid review of the evidence of prevalence, impact and effective interventions showed evidence of an association between high risk parental alcohol misuse and externalising difficulties through conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, attention difficulties, and violent and rebellious behaviour.

These harms also impact children of parents who drink at lower levels too. The Alcohol and Families Alliance's 2017 research report "Like Sugar for Adults" makes a direct link between parental drinking habits and a child's attitude towards alcohol, drinking behaviour later in life and a range of emotional and other impacts.

The Alcohol and Families Alliance believes that preventing future alcohol related harm to children requires action today. This includes ensuring better training is made available for universal service practitioners, such as health visitors and GPs, to identify parental drinking problems and signpost families to specialist support where appropriate. Early years services have a particularly important role in identifying and supporting children and young people affected by parental drinking. Training resources should be developed for professionals to help them to better recognise, support, and refer children affected by parental drinking.

In addition, better information is required for parents and the Government should publish evidence-based guidance on parental and family member drinking and its effect on children, including at low levels.

The Alcohol and Families Alliance welcomed the Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Work and Pensions' recent injection of funding through the Children of Alcohol Dependent Parent Innovation Fund, which has led to a number of examples of good practice. This includes Alcohol and Families Alliance members Adfam and the National Association for Children of Alcoholics (Nacoa).

## **8) What else would help develop 'excellence' in early years healthy development?**

The harms experienced by children as a result of parental alcohol use can take place even before birth. Drinking during pregnancy can impair foetal development leading to Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

A recent study which estimated national, regional, and global prevalence of alcohol use during pregnancy (Popova S., Lange S., Probst C., Gmel G. & Rehm J., 2017) estimated that 41% of pregnant women in the UK drink during pregnancy.

In 2016, following an evidence review, the UK Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) published a guideline on drinking during pregnancy, advising that if pregnant or planning a pregnancy, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all. However, research conducted in 2019 by the Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS), University of Edinburgh and University of Hull found that a lack of promotion of the guidelines, along with conflicting messages from midwives and healthcare professionals, and the lack of mandatory pregnancy warning labels on alcohol products and advertising, have caused confusion amongst the public and largely prevented the CMOs' guidelines from getting through to pregnant women.

Furthermore, as part of Adfam's project supporting families of children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) funded by the Government's Innovation Fund, findings from consultations conducted in 2020 with frontline professionals and families found a lack of consistent support available nationally for families of children with a FASD, combined with a lack of understanding around FASD amongst key professionals. This in turn leads to a difficulty in children receiving a formal diagnosis, and accessing support as a result. Amongst the practitioners that took part in this consultation, there was a strong appetite for more training to enable them to better understand FASD.

As outlined by FASD Network UK, FASD is a lifelong disability. Individuals with FASD have their own unique areas of difficulty and may experience challenges in their daily living and need support with motor skills, physical health, learning, memory, attention, emotional regulation, and social skills.

The Alcohol and Families Alliance believes the Government must support the effective communication of the Chief Medical Officers' alcohol guidelines, in particular the guidance on drinking in pregnancy.