



**Stigma and Children Affected by
Parental Substance Use:
Literature Review
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Determining the prevalence of parental substance use has proven challenging in much of the research, largely due to the covert nature of the issue. Figures indicate that between 5 and 37% of children reside with at least one parent who uses substances (Galligan & Comiskey, 2019). A child's development can be severely affected when living with a parent who is frequently intoxicated, causing a plethora of negative consequences, such as physical, behavioural, and emotional problems. Beyond the family context, children also suffer the detrimental consequences of their parent's substance misuse by facing external judgement, discrimination, and stigma.

Stigma from Society-

The stigma surrounding substance use is deeply rooted in negative societal stereotypes. These deleterious beliefs are essential in the development and persistence of stigmatisation. Families affected by alcohol or drug addiction are perceived to deviate from the societal norms and expectations. As well as marginalising this population, it induces shame in young people upon realising that their family are not 'normal' (Houmøller et al., 2011). The media perpetuates these stereotypes, by depicting substance users as lacking self-control, and frequently using derogatory language to describe them (Taylor 2008). This emphasises the dichotomy between "them" and the rest of society, reinforcing a sense of superiority and viewing substance users as distinct and inferior. Such portrayals overlook the reality that addiction is a disease that can affect anyone. It is not a character flaw and does not make someone a bad person.

The Effects of Stigma on Children Affected by Parental Substance Use-

Children affected by parental substance use bear the burden of these stereotypes, suffering judgement from others, and reporting feelings of stigmatisation due to their parents' substance use. Many are often manipulated into believing that their parents' substance use is their fault; thinking that their bad behaviour triggered their parents' use of drugs or alcohol (Tarlow, 2023). Furthermore, people form preconceived notions about children whose parents use substances, expecting them to follow a similar trajectory to that of their mother or father (Tamutienė and Jogaitė, 2019). This prejudice is associated with a plethora of negative outcomes for children affected by parental substance use.

The stigma accompanying parental addiction can result in feelings of isolation for affected children (Nattala et al., 2022; Reupert, Goodyear, and Maybery 2012). When peers treat them as "abnormal" or "different", it leads to loneliness (MCA Staff, 2023) and alienation. In an environment where young people should feel safe, children affected by parental substance use have previously reported experiencing stigma from their teachers at school; stating that they were made to feel different or that they were 'picked on' (Bancroft, 2004). If social interactions persistently lead to rejection, children will come to expect this reaction in subsequent encounters. Consequently, they may withdraw further, intensifying feelings of isolation and loneliness. Research has found that having few, low-quality social relationships

(Eccles & Qualter, 2021) can negatively impact a variety of short- and long- term physical health (Harris et al., 2015), and mental health (Beutel et al., 2017). Furthermore, these negative experiences, and the emotions that coincide, can discourage children from seeking help, forcing them to suffer in silence due to the fear of ostracism (Nacoa, 2017).

Deterred from seeking help, children affected by parental substance use find themselves trapped in a cycle that torments them into adulthood. Adult children of parents who drink alcohol problematically experience increased depressive symptoms, lower self-esteem and resilience if they felt stigmatised by others (Haverfield and Theiss, 2016). This occurs regardless of whether these perceptions of stigma accurately reflect the behaviour of others or are wrongly interpreted by the child. How a child perceives reactions from their peers can significantly impact their outcomes. This can also manifest as difficulties in future job prospects and relationships (Bancroft 2004; Nattala et al. 2022).

The Class Divide-

Children exposed to parental substance use are more likely to grow up in conditions of deprivation (Marmot, 2020), enduring a range of disadvantages that exacerbate their vulnerabilities. In families where parental substance use and poverty are concurrent, the financial burden may mean that basic necessities, such as food and clean clothes, are not met (Muir, McGovern, & Kaner, 2022). This neglect makes the effects of parental substance use more apparent to others around them and can increase the stigma that these children experience. In contrast, wealthier families, facing similar issues, have the finances to conceal the problem (Muir, McGovern, & Kaner, 2022). This evidence highlights the disparity of stigma, based on socio-economic status, indicating that young people from a lower social class experience more discrimination and stigma due to their parents' substance use.

Supportive Experiences, Coping, and Disclosure-

Keeping their parents' substance use private is a strategy frequently adopted by children to help cope with stigma and the challenges associated with it (Muir, McGovern, & Kaner, 2022). However, this approach may be more harmful than helpful, as it reinforces the belief that their identity should be 'hidden' to avoid judgement and discrimination from others.

Supportive environments, where children receive empathy and positive interactions, can help minimise the negative consequences of stigma (Tarlow, 2023). When these children receive such support, it is considered invaluable (Muir, McGovern, & Kaner, 2022). Research has shown that children who disclose their stigmatised identity within supportive environments have greater health benefits (Quinn, 2017). Furthermore, discussing their family life with other young people affected by parental substance abuse has been reported to be helpful (Hagström & Forinder, 2022). Recognising that their experience is relatable can help young people build a shared identity, reducing feelings of loneliness, shame, and stigmatisation.

Emphasis should be placed on training professionals who work closely with children affected by parental substance misuse (Muir, McGovern, & Kaner, 2022). Constructing trusting relationships, where children feel safe to disclose their traumatic experiences, could act as a catalyst for positive development. Additionally, services that promote communication between family members, including with parents, may help minimise feelings of stigma and encourage children to seek help (Muir, McGovern, & Kaner, 2022). Crucially, there needs to be a public understanding of substance misuse to reduce stereotyping and stigmatisation (Muir, McGovern, & Kaner, 2022). Increased education and awareness can challenge misconceptions, promote empathy, and foster more supportive attitudes towards individuals who misuse substances, and the families affected by it.

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