



# Parental Substance Misuse: addressing its impact on children

## A Review of the Literature

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Dr Justine Horgan, Senior Researcher, NACD

# Overview

- Policy context
- Parental substance misuse
  - Outcomes for the child
  - Mechanisms
- Responding to parental substance misuse
  - Some key challenges
  - Very little on solutions
    - Seminar
- NACD recommendations



# Background

## Policy context

# Policy context

- Report of Working Group on Drugs Rehabilitation (2007)
  - Identifies children of drug users as a specific risk group
  - Recognises lack of knowledge/information
- National Drugs Strategy (2009-2016)
  - Recognises the implications for child development and parenting
- The National Children's Strategy
  - The family affords the best environment for raising children
  - Outcomes focused approach to providing education, physical, mental and emotional

# *Parental substance misuse*

- Substances
  - Illegal drugs, alcohol data where useful
- Use vs Misuse
  - Harmful effect on a person's life, dependency
- Chronic, relapsing condition
  - A priority to the exclusion of significant personal relationships
    - May impact ability to care for children



# Child outcomes

## NACD Report compiles evidence

- Key areas of child development are affected
  - Attachment, self-regulation & stress response
- Prevents this group of children from developing key skills and competences
  - Lower academic achievement
  - Psycho-social development (resilience)

# As a consequence...

- Risk of developing problem substance use is higher
  - Early onset
  - Telescoping
    - Transition from onset to dependency is shorter where parental substance misuse is involved



# Cascading -domino effect

- Academic functioning
- Social skills
- Peer groups
- Substance misuse
- Depression, anxiety etc



# Some key mechanisms

Pre-natal exposure

Parenting

Family life disruption/stress

# Mechanism 1: Pre-natal period

- Misuse of substance at pre-natal stage
  1. Crosses the placental barrier
  2. Constriction of blood vessels/oxygen
    - Heavy, prolonged use e.g. cocaine
  3. Maternal stress/lack of prenatal care
    - Cortisol levels mother's blood & amniotic fluid

# Mechanism 1: Pre-natal period

- Impacts foetal and child development
  - Premature births
  - Physical, neurological implications
- Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)
  - Craniofacial abnormalities, heart defects, reduce muscle tone, reduced height, weight.
  - Functional: thinking, speech, movement, social skills
- Neo-natal abstinence/withdrawal syndrome
  - Group of symptoms in newborn infant (substance dependent)
  - E.g. Fever, poor feeding, hyperactive reflexes, rapid breathing, excessive crying & sucking, distorted muscle tone

# Mechanism 2: Parenting

- Where parental substance misuse a factor, serious problems with
  - Quality of parenting (responsiveness)
    - Early years
    - Security, safe haven, associated with mothers
  - Parenting strategy (boundary setting)
    - Up to adolescence
    - What is acceptable, exploring boundaries, risk taking, associated with fathers

# Parental substance misuse and responsiveness

- Bonding opportunities
- Drug, alcohol misuse & parenting
  - Low responsiveness
  - More withdrawn
  - Inconsistent response

## Parental substance misuse and boundary setting

- Alcohol, drug users
  - Authoritarian (over-controlling)
  - Instable and inconsistent
  - Punitive

## Mechanism 3: Family life disruption

- Reported episodes of domestic violence
- Men in treatment
- Women in treatment victims/survivors of DV
  - Male partners very likely to misuse substances
- Isolation from support



# Family life disruption: Care arrangements

- Sporadic and inconsistent life circumstances
  - Unable to provide economic security
  - Involvement with CJS, treatment
- Out-of-home care
  - Starts young
  - Informal/ statutory arrangements (court order)
  - Likelihood of being reunited dependent on treatment success , network of support

# Aims

- Reduce/stop parental substance use
- Improve parenting skills
- Provide stable family life
  - Domestic violence
  - Mental health



## Key areas of response and challenges

# Treatment/rehabilitation

- Treatment reduces substance misuse
  - Environment safer/better for children
- Strengthen by integrating parenting perspective
  - Being a parent a motivation & strain
- Mother's needs
  - Specialized health and mental health services
  - Woman-centered treatment involving children
  - Home visitation, transportation, childcare
  - Short-term targeted interventions

# Treatment/rehabilitation

- Relatives involved to encourage participation in treatment
  - Also provide support for child, systematic and co-ordinated approach
- Discuss men's role and how substance use affects their roles as fathers and partners
- Challenging
  - How to develop therapeutic relationship which includes a focus on parenting?

# Family & child support/protection

- Statutory, community & voluntary sectors
  - Social workers, therapists, primary care, family, child, youth workers and other relevant professionals
- In-home support, centre-based support
  - Parenting skills, behavioural training, family skills training communication skills, relationship building,
  - Therapy (individual, group, family); stress-strain coping skills

## Family and child support/protection

- Services aim to strengthen parenting skills and a stable family environment (protection)
  - Goal: safety & wellbeing of child within family
- Strengthen by integrating addiction perspective
  - Openness/trust re substance misuse
  - Understanding re substance misuse issues (UK)
    - Ltd familiarity with nature of alcohol and drug problems, treatment options
    - Are all families affected? How long is recovery? Indications of relapse? Children safe (in/out treatment)? Which substances matter more?

# Challenges

- Barrier
  - A focus on child protection without addiction perspective
    - Client fears losing custody of children
    - Need for support with parenting and substance misuse issues
  - Dilemma of how to safeguard the child while supporting parents who are substance misusers



# Integrating perspectives

- Working with other agencies/organisations
  - Linking, co-ordination/co-operation (protocols)
    - Substance use, family and child support, welfare and child protection, domestic violence, mental health
    - E.g. how agencies can support one another on assessment, motivation techniques, case management, visitation etc.
- Cross-training of frontline workers
  - Overlapping skills/knowledge to incorporate perspectives
  - Training on cross-system collaboration
  - Re-definition of roles
    - Need for integration must be reflected in use of protocols within services to guide service provision

# Helps to ensure

- Clients are fully assessed and their needs are understood
- Desired case outcomes are consistent between the two systems so that agencies are not working toward conflicting goals,
- Resources are used efficiently to prevent duplication of services

# Areas for Recommendation

# Research

1. Improve and strengthen existing data
  - Move beyond anecdotal, solid data on outcomes
    - Numbers of children living with parental substance misuse
  - Nature of problem (monitor & understand)
2. Mapping existing services, identify gaps
3. Fathering and parental substance misuse?
  - Mother and father's parental role
  - Potential to be the child carer

# Key Recommendations

4. Increase awareness re consumption of alcohol and drugs (women & men); risks during pregnancy
5. HSE Children First guidelines
  - Should be used by all working regularly with children who experience parental substance misuse and with their parents.
6. Assess service provision
  - That drug and alcohol treatment services incorporate parenting dimension
  - The extent of liaison among drug and alcohol, family, child support domestic violence and other relevant services

## Key recommendations

7. Providing adolescents with opportunities to talk with significant others
8. Assess whether relevant education and training curricula address parental substance misuse
9. Recognition of the role of family support groups in parental substance misuse
10. Culturally sensitive approach

# Research Advisory Group

- Mary Ellen McCann, UCD
- Marion Rackard HSE  
Social Inclusion
- Bobby Smyth HSE  
Addiction Services
- Claire Deane Barnardos
- Gavin Mulhall HSE
- Liam O'Brien KARP
- Mairin O'Sullivan DE&Sk
- Siobhan Maher FSN
- Martin Keane HRB
- Pauline McKeown  
Coolmine TC
- Mary Jane Trimble  
NACD
- Stephen Bartley, OMD

Thank you

Justine@nacd.ie

