

7-Minute Briefing – Impact of parental substance use on children updated November 2025

01. Purpose of this Briefing

This briefing considers learning from children's cases, involving children of parents who use substances, including un/born babies, and those with caring responsibilities.

02. Background

Substance use refers to the consumption of drugs and/or alcohol resulting in impairment, there may be different treatment methodologies for adults with these problems, they are considered together because the consequences for the child are quite similar. Substance use refers to both illicit drugs, alcohol, prescription drugs and solvents. Many substance using adults also experience mental health problems, which is described as Dual Diagnosis.

03. Risks and Safeguarding Concerns

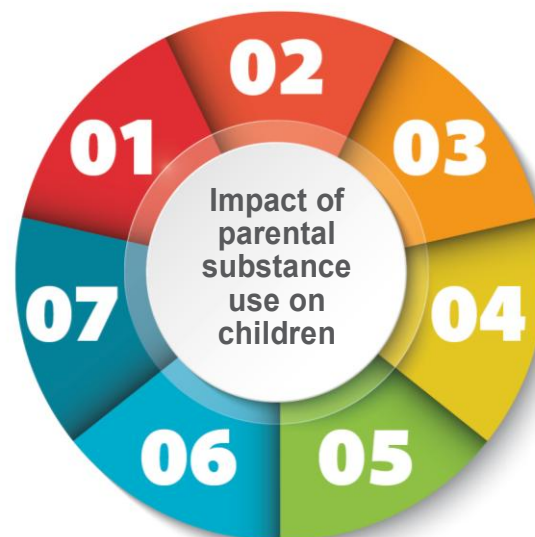
- Substance use can impact on the capacity of a person to parent a child. Children can also be vulnerable when parents are withdrawing.
- Children's physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and developmental needs can be adversely affected by their parent's use of substances. These effects may be through acts of omission or commission.
- This behaviour can put the child at an increased risk of neglect and emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, either by the parent or because the child becomes more vulnerable to abuse by others. Children may take on a caring role for their parent and/or siblings and feel they have the responsibility to solve their parent's problems.
- Children may be introduced to drug and alcohol use at an early age by the behaviour of parents and the availability of substances within the home. Research indicates increased risk to the child, as well as making it more likely that they will repeat the cycle and become substance users themselves.

07. Resources to support practice

- Drug Wheel – [Alcohol and Drug Foundation](#)
- Building Confidence in Practice Resources – [Professional Curiosity](#)
- ["Parents with substance use problems: learning from case reviews"](#) – NSPCC, December 2023

06. Reviewing Practice

- Remember parents who use drugs and/or alcohol may be good enough parents who do not abuse or neglect their children. It is important not to generalise or make assumptions about the impact on a child. It is, however, important that the implications for the child are properly assessed and documented.
- There is a risk in focusing on the adult's difficulties and supporting their attempts to control their behaviours that the impact on the child can be overlooked or seen as a secondary consideration.
- Do not rely on self-reporting around consumption – explore any signs which contradict self-reporting.
- If you are in contact with a child in a drug/alcohol-using environment, ask yourself "What is it like for a child in this environment?"
- Remember Specialist Substance use services should be invited to and attend / provide information to any meeting concerning the implications of the parent/carer's substance use problems for the child.



05. Professional Curiosity

All agencies need to work together in tackling the problems caused by substance use in families in order to safeguard children, adults and promote their well-being. This would include having as comprehensive an understanding as possible of the extent and range of substances being used by parents/carers. Professional curiosity around self-reported drug use and sharing this information across agencies is essential to gain as full a picture as possible of substance use.

04. Substance Use and Un/born babies

The pre-birth impact of substance use on the foetus includes low birth weight, premature labour, infections, risk of haemorrhage, and impact on cognitive development. Newborn babies can experience drug or alcohol withdrawal from birth. Alcohol use through pregnancy causes foetal alcohol syndrome, which leads to permanent physical, cognitive, and behavioural impairments. Mothers can transmit substances to their baby via breast milk. Additionally passive smoking in the presence of a baby/child has additional risks through passive smoking. Becoming a new parent could be a stressor regarding substance use. If you encounter a pregnant substance user whose degree of substance using indicates that their parenting capacity is likely to be seriously impaired, make a referral to Children's Social Care.