

Nacoa Helpline Model of Care

"Speaking to Nacoa feels like coming home ...a huge piece of the jigsaw has fallen into place." Spike (18 years)

In a family struggling with alcoholism, parenting can be chaotic and inconsistent and is often characterised by secrecy and lies in an effort to keep the family's problems secret from the outside world. This leaves children confused and unlikely to reach out for help; often in fear of not being believed or of betraying the family.

Children often establish a cover story. They may be embarrassed and fearful of consequences if they subsequently reveal the truth. The immediate and extended family may collude to keep the family "safe" from the outside world. Conversely this compounds their isolation and excludes them from people who could support them, who are often unaware of their problems.

Some alcohol services offer help for family members, but there are few that serve children whose parents don't acknowledge or seek help for their addiction problems. These children find themselves with no one obvious to turn to for help.

The Nacoa helpline was set up to empower children with a variety of life skills to help them cope with difficult challenges. For example, some children face difficult situations with family violence, neglect and other problems. These children can learn a variety of coping and self-care strategies to stay safe.

Others may allow their feelings to build up inside until they become ready to explode or become ill with symptoms like abdominal pains and headaches. These children need help to identify their feelings and find ways to express them in healthy ways, especially with people they trust.

Some may lack confidence and self-esteem. These children can learn to respect themselves through experiences in which they have opportunities to succeed and thrive.

Reports into the problem of parental alcohol-dependence promote the use of helplines. Alcohol Concern's report "Under the Influence: coping with parents who drink too much" states:

"There are enormous advantages for children in having helplines and unlike other services, they do not depend on the child being able to get there. Unlike most services, which usually require some degree of adult involvement, access to a helpline is largely within the control of the child. Obviously, this is the one service where a child's wish for secrecy can be safeguarded absolutely, and there need be no concerns about confidentiality."

A recent government consultation with young people reported that children said they want to

- Be treated as individuals
- Have a say and be listened to
- Have choices in decisions affecting them
- Have services that do what they think is important



The way we work has been developed by listening and taking account of what children and young people tell us they want and need. They are the true architects of our Helpline Model of Care.

Calling a helpline or accessing other services is a daunting experience, especially for children living in families who deny or ignore their problems.

"Is this confidential?" is often the first question. Calls are confidential, no one else need know unless the caller decides to talk to someone else or wants Nacoa to approach another agency on his/her behalf.

However, there are times when duty of care and professional codes of practice support breaching confidentiality. This information is given clearly to callers, who are advised that if they disclose identifying information and we are concerned for their safety, we will make a statutory report. Being honest and open is essential if we want to honour and encourage their trust.

"He said you were kind, caring and gave him the opportunity to talk – without you he did not know what would have happened. He'd called other helplines and all they wanted to do was to get him off the phone with another phone number to call. You made all the difference."

Callers are often breaking their family's "code of silence" for the first time and may feel they are putting themselves at risk, that they are being disloyal to their parents. Callers need to know that they can remain anonymous. They are calling for themselves, not to betray their families.

Breaking the silence:

We focus on the individual caller, encouraging them to look at their own practical wants and needs, rather than those of the family.

Callers tell their stories to more than one volunteer helpline counsellor. They are often closed down to their own emotions, distancing themselves from what's happening in their everyday lives. We listen without judgement, as they explore their experiences.

"To the world outside everything was fine, a normal family. To have shared the secret burden that my brother and I carried would have brought shame on the entire family; we were led to believe we would become outcasts." Daisy

By recounting experiences, callers begin to feel less overwhelmed and begin a process of looking at issues one at a time, tackling life a day at a time, sometimes an hour at a time, or simply between calls.

Important messages include:

- You are not alone
- You are not responsible for your parent(s)' drinking
- You did not cause it and you can't control it
- You are not responsible for your parent(s)' behaviour

"Everything you said and the stuff on the website is exactly what we're going through – it's great to know and so helpful." Tom



Coping with difficulties: Callers are often overwhelmed by their situations, and use drink, drugs or other behaviours, such as eating disorders and self-harm, as a means of surviving difficulties at home and subsequent problems at school and other social situations. These seemingly destructive behaviours become the solution to the problem.

"This young boy told me he sat down at the breakfast table and cried. He said, "I'm turning into my mother. I've lived with it all these years, and today I had to have a drink to start my day."

Callers tell us they drink because "It numbs the pain", "I want to forget what's happened", "I drink with mum, it's the only good times we have", "The only time I'm happy is when I'm out of it".

We do not criticise parents or callers, but provide factual information, encouraging callers to find positive ways to express themselves and cope with difficulties.

"At this moment in time, my Mum is upstairs crying in her room. I've no idea what to say or what to do. I feel like I tread a path that goes nowhere but I can't stop. Maybe I'm doomed to never feel safe.

I really don't see a way out of the darkness or if I'll ever be rid of the 'deep' anger but I know I've got to keep on trying; living in this house leaves me feeling over-whelmed. Thanks for listening; it helps to know you are there." Tony

Staying in the present, concentrating on practical solutions and taking account of the callers' choices leads to what might seem small triumphs in both planning, thinking things through and informed choice making.

This may be the first time a caller has experienced positive outcomes for themselves – a powerful lesson and one which may lead to future positive choices.

Who can help:

We encourage callers to talk about their relationships with teachers, friends and other family members. These relationships may be difficult because they fear being taken away from home or of "telling" on their parents. Anxiety leads to further isolation as they maintain what is often a painful silence.

For some callers there is no one to confide in, for others they simply need help to rehearse what to say, how to ask for help and what to ask for.

"I rang your helpline last year, when I could not take it any longer and I will never forget the lady who chatted to me for two hours, and calmed me down by actually understanding where I was coming from. As my friends and family never did." Sarah

We are often the only adults callers feel able to ask for help about growing up in today's world. We help them to make informed choices without feeling that they have to be an adult. We provide age-appropriate information so they can explore their options. The call is always about the caller, relevant to their individual situation, directed by the caller and at his or her own pace.



Ongoing support:

Callers ring or email for as long as they want. The work revolves around what the caller wants to discuss, providing help when needed and sometimes at times of and during crisis.

Regular callers are supported in ways, which might ordinarily come from parents or carers. No two calls are the same. Callers talk about a wide range of problems and sometimes contact because they are concerned about younger siblings. The roles of child and parent have become blurred adding to the caller's sense of responsibility for what is happening.

"One night quite recently my mum locked him out but I got too upset thinking he would break the door down and do something to my mum. So my mum let me unlock it."

"I know a girl about my age who lives at the pub where dad drinks. One night he fell down some stairs and cut his face. My friend knew and I was embarrassed. When he's drunk he is not violent or abusive but he scares me."

"He has no concern for us at all and my mum suffers most. But if my mum divorces him we would lose our house but we are unhappy so what should we do? I wonder if it's us, having a family seems to pressure him." Claire

Establishing what callers can change, what they can do for themselves and what is not within their power, is often a relief when they've been battling against impossible odds.

"You know at Nacoa you are always telling me that I'm important, well it's true! I am important! I still want my dad to stop drinking but I've stopped running around trying to get through to him. He still drinks but I feel less of a failure now. A lot of what I've achieved is thanks to you for sticking by me through the bad times." Max

Learning to manage change, e.g. when our volunteers leave, is an opportunity for callers to experience forward planning, and to put in place strategies to support themselves in times of stress.

Our work is about planning for a more positive future. Positive experiences lead to higher self-esteem, a sense of autonomy and independence and the ability to perceive experiences constructively whilst gaining positive affirmation and support from Nacoa.

Working with other agencies and services

Being heard and having found words to ask for help often opens the way for callers to speak to people in their local areas. We share how to research other services, so callers can seek and access information and support for themselves. We also research on their behalf, including confidentiality issues for younger callers.

Callers can continue to call Nacoa after they find help elsewhere. Sometimes there is a period when callers continue to use Nacoa until feeling safe and secure with their new support network. There is no time limit and continued support does not depend on their contacting other suggested agencies or groups.



Engaging with, and becoming involved, e.g. by contributing a personal experience for the website, or becoming a member or volunteer, helps callers to perceive their experiences constructively and with a positive vision of life ahead, bringing our work full-circle helping others to help themselves.

"Growing up with an alcoholic parent was not an easy time for me. When it was 3am and my mother was screaming at us all for the fourth night in a row, I felt responsible and that I needed to do something to stop it – so with nowhere else to turn I would phone 999. This didn't help and in fact made things worse. Years later, I found out about Nacoo and two things happened: I was sad that they didn't exist when I was younger. Having a resource that listens and reassures you would have been much better than calling the emergency services.

I also decided that I needed to get involved – I know how invaluable it would have been to have Nacoo at the end of the phone. Now, I've completed the training and work with callers. It's great to know that any time I spend at Nacoo means more people get through and are heard. They may have a little more hope in their lives and start to believe that it isn't, never was and never will be their fault. That's why I volunteer. I know how important being listened to is." Katy

HH 12 January 2012

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