



Helping everyone affected
by a parent's drinking



Information for Teachers

FREE Helpline 0800 358 3456
helpline@nacoa.org.uk



The Queen's Award
for Voluntary Service

The MBE for volunteer groups

Introduction

In classrooms across the UK 1 in 5 children are carrying the burden of someone else's drinking.

Imagine coming home from school and dreading what you might find. Imagine having no friends because you're too embarrassed to bring them home in case mum or dad are drunk, or worse. Imagine living in a home full of fear and having no-one to turn to because everyone denies there is a problem.

Nacoa was set up in 1990 to provide information, advice and support to children affected by their parent's alcohol problems.

We've responded to hundreds of thousands of requests for help from children as young as five who find the courage to call or email the Nacoa Helpline. They know they can remain anonymous, talk about what they want, in their own time, and without judgement or time limits. Some children contact once, others over a number of weeks, months or years. Sometimes they call at the point of crisis and we remain with them on the phone; a kindly voice in what might seem a hostile world.

The vast majority of callers live with parents who do not acknowledge or seek help for their problems. Social stigma compounds their need to hide and causes untold harm, as they keep their problems secret from the outside world in an effort to keep their family 'safe' and together.

Our work is all about planning for a more positive future. An opportunity for children and young people to see that the world can be different from the one they've always known and that they can, with help, go on to live happy and fulfilled lives and break the cycle of addiction.

Hilary Henriques MBE



Hilary Henriques MBE
CEO and Co-founder of Nacoa



Alcohol and the Family

Alcohol problems do not only affect the person drinking, but everyone around them, including family and friends.

As the person drinking organises his or her life around alcohol, family members adapt to cope with both the drinking and associated behaviour. These problems are often a taboo subject and become the family secret as each member of the family—including extended family members—collude to keep the problem hidden from the outside world in an effort to keep the family together.

The family rules ***don't talk, don't trust, don't feel*** develop to protect the illusion of a 'normal' family.

The impact can be especially difficult for children, who are affected even if they are not living in the same house, or if the parent no longer drinks. The effects seldom disappear once children reach the age of 18 or move away from home and, if unaddressed, continue into adulthood.

Research consistently reports that children can be affected in all areas of their life—detailed below. However, research also shows that the extent to which children are able to shelter themselves from the negative impact of parental alcohol problems plays a significant part in their growing up to be happy and fulfilled.

A study with over 4,000 respondents found that these children are:

- 6 times more likely to witness domestic violence
- 4 times more likely to develop an eating problem
- 3 times more likely to consider suicide
- 2 times more likely to experience difficulties at school
- 3 times more likely to develop alcohol dependency as adults
- 2 times more likely to be in trouble with the police



Children Affected by Parental Alcohol Problems in the Classroom

A Nacoa study with 23,000 respondents found that there may be as many as 2.6 million children living in the UK with a parent who drinks too much. The following may help you to identify these children:

- A child fails to get excited about an anticipated class trip or event.
- A child acts very differently during PSHE drugs and alcohol education from the way he or she usually reacts.
- A child gets upset around his or her birthday and/or holidays.
- A child wants time alone with the teacher or clings to a teacher or support staff.
- A child has unrealistic expectations of other children and may often be disappointed in others.
- A child may not be able to comply with the requests of the school when it involves parents.
- A child is fretful of school-parent contact.
- A child talks back to a teacher or fights with other children.
- A usually responsible child may be inexplicably absent or perform poorly in school work.

Of course, any child may present with one or more of these features at certain times. However, the appearance of some of the above in a consistent way could alert you that the child may be living with parental alcohol problems.



Frequent Issues

- **Lack of money**

Significant amounts of money are often spent on alcohol, which may take priority over everything else. This leaves the rest of the family, sometimes one of the children, to make sure that their basic needs such as food and clothing can be met.

'The only source of income she's got is by dad giving her money, and it's unfair on him because he works so hard, and all she uses the money for is alcohol. I've told him not to give her any money because he's feeding her addiction, but I know he's only doing it because otherwise she'll give him a hard time.' (Cathy, 15)

Alcoholism affects families from all areas of life, regardless of wealth, class or regional differences. However, financial problems are present amongst the majority of families affected by alcoholism, with 64% reporting that there was a shortage of money during their childhood. In comparison, this was true of only 15% of a control group.

- **Unpredictable behaviour – lack of structure, wild mood swings – inconsistency.**

Life can be very confusing for children living in an environment where alcohol affects the behaviour of one or both of their parents. It is difficult to predict what state mum or dad will be in when they get home from school—they might be in a good mood, and wanting to do something fun; but they might be violent or irrational.

What confuses things even further is that the whole family colludes to cover up for that person's drinking, and keep it secret from the outside world. As a result, many children feel unable to take friends home as they are embarrassed about their parent's behaviour.



'Everything revolves around mum's drinking. We pretend it's not happening. I can't stop thinking about what's happening at home when I'm not there. Sometimes I think I'm going mad.'
(Paul, 15)

Our research shows that secrecy, manipulation and an inability to identify one's feelings are twice as likely in families struggling with alcohol problems compared to other families. Irrational behaviour is five times more likely, and 89% of these children claimed that their childhood household was not a place to be proud of.

- **Aggression and violence – arguments between parents**

Many children may not experience obvious forms of abuse, but suffer from neglect or a chronic lack of little things which are so crucial to the wellbeing of us all. Some are exposed to rage, violence and abuse on a daily basis, which become part of the unpredictable and inconsistent environment in which they live. Our research shows that aggression within the family environment is six times more common where one or both parents suffer from alcohol problems.

Social Services report that alcohol is a factor in:

4 in 10 domestic violence incidents

4 in 10 child protection cases

7 in 10 child mistreatment cases

In more than half of these cases, no action is taken to address the drinking

An Alcohol Concern report found that 30-60% of child protection cases involve alcohol, and the government's Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy reported that alcohol is a factor in half the violent crimes committed in the UK.



'My strongest childhood memory is one of fear. My father was a huge man and always angry. He would sit up drinking late at night. My brother, sister and I were terrified of being beaten.'
(Tim, 53)

■ Silent withdrawal – anxiety and depression

Children struggling with parental alcohol problems may grow up feeling anxious, depressed, emotionally detached and socially isolated without knowing why. They feel that there is no-one to turn to, as this would amount to the betrayal of their family. Some may take on responsibilities within the family, i.e. caring for younger siblings and parents, which means that they don't have time to spend with their friends.

'I was never allowed to be a child: I had to spend every night keeping my parents from fighting. I never learned to play. Now I can't make friends; I never learned to let people close to me. Even my relatives seem to live in a different world.' (Andrew, 35)

Research shows that incidences of depression are likely to be four times more frequent in a family affected by alcohol. In later life, children are also twice as likely to suffer from depression than children of non-alcohol-dependent parents.

'My mother's drinking remains a taboo subject within our fragmented and secretive family. I am haunted by the idea that telling these dark truths is an unwarranted betrayal of my mother. I am convinced that these experiences have played a major role in allowing my life to be consumed by misery, fear and despair.' (June, 25)



▪ Guessing at 'normality'

Children who grow up around alcohol and its effects often know no alternative. This may be the only state of 'normality' that they have experienced.

'If I asked what was wrong, why dad was lying in the middle of the kitchen floor with his eyes shut, I was told 'nothing, everything's fine'. I wondered if I could see something they couldn't or perhaps this was normal. I guessed at what normal was.' (Sam, 24)

Co-dependency, or adaptation to a dysfunctional family system, is a learned behaviour which, in the absence of any other model to follow, is often passed from one generation to the next. Later in life, many children find themselves drawn towards others who have grown up in similar situations, and sometimes become dependent on alcohol themselves.

'I wish when I was a child I could have rung someone for advice but I must admit I thought all dads were like mine so saw nothing wrong in his behaviour—although inside I always thought there was something wrong with me.' (Chris, 32)

Research has also identified a family 'trail' with respect to divorce, finding that this is more likely amongst generations of families affected by alcoholism.

▪ Guilt and shame — feeling to blame

It is common for these children to feel that they have somehow caused the problem, and are to blame. Children often harbour the mistaken belief that they are responsible for their parent's difficulties, and can therefore change them. Only the person drinking has the power to change their behaviour.



'I thought I was the reason he drank. I thought that if I tried harder, was nice enough or clever enough, he wouldn't need to drink. But however hard I tried, I was never good, nice or clever enough because he always drank.' (Alice, 31)

Our research found that these children are likely to feel 6 times more responsible for conflict in the home, and 7 times more likely to try to resolve arguments within the family.

'Tonight another huge argument erupted in our house—I begged my mum to stop drinking, and the only answer she gave me was 'IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT!'. She cannot take responsibility over anything herself, it's always someone else's fault.' (Cathy, 15)

Breaking the Cycle

Some children live in terror, sometimes they are simply ignored; deprived of the ordinary things in life we accept as the norm—being loved, cared for, clothed, given food and warmth, feeling wanted and cherished for who we are. Sadly 7 in 10 of these children will follow the patterns set by their parents and successfully hide their drink problems from the world. They will not ask for help and so remain isolated and alone.

Social researcher Donald Winnicott found that something as simple as a one-time encounter with someone or an organisation can make a big difference for a child. It can show them that the world can be a different place from the one he or she has always known. An opening can be created for a 'teachable moment' to inspire the belief that 'I can do it.' In effect, the opportunity to discover that they can change how they feel about themselves and get what they need from others.



The key to helping is to be able to recognise the nature of the child's family life. Being able to listen, understand and support will make a difference.

Breaking the Silence

- Listen in a non-judgemental way. You may be the only person the child has approached.
- Try not to react negatively when a child asks you for help. A negative response may be discouraging and increase the sense of isolation and hopelessness.
- Be sensitive to possible cultural differences which may influence how you can most effectively help.
- Don't share the child's problems with others who do not need to know.
- Keep the focus on the child as an individual, encouraging them to talk about their own needs, rather than those of the family.

Coping with Difficulties

- Don't criticise the child's parents or be overly sympathetic. Children gain the greatest benefit from having someone to talk to with an understanding ear.
- Encourage the child to find positive ways to express themselves, such as calling or emailing the Nacoa helpline, writing a journal (which could be kept at school), or reading about other children's stories on Nacoa.org.uk. This may help them to feel less alone.
- Help the child to identify 'safe places' where they can do homework uninterrupted, or where they could go after school.
- Provide factual information about alcohol and associated problems—Nacoa.org.uk publishes frequently asked questions and answers.
- Try to listen without judging the ways in which the child is coping. Helping the child to find positive ways to cope will be more effective than reacting negatively.



Important messages to pass on to children 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.

There are people who can help.

Who Can Help

- Encourage the child to talk about their relationships with friends and family members.
- Be aware that for some children there is no-one else they can confide in.
- Help the child to contact the Nacoa Helpline: 0800 358 3456.
- Local clubs and sports teams may help the child to find outlets to have fun and build positive relationships.
- When children become accustomed to talking about their difficulties they are often more open to finding other avenues of support. Nacoa can research other agencies and services in your area.

Ongoing Support

- Refer the child to someone with specialist skills. Regular work may best be undertaken by a School Counsellor.
- Be prepared to continue to provide a listening ear. Children often want the continuity of speaking to someone who they have learnt to trust, even when they find help elsewhere.
- Remind the child that the Nacoa Helpline provides ongoing support without time limits.

'Change does not happen in an instant but never doubt that a simple action like talking to someone who cares can make a difference.'

Hilary Henriques MBE, Nacoa CEO





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Nacoa (the National Association for Children Alcoholics) was founded in 1990 to address the problems faced by children growing up in families where one or more parents suffer from alcoholism or a similar addictive problem. This includes children of all ages, many of whose issues become apparent in adulthood.

Nacoa's aims

- To offer information, advice and support to children of alcohol-dependent parents.
- To reach professionals working with them.
- To raise their profile in public consciousness.
- To promote research into the problems they face and the prevention of alcoholism developing in this vulnerable group.

Our services are funded by voluntary donations. Please support this vital work by becoming a member, volunteering or making a donation. Together we are making a difference.

Text HELP21 followed by the amount (e.g. £5, £10 or £20) to 70070 or visit nacoa.org.uk/get-involved.html.

'Finding someone who I felt comfortable talking to was the beginning of everything changing for me. Without your help and support, mum could have drunk herself to death and I could have spent the rest of my life watching her. Now I know there is help for mum and for me. Now I can get on with my life.' **Paul, 15**

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