

Information for Parents

1 in 5 children in the UK are affected by a parent's alcohol problems. Working together we can make a difference and help them to know that they are not alone and nor are you.

Sadly when alcohol is the family secret, children and adults often believe that talking is being disloyal to their family and try to hide the problem from the outside world. This can leave every member of the family feeling isolated and alone.

Research tells us that 70% of adults brought up in a home with one or two alcoholics felt they had successfully hidden the problem of alcoholism from those around them whilst they were growing up.

“Drink is one of the hidden sufferings in families.” Dr Mo Mowlam, Nacoa Patron 1996-2005

However hard children try to cover up the problem does not mean that they are unaware that there are problems related to alcohol at home. Children tell us they are confused when parents deny that an alcohol problem exists, despite evidence to the contrary. They often take on responsibility for the problem, believing that if it is connected in some way to them, that they caused it, they can find a way to stop their parent from drinking.

Some children spend their childhoods trying to do the impossible – stop someone else from drinking. When they know that this is not possible – that only the person drinking can make that choice – the burden of ‘failing’ is lifted from their shoulders, giving them the opportunity to live their own lives irrespective of whether their parent continues to drink.

Talking to children honestly about alcoholism and using some of the information printed here and on our website will dispel some of the myths and fears that abound when we keep secrets and deny reality. Children need to have someone to turn to, to acknowledge their fears and to know that there are people who can help them cope. Nacoa are here to support you and your children.

We do not know how many children in the UK have a parent who is addicted to other drugs. Many research studies suggest that children of alcohol and other drug dependent parents are at greater risk of developing problems later in life. However, studies also show that the sooner children are given information and support about alcoholism, the better able they are to develop resilience and able to make healthy choices for themselves. Your children are not alone, and nor are you.

“Finding someone who I felt comfortable talking to was the beginning of everything changing for me. Things could have been very different. 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 own life.”

Paul (15)



Alcohol and the family

- Addiction to a substance or behaviour can affect people of all ages and from all walks of life.
- Alcoholism is like an illness where the person has lost control over their drinking. They continue to drink despite the negative affect on their lives, their health and those around them and usually need help to stop.
- It is not caused by lack of love or by unruly children or difficult relationships. No one sets out to become dependent on alcohol or other drugs, in order to hurt themselves or their families. The slide into problem drinking and dependency can be gradual as they come to rely on alcohol more and more.
- Often the person drinking doesn't realise they have a problem. Even when they become aware something is wrong, they may not see that it is connected to drinking. It is quite normal for the alcoholic to place the blame on other people, or problems in their life. This is referred to as being 'in denial'. Regardless of what may be said, it is important for others to realise they are not responsible for someone else's drinking and it is not their fault.
- When someone has a drink problem, alcohol often becomes their main focus in life. Drinking is seen as the solution to their problems. The need to drink takes priority over everything and everyone else, including those they love. They can become secretive and adept at explaining away how much they drink, when and where.
- Alcoholism affects every member of the family as they adapt in order to cope with alcohol and other problems. Codependent patterns of behaviour including denial, allow the family to balance the effects of the drinking parent's behaviour, whilst keeping the family's secrets hidden from everyone around them to avoid criticism and to keep the family together. Although some children are more resilient and better able to find ways to cope, all children are affected.
- This is not what parents want for their children but when keeping secrets creates a false reality where there is no place for honesty, it is difficult for children to ask for help even though they know there is something wrong.
- Parents need support too and learning about alcoholism and how it affects the family is an important step. You can also call the Nacoa helpline on 0800 358 3456. Your call will be taken by a helpline counsellor who will help you to find ways to help both yourself and your children.
- Support is available for people who need help to stop drinking, but as hard as it is for those around them, the person has to accept that they have a problem and want to stop.
- Equipped with knowledge and information about alcoholism and how it affects the family, you can be prepared and help to reduce the risk of your children developing alcoholism in the future.

Key messages for parents

- Talk honestly and openly to your children about alcoholism. They will know there is something wrong, even if you deny it. We know from research and from helpline callers that children are confused when parents deny that an alcohol problem exists even when there is evidence to the contrary. We hope the key messages to children, frequently asked questions and book list listed below will help you to initiate a dialogue with your children.
- Avoid pressurising your children into taking sides in fights or conflicts. This causes more problems for them. They have a childhood that should be preserved.
- Avoid using the opinions of your children. Do not voice their opinions, or say how you think they feel.



Using your children against the drinking parent might cause them to stop sharing feelings with you in the future. It also places your children in an impossible position with each parent.

- When the home situation is disruptive or verbally abusive, children often go off to be alone or hide. They hide because they are upset, afraid and lonely. Find them, talk to them honestly and comfort them. Try to avoid letting your children go to sleep in these situations and if they do, talk to them openly at the first opportunity. They will not have forgotten.
- Avoid placing an older child in the position of being a confidante or substitute parent to replace the drinking parent. This only fosters false-maturity. It is difficult for a child to enjoy ordinary childhood activities if he or she is encouraged to 'parent' the other children in the family. No matter how 'mature' older children might appear to be, the reality is that they are not parents, nor are they replacements for a drinking parent.
- Encourage and support your children to become involved in school and other activities - sports and youth clubs, brownies, scouts etc. Your children need outlets and the opportunity to develop relationships with safe people in activities outside the home. These activities can help them to accomplish many things on their own and support their independence.
- Arrange times for your children to have their friends to visit if possible. Children often report being too embarrassed to invite friends home, for fear of a parent being drunk, rows etc. However, do not make matters worse for your child or friends by confronting the alcohol-dependent parent when they are present. Be prepared to assess the situation, be honest and remove the children from potential risk of embarrassment.
- A lot of frustration arises from fear. You can help prepare yourself and your children with knowledge and information. To help you learn about alcoholism, there is information on the Nacoo website www.nacoo.org.uk or you can call the Nacoo helpline on 0800 358 3456.
- You may find that becoming involved in community or self-help groups for family members is useful. Organisations such as Al-Anon can greatly benefit the family. These groups provide the opportunity for you to talk to other people in similar situations. Families of alcohol-dependent people need not be alone unless they choose to be.
- Support is available for people who need help to stop drinking. There are in-patient and day programmes run by trained professionals who specialise in the treatment of alcoholism and other addictions. Your GP may be aware of other resources, or call Nacoo and we will help you to find agencies in your area.
- Many agencies offer help and support for the family too. This gives everyone a support structure for the changes brought about by someone stopping drinking. Family members who have adapted to alcoholism often ignore their own needs. Everybody needs support while learning to live with change.
- We all want our children to grow up making healthy choices for themselves and to live happy and fulfilling lives. To do this they need help from people in their family and social environment, but most of all, they need you to be there for them. We are here to help you to support them.

Key messages for children

- Addiction to a substance or behaviour can affect people of all ages and from all walks of life.
- Alcoholism is like an illness. Your parent is not a bad person; he or she has an illness that makes them lose control when drinking. Sometimes alcoholism makes them do things that they would not normally do if they didn't drink.
- If your parent, step-parent, grandparent, carer or anyone else important to you has a drink problem, it can affect you, even if you are not living in the same house, or they are no longer drinking. A child of



an alcoholic can be 1 or 101 – it doesn't change the fact that your parent is, or has been, dependent on alcohol, along with the problems this brings

- You cannot control your parent's drinking. It is not your fault. Don't hide the bottles, or try to be perfect; you can't do anything about their drinking. You are not the reason why they drink. People with an alcohol problem have lost control over their drinking and usually need help to stop. There is help, but as hard as it is for those around them, only the person drinking can make the decision to accept help. However, you can feel better whether your parent continues to drink or not.
- You are not alone. Many people keep alcoholism a secret, so sometimes it can feel like you are the only one; however, research suggests that 1 in 5 children in the UK have a parent with a drink problem. This means other people you know at school, college, clubs etc. may be experiencing similar problems, and may be trying to hide it from the outside world.
- You can talk about the problem. Find someone you trust, who will listen to you. It could be someone in your family, a friend, a teacher, a friend's parent or someone else. Keep a list of people you can call if you feel like talking. We also have a list of phone numbers you can call if you need someone to talk to, or for help of any kind.
- You can call Nacoa on 0800 358 3456 just to talk. People at Nacoa are here to help. Calls to the helpline are free and will not show up on landline bills. Calls from many mobile providers are also free but if your provider charges and you have inclusive minutes you can dial 0117 924 3675 but please be aware this may show up on your bill. Speak to someone you can trust and who will understand your problems. There is no need to tell anyone else about the call, unless you choose to do so. You can also email Nacoa at helpline@nacoa.org.uk.

Remember the six Cs

1. I didn't **cause** it
2. I can't **control** it
3. I can't **cure** it
4. I can take **care** of myself
5. I can **communicate** my feelings
6. I can make healthy **choices**

Questions and answers about alcohol problems

When does someone have a problem with drink? Is my parent an alcoholic?

If you feel affected by someone else's drinking, there could well be a problem. The following questions look at what alcoholism is and why people continue to drink even when it's affecting their lives and those around them. Remember that Nacoa is here for everyone affected by their parent, step-parent, grandparent or carer's drinking. We will focus on the impact it is having on you, whether they've been diagnosed as having a problem or not.

What is alcoholism?

Alcoholism is like an illness where people have lost control over their drinking; they may set out to have one or two drinks and end up drinking more than they intended. People who are dependent on alcohol have a compulsion to drink, spend increasing amounts of time drinking, thinking about drinking and recovering from



drinking, with unsuccessful attempts to stop or cut down. They can become physically dependent on alcohol, needing to drink to get rid of unpleasant withdrawal symptoms. People usually need help to tackle their problem drinking.

How can I stop my parent from drinking?

When someone has an alcohol problem, they have lost control over their drinking. Denial is a common feature and the drinker may not even realise they have a problem. There is help available, but they have to accept they have a problem and want to stop. Your parent's behaviour is not your fault and you can't control their drinking. Look after yourself and avoid getting into an argument when they are drinking. You can feel better whether your parent continues to drink or not. Try talking to someone you trust, like a friend, relative, teacher or Nacoa.

Is there a cure for alcoholism?

Alcoholism is treatable – people can find help for their drink problems and go on to live healthy lives. For some people this is possible by not drinking alcohol at all. This is often referred to as 'being in recovery'. The person in recovery will usually have to work at staying sober and remaining free of alcohol or other addictive substances and behaviours. Some people do this with the help of self-help groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

Some people need medical help and go into treatment or rehab where their physical and psychological dependence is addressed over a series of weeks, months and sometimes years. Some rehab centres offer residential programmes, followed by supported living before returning to their family. Others offer a daily programme where patients continue to live at home. Funding is sometimes available from the local authority after a referral by the GP. Nacoa will happily research rehab or treatment centres so you have an idea of what might be available for your parent(s).

Why can't our doctor do anything about it?

Doctors can offer advice and suggestions, but the person with the drink problem has to accept they have a problem and want help. No one can be forced into treatment. This may be difficult for family members to accept but talking to the doctor can still help to find support for yourself.

What is denial?

Denial often goes hand in hand with addiction and is not the same as lying. The drinker believes that alcohol is the solution to problems, something that helps them to function normally in their everyday life. They may blame other people for their drinking, and will often find ways to excuse their behaviour. Denial can spread into all areas of life as a way of coping and hiding the problem from him/herself and others. Sometimes family members can also be in denial as a way of coping; pretending the problem doesn't exist or keeping it hidden from the outside world.

Why has this happened to me? Have I done something to deserve it? Is it my fault?

You do not deserve it and it isn't your fault. Alcoholism affects people of all ages and all walks of life. There are many research studies which look at the reason why some people become dependent on drink and others don't. A number of factors play a part – a history of alcoholism in the family, how we deal with life's challenges, changes in brain function and more. However, there is no definitive reason why people drink



and there is no reason why this has happened to you. Young people can often feel guilty and ashamed that they have not been able to help their parent to stop drinking, feeling in some way that they have caused it. Please be assured that someone else's drinking is not your fault; you did not cause it and you can't control it. Parents sometimes blame children, and everyone else, for their drinking. You had no control over the problem starting and you can't make it stop. Only your parent(s) can take responsibility for their behaviour; but you can look after you.

My parent had/has a drink problem; does that mean I will too?

Nacoa's research study suggests that people who grew up with parental alcoholism are almost three times as likely to develop a problem with alcohol compared to the general population. This does not mean that they will end up drinking like their parents, but that they are more likely to do so if they follow the don't talk, don't trust, don't feel rules which promote drinking or ignoring problems (denial) as a way to cope with life's challenges.

People who grew up with parental drinking often report an uneasy relationship with alcohol and are aware that they may not know if/when they cross the line into uncontrolled drinking. Some people make a decision not to drink alcohol at all, whilst others drink socially. Many people worry they will turn out like their parent(s) but being aware of all the risks, looking after yourself and adopting healthy ways to cope, e.g. talking to someone you trust about your worries, can help.

How many people are affected by their parents' drinking?

Research suggests that 1 in 5 children in the UK are currently living with parents who drink hazardously. Remember that you can still be affected even if you are not living in the same house or if your parent is no longer drinking. This means other people you know at school, college, clubs etc. may be experiencing similar problems, and may be trying to hide it from the outside world.

What can I do to feel better?

Look after yourself. Remember you can't control someone else's drinking and you certainly didn't cause it. Speak to someone you trust who understands the problem. Contact Nacoa and speak to one of our trained volunteer helpline counsellors, who understand what it can be like when a parent has an alcohol problem. We will listen without judging and help you to find ways to cope. You cannot change your parent's behaviour but you can change how you feel about yourself. We can help you to explore things that you enjoy which take you out of the situation and your worries for a while.

Helpful books

Courage to be Me: Living with Alcoholism Al-Anon Family Groups

Written by young people whose lives are affected by someone else's drinking. Describes what happened in their homes, and how they dealt with it.

Emmy's Question Jeanette Auth

9 year-old Emmy finds a wine bottle in her toy chest and suspects it's connected to her mum's behaviour. She joins a group for children of alcoholics and starts to understand her mum's disease.





The National Association
for Children of Alcoholics

My Dad Loves Me, My Dad Has a Disease: A Child's View Claudia Black

An illustrated workbook that explains and portrays addiction from the viewpoint of children. It gives children and young people a chance to share their thoughts and feelings.

An Elephant in the Living Room: The Children's Book Jill Hastings & Marion Typpo

An illustrated story to help children and young people understand and cope with the problem of alcoholism or other drug addiction in the family.

Missing Mummy: Living in the Shadow of an Alcoholic Parent Emma Spiegler

Selection of poems offering insight into the emotions of a child growing up with an alcoholic parent.

The Truth about Leo David Yelland

The story of Leo, in his last year of primary school, who loses his mother to cancer, and finds himself coping with his alcoholic father.

Straight Talk from Claudia Black: What Recovering Parents Should Tell Their Kids about Drugs and Alcohol Claudia Black

Recovery author Claudia Black introduces readers to five families and reveals how each of the parents talked with their kids about recovery, relapse and the children's vulnerability to addiction.

Other sources of support

Some other national organisations offering support to young people are listed below. You can also contact Nacoa (0800 358 3456 helpline@nacoa.org.uk) and we will happily research services, both national and local to you that may be helpful.

Al-Anon Family Groups

www.al-anonuk.org.uk

Helpline: 0207 403 0888

Support for anyone whose life is, or has been, affected by someone else's drinking, through local meetings and literature.

Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA)

www.adultchildrenofalcoholics.co.uk

Tel: 0159 061 0936

Support for people who have grown up in alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional families, through local meetings and literature.

