

**Study to investigate the extent and nature of the problem of adults who grew up in a home with alcohol-dependent parents to discover:**

**How extensive is the problem in comparison to other recognised problems?**

**How severe is the problem in comparison with other problems?**

**What are the characteristics of the problem?**

**Does it impact differently depending upon the child's circumstances?**

**Professor Martin Callingham  
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**June 2004**

## Survey for NACOA

### Professor Martin Callingham

#### Purpose

To investigate the extent and nature of the problem of adults who grew up in a home with alcohol-dependent parents.

#### Objective

How **extensive** is the problem in comparison to other recognised problems

How **severe** is the problem in comparison with other problems

What are the **characteristics** of the problem?

Does it impact **differently** depending upon the child's circumstances?

#### Method

Use a quality random method to collect the names and addresses of people in the various targets, to be as representative as possible of them, in terms of demographics, and region.

Sample the names and addresses and send off a self-completion questionnaire. This is numbered, so that the returned questionnaires can be weighted by demographics back to represent the original universe.

#### The classification questions:

*'Did you grow up in a home in which either or both of your parents drank too much?'*

*'Did you grow up in a home in which either or both of your parents suffered from a mental health problem such as depression or schizophrenia?'*

*'Did you grow up in a home in which severe trauma occurred involving disablement, death, or loss of long term contact with another member of your family?'*

#### Development of the questionnaire

Extensive reading and research

Extensive discussion with children of alcohol-dependent parents (COAs)

Piloting of the questionnaire amongst the targets and the control

#### Question areas

Family structure as a child across three age ranges

Relationship with mother and father as a child

Nature of the family experience

Image of mother and father at their best and worst

Happiness at school and with friends

Self image as a child and now

Fears for partner and children

Involvement with problems

Demographics and classification

Stage 1 The collection of suitable names and addresses

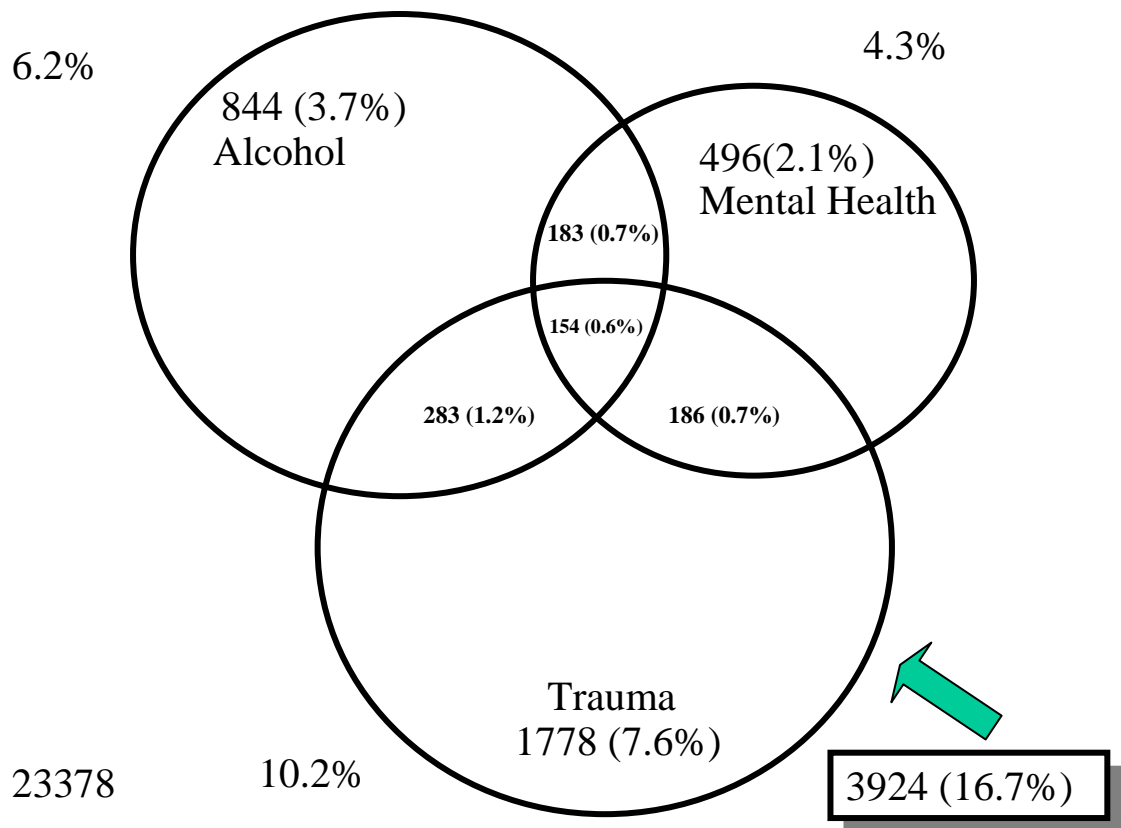
23,378 people were interviewed in 1998 in weeks 15,18,20,21,23,24,25,27,30,41,44.

The interviews were conducted in-house face-to-face.

Houses were selected on a random basis.

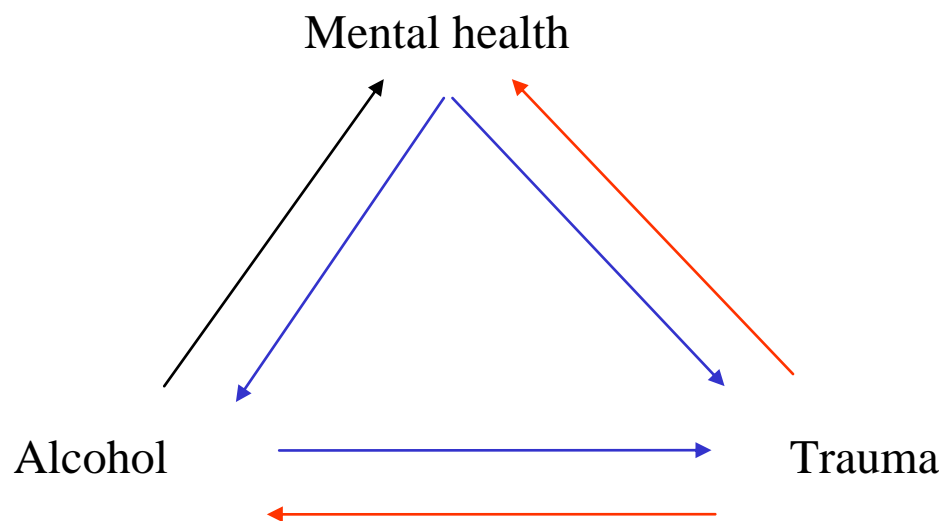
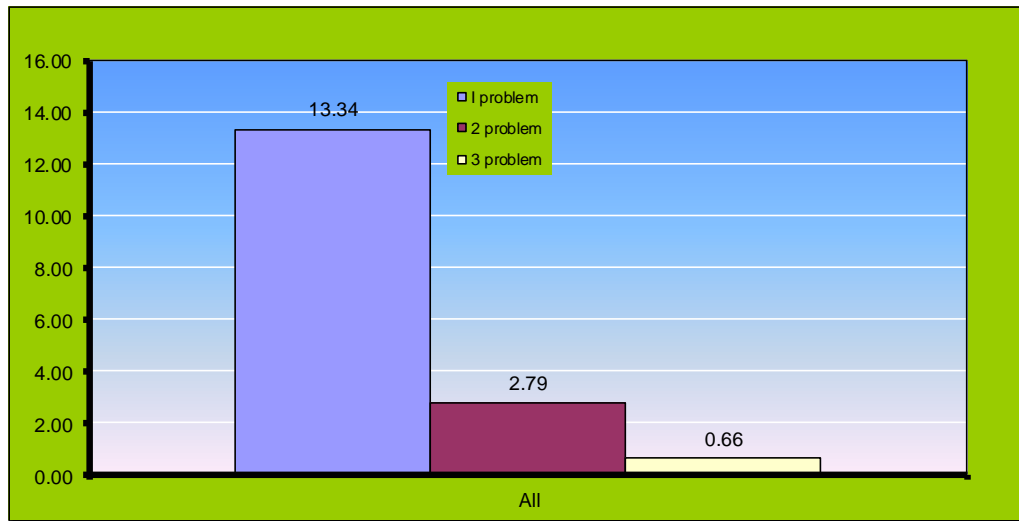
Many of the people recruited will not have had contact with professionals. This makes this survey almost certainly unique, in terms of the nature and representation of those from whom the data has been collected.

Sample			
	Responders	Agree-ers	%
Total	23378	9789	41.8%
Alcohol	1464	953	65.0%
Mental health	1019	707	69.3%
Trauma	2401	1548	64.4%
No problem	19454	7387	37.3%



13.3% of the population had only one of the problems, and 16.79% of the population had one or more.

Is there an association between having one problem and another?



Impossible to mathematically resolve this, but maybe some common sense can help.

The proportion of people that only have one problem is greatest with ‘trauma’, and least with ‘mental health’.

This suggests that ‘trauma’ is the least interactive of the problems, and that mental illness is the most.

Population	Pop	Alcohol	Mental health	Trauma
Base	23378	1464	1019	2401
	%	%	%	%
one	13.3	57.6	48.6	74.0
two	2.79	31.8	36.2	19.5
three	0.66	10.5	15.1	6.4
two or three	3.45	42.3	51.3	25.9
any	16.75	100	100	100

This shows the proportion of people who have one problem have another and the nature of it.

All	Alcohol	Mental health	Trauma	All
base	1464	1019	2401	23378
	%	%	%	%
Alcohol	57.6	17.9	11.7	6.2
Mental health	12.5	48.6	7.7	4.3
Trauma	19.3	18.2	74.0	16.7
two	31.8	36.1	19.4	
three	10.5	15.1	6.4	

We can use the relative proportions to get an idea of the degree to which these problems go together.

All	Alcohol	Mental health	Trauma	All
base	1464	1019	2401	23378
	%	%	%	%
Alcohol	57.6	17.9	11.7	6.2
Mental health	12.5	48.6	7.7	4.3
Trauma	19.3	18.2	74.0	16.7
two	31.8	36.1	19.4	
three	10.5	15.1	6.4	

1.52

}

1.52

}

1.44

}

Being in a family that has experienced a trauma does not particularly associate with them also being alcohol-dependent

All	Alcohol	Mental health	Trauma	All
base	1464	1019	2401	23378
	%	%	%	%
Alcohol	57.6	17.9	11.7	6.2
Mental health	12.5	48.6	7.7	4.3
Trauma	19.3	18.2	74.0	16.7
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0.98

}

1.52

}

1.44

}

0.37

}

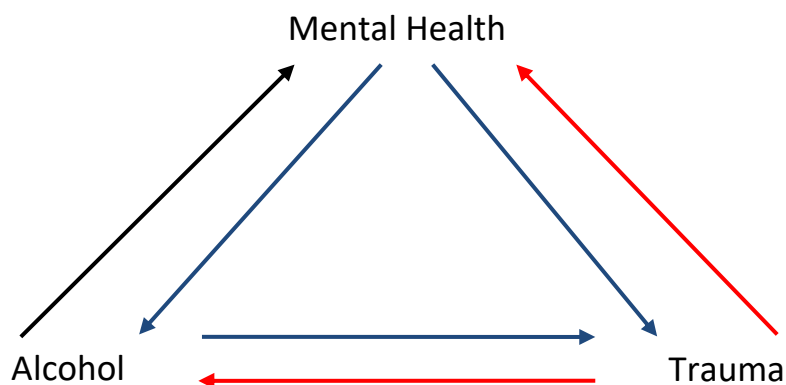
Being in a family where one or both of the parents has mental illness is likely to be associated with alcohol

	Alcohol	Mental health	Trauma	All
base	1464	1019	2401	23378
	%	%	%	%
Alcohol	57.6	17.9	11.7	6.2
Mental health	12.5	48.6	7.7	4.3
Trauma	19.3	18.2	74.0	16.7
two	31.8	36.1	19.4	
Three	10.5	15.1	6.4	

Associations shown by brackets in the original image:

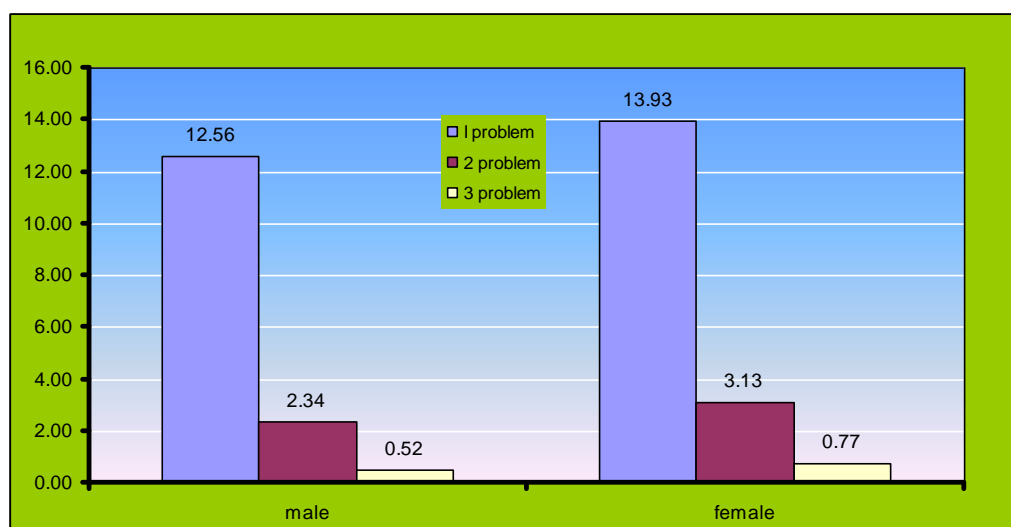
- Alcohol and Mental health: 0.65
- Mental health and Trauma: 0.98
- Trauma and All: 1.52
- All and Alcohol: 1.44
- Alcohol, Mental health, and Trauma combined: 0.37
- Overall combined: 0.27

Being in a family where the parents drink too much is likely to be associated with mental illness (this is the other side of the coin)



So one problem seems to go with another and mental health and alcohol seem to go together  
Variation of the presence of a problem to demographics

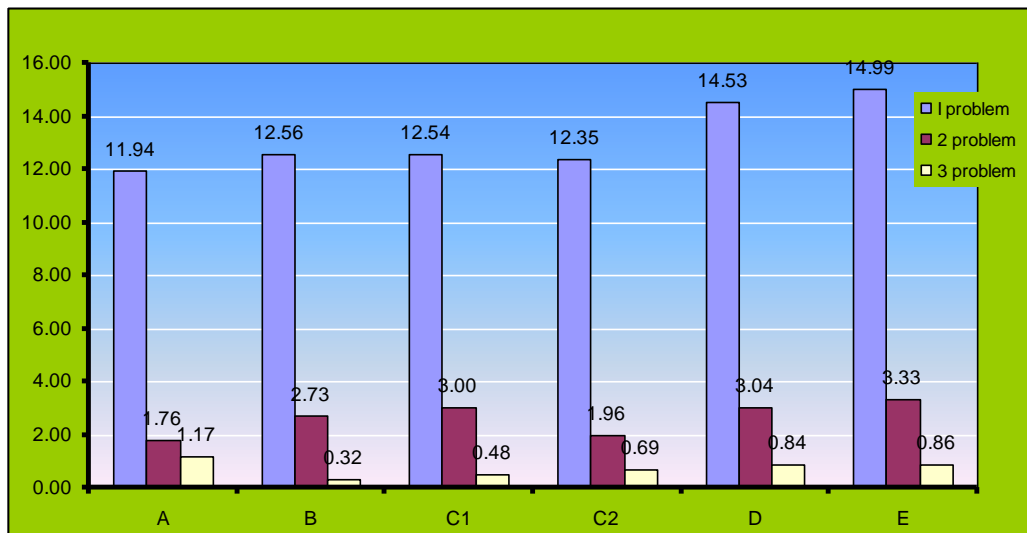
Women perceive more problems than men



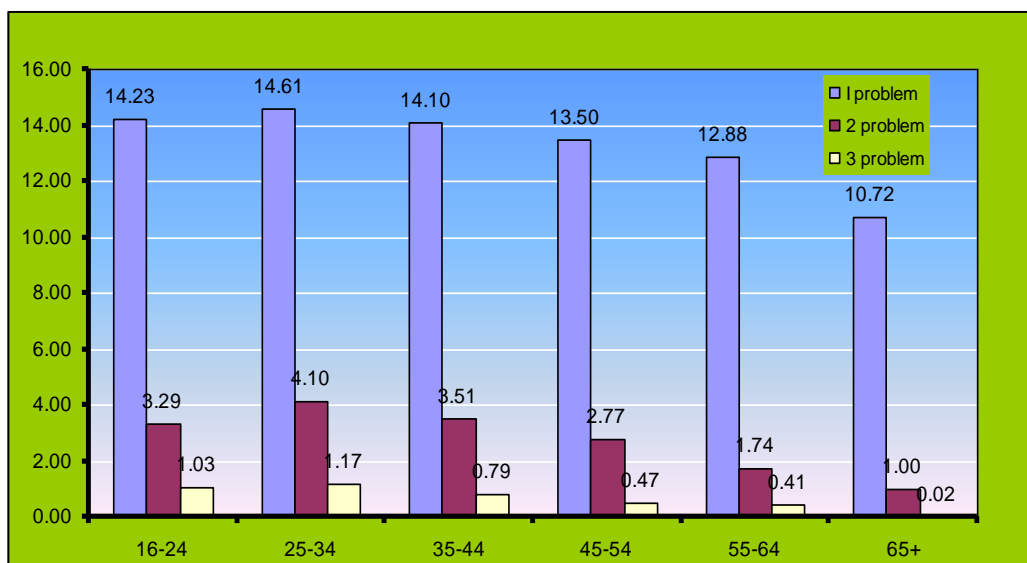
Above the age range of 25-34, the proportion of people with one, two or three problems decreases with age. People in the age range 16-24 are less likely to claim to have a problem.

The proportion of people with one problem is higher for the social classes D and E, and least for A's. Social grade C2 has one of the lowest proportion of people with two problems. Note that E are more likely to be old (34% over 65 compared to the population of 19%). This means that the E is especially likely to have a problem. The same is true of the D who do not differ from the population other than being more likely to have a problem

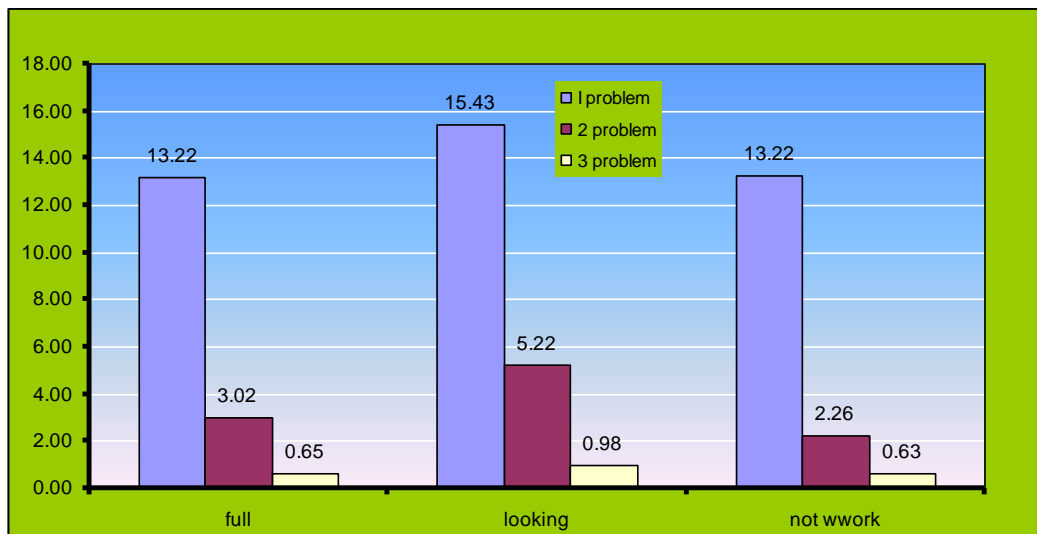
The A tend to be light in those under 25 -35(11% compared to 20% in the population), and these are slightly more likely to have a problem but C2 have an age profile similar to the population



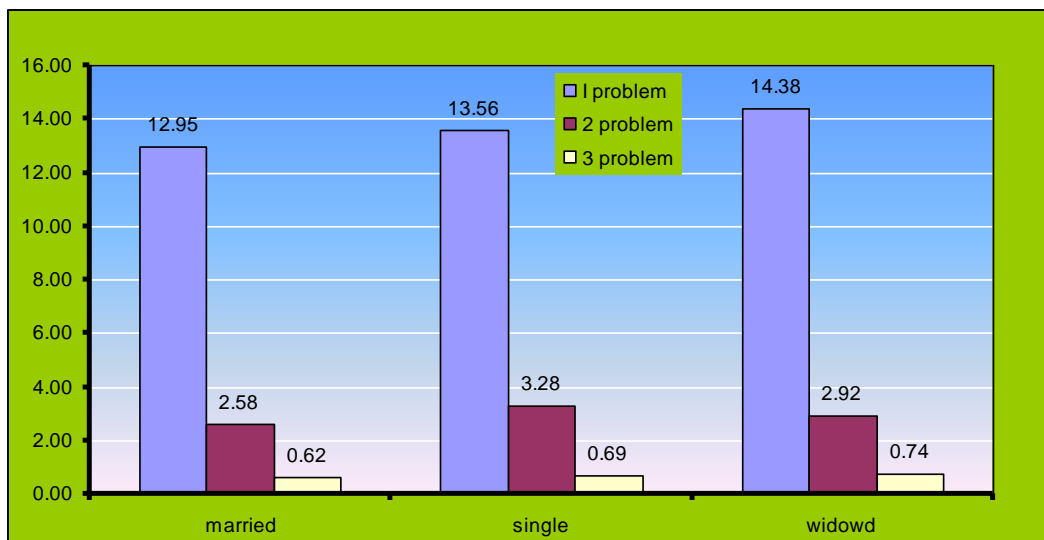
People, who are looking for work, are more likely to have a problem than either those in full time work, or those who were not looking. Those that were looking were more likely to be E (bad), not older (bad), male (good). This suggests that being out of work and looking is associated with having a problem to a degree that is not explained by their demographics.



Those that were not working were more likely to be E (bad) and A (neither) and female (bad) and over 65(good) or under 24 (good)

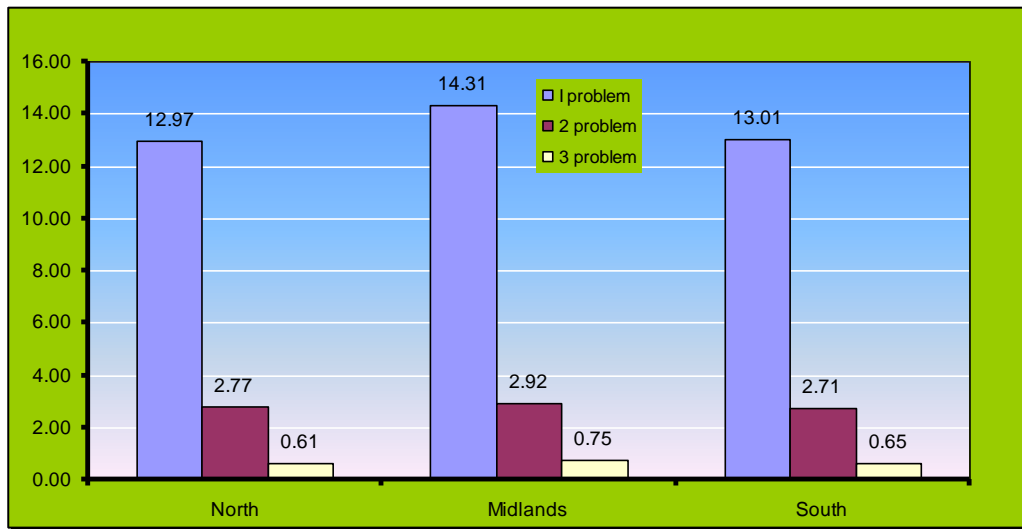


Widowed people were more likely than married or single people to have one problem. Widowed people are more likely to be older (good), female (bad), and E (bad).

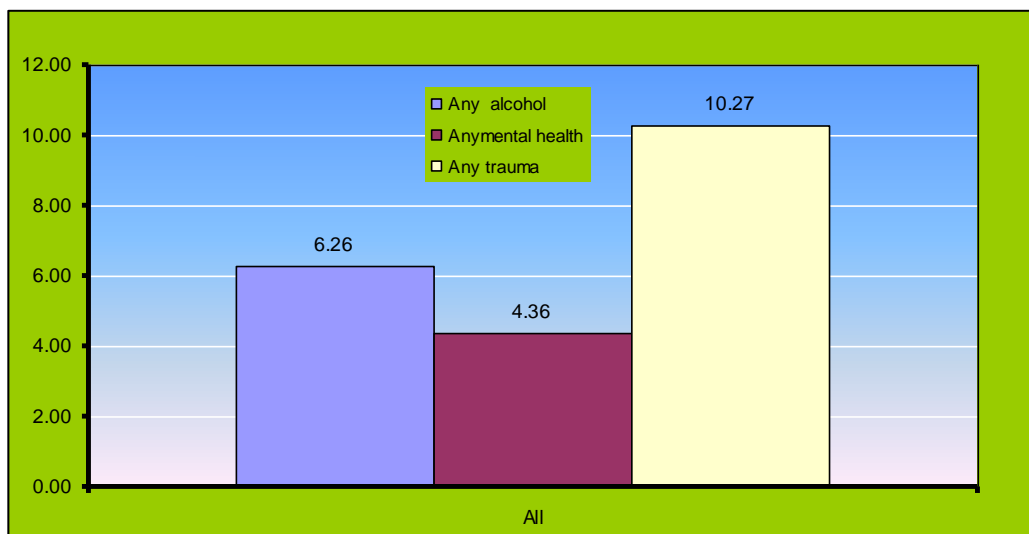




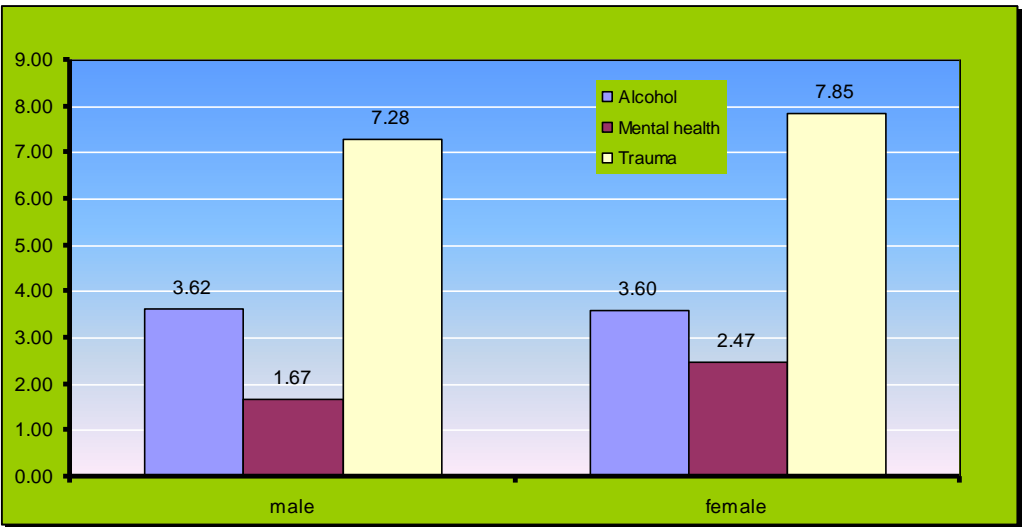
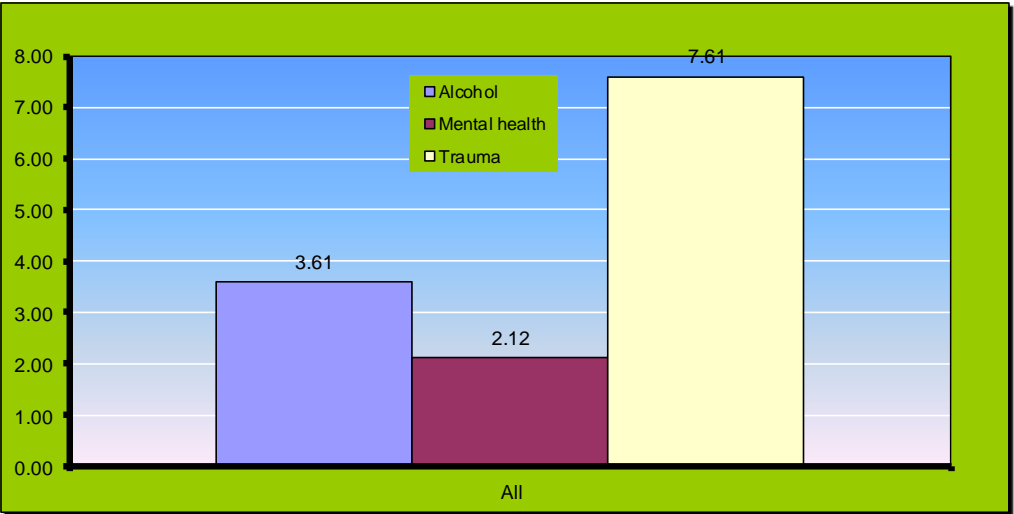
The Midland has the highest rate of problem and the North the least. The demographics of the three regions are similar with the exception that the south is a bit more up market.



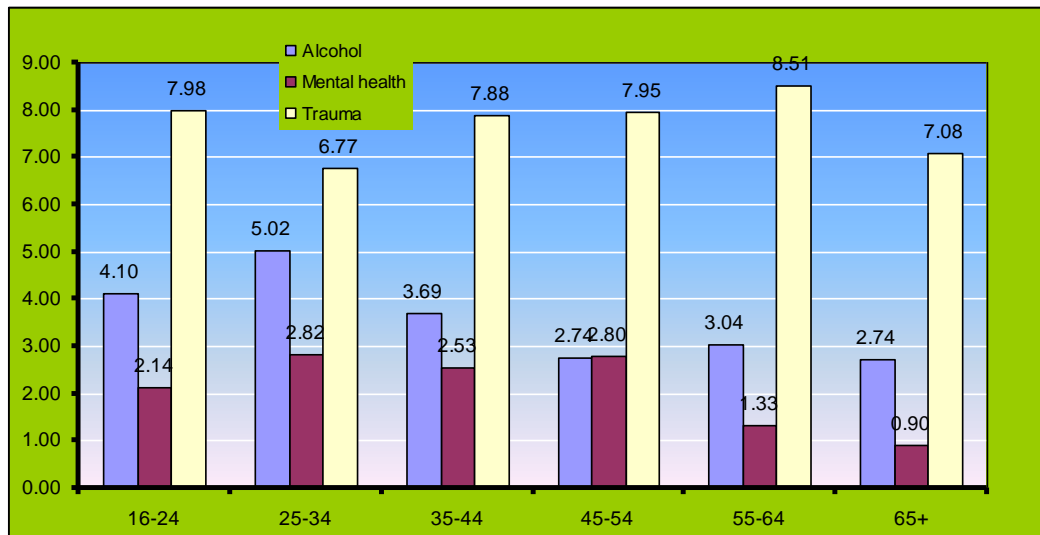
More people claim that they grew up in a family that drank too much, than grew up in a home with mental illness.



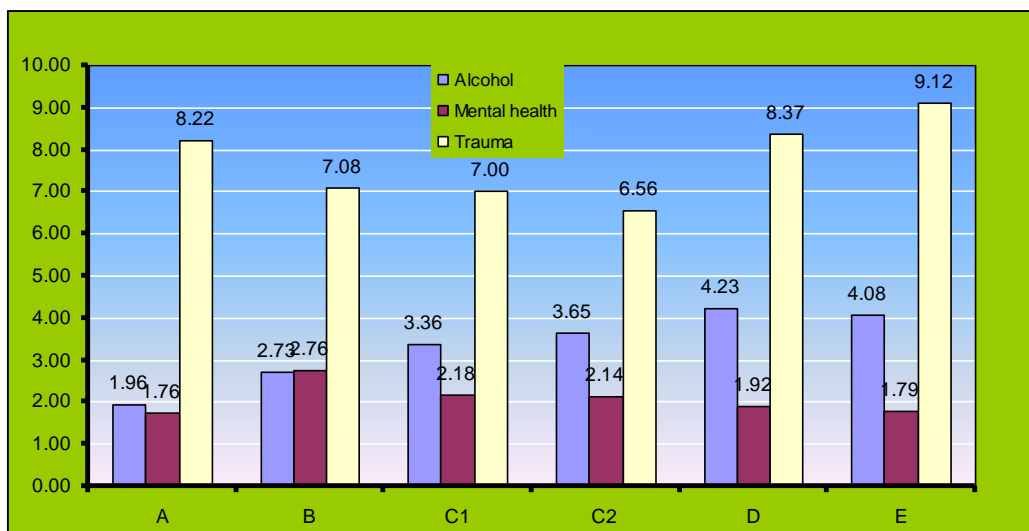
Women were more likely to say they were brought up in home where there parents had a mental health problem, or where a severe trauma occurred than men. Men and women were similarly likely to claim that one or both their parents drank too much.



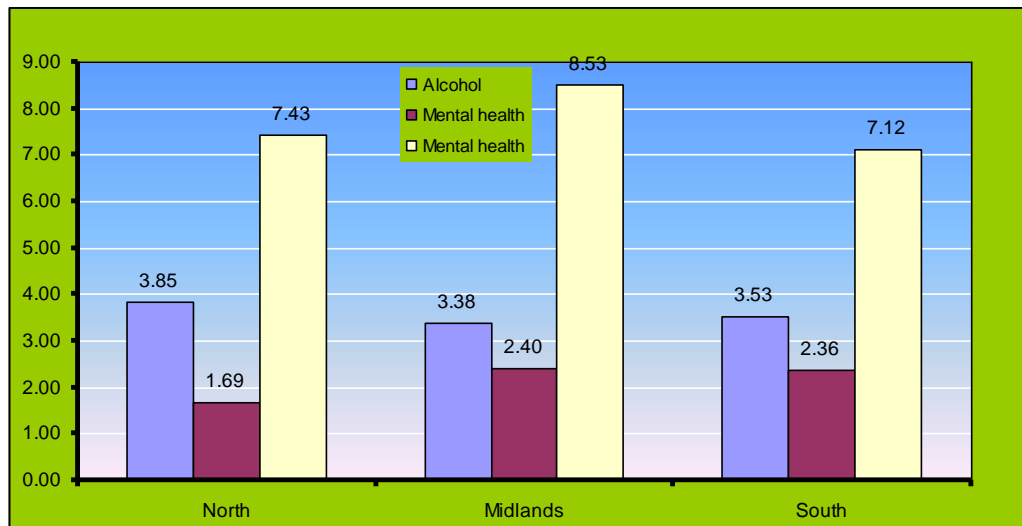
The pattern of proportions of people who claim to have grown up in a home with one of the problems changed with their age. In the case of alcohol, people who were between 16-24 were less likely to have grown up with the problem than those in the 25-34 age range, and slightly smaller proportions occurred for older people. The mental health experience also dropped off amongst the older people, whilst the trauma problem seemed to be fairly constant across the age ranges.



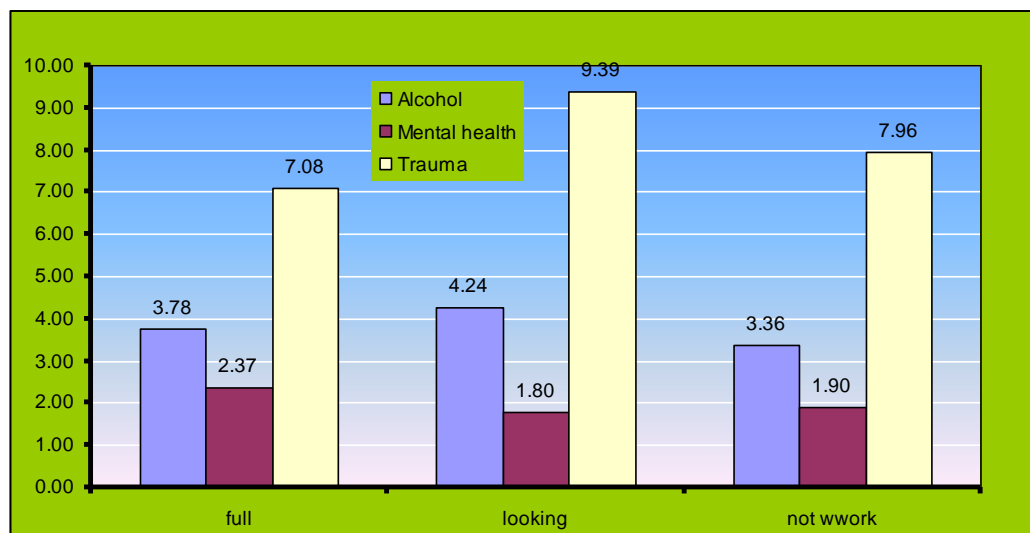
The alcohol problem increased with the lower social grade people, whilst the mental health problem decreased. Trauma was slightly higher at both ends of the spectrum.



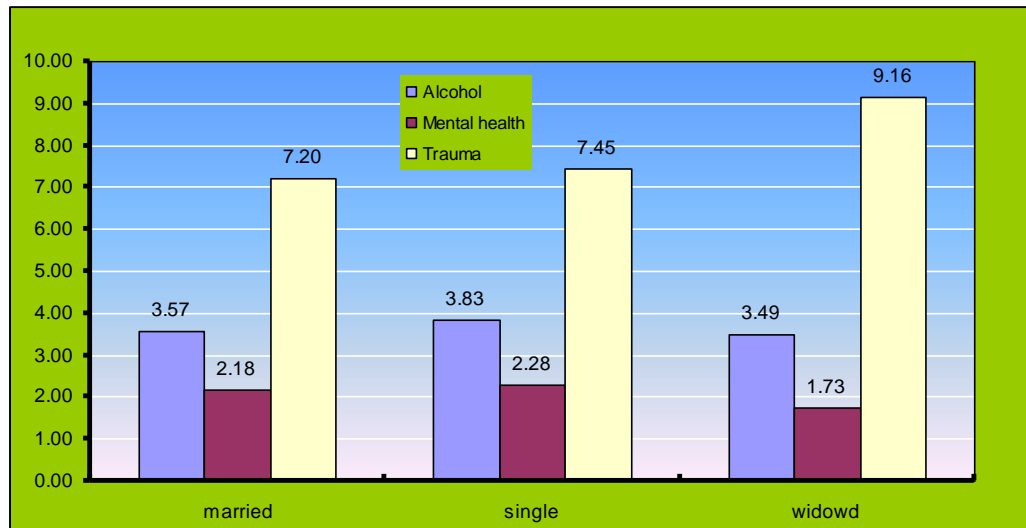
The alcohol problem was least in the Midlands, and greatest in the north. The mental health problem was greatest in the Midlands, and least in the north, and the trauma problem was greatest in the Midlands and least in the South



The alcohol problem was greatest for those people looking for employment and least in those not working, whilst the trauma problem was greatest in those looking for employment, and least in those in full time employment.



The alcohol problem was highest amongst those who were single, as was the mental health problem, and least amongst those who were widowed. The trauma problem was greatest amongst those who were widowed.



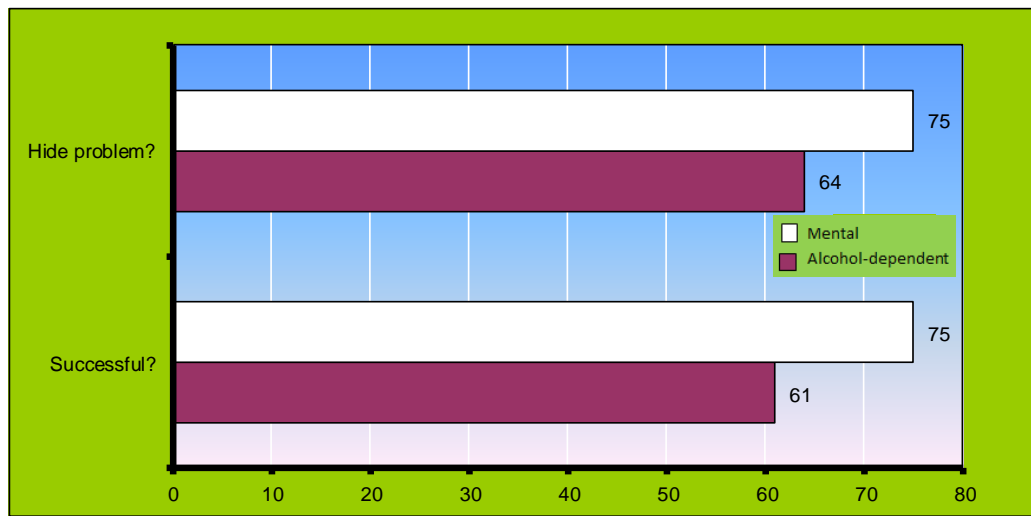
The survey has only just gone into field  
 So far we have had 438 questionnaires returned  
 238 from the control  
 94 from the alcohol-dependent families  
 44 from the mental health families  
 149 from the trauma families  
 This proportion is broadly in line with the presence in the population

These are very preliminary results. The sample of adults from families that had mental illness is really too small to draw proper conclusion. We have about 100 adults who grew up in families in which one or both the parents drank too much

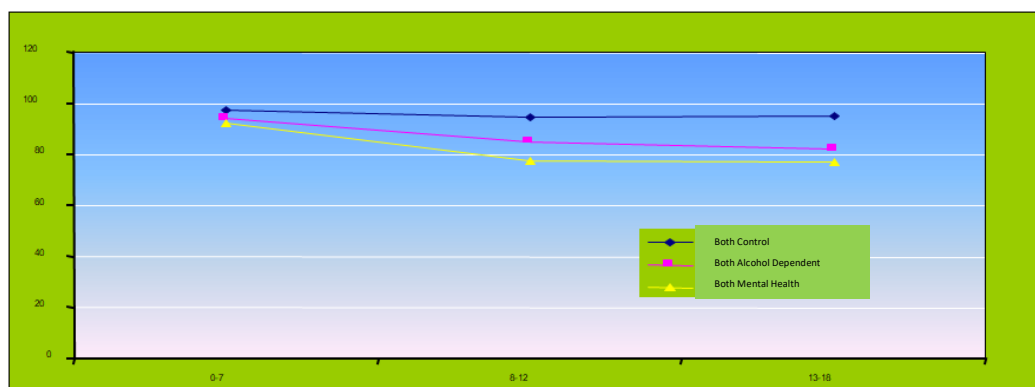
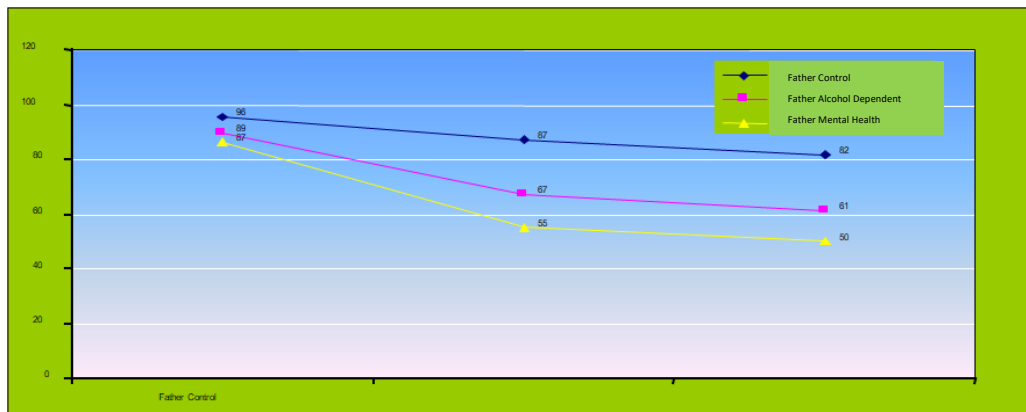
Details of the sample

	<b>Control</b>	<b>Alcohol-dependent</b>	<b>Mental Health</b>
	%	%	%
<b>Separate / divorce</b>	9	15	32
<b>Average number of units</b>	6.6	10.75	6.5
<b>Number of children</b>	1.92	1.88	1.91
<b>Number of adults</b>	2.06	1.96	1.68
<b>Unemployed</b>	5	11	7
<b>Not employed</b>	16	24	27
<b>Retired</b>	19	12	7
<b>18 – 24</b>	5	12	9
<b>25 – 34</b>	19	25	16
<b>35 – 44</b>	25	29	48
<b>45 – 54</b>	22	16	20
<b>55 – 64</b>	16	19	4
<b>65 – 74</b>	8	6	3
<b>75+</b>	4	2	0
<b>Caring Professionals</b>	23	19	18
<b>Play out a role</b>	5	11	18

Did the people in the household try and hide the problem from the outside world, and were they successful?



Proportion of people with father decreases with their childhood age, and is greater for the control group

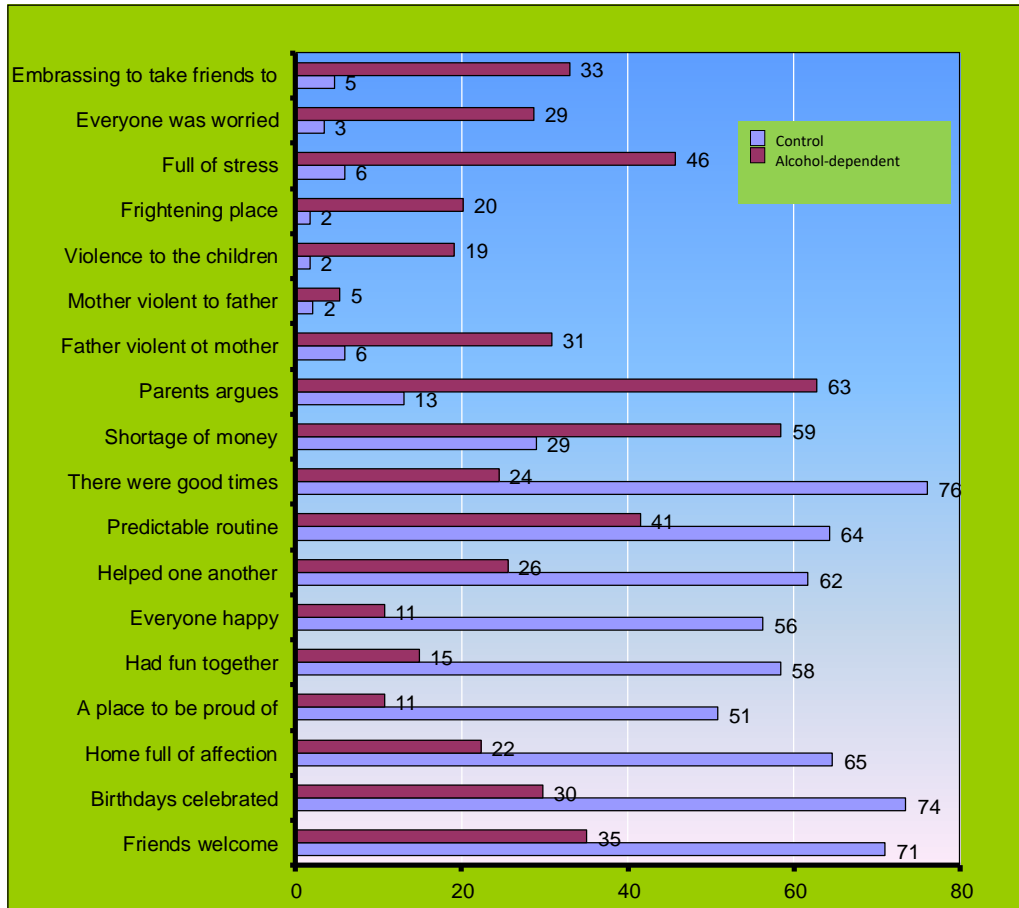


So what was the family environment like?

*'How often do you remember the following being true of your childhood household?'*

*'Often'* response

*'Often'* true of family household

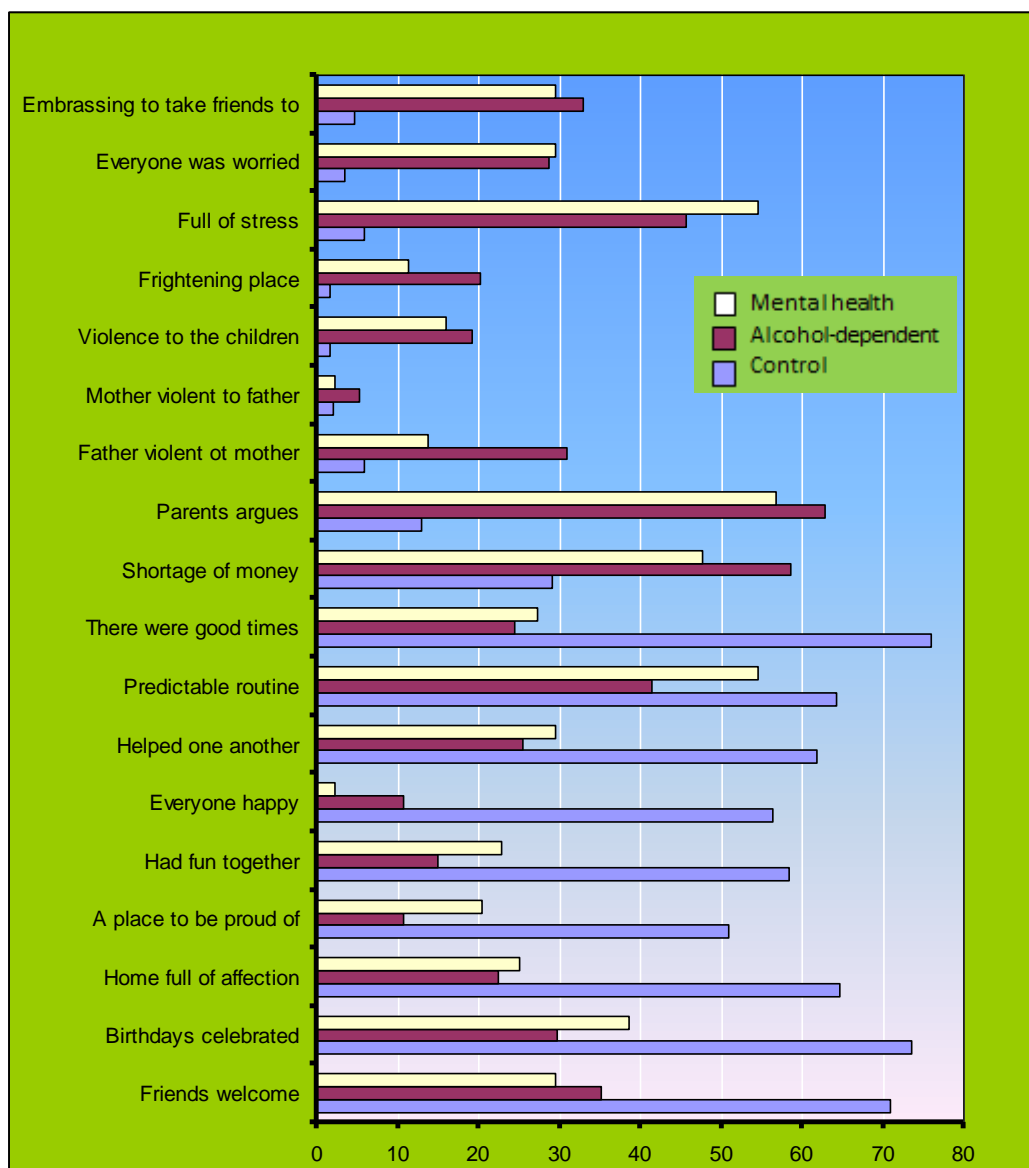




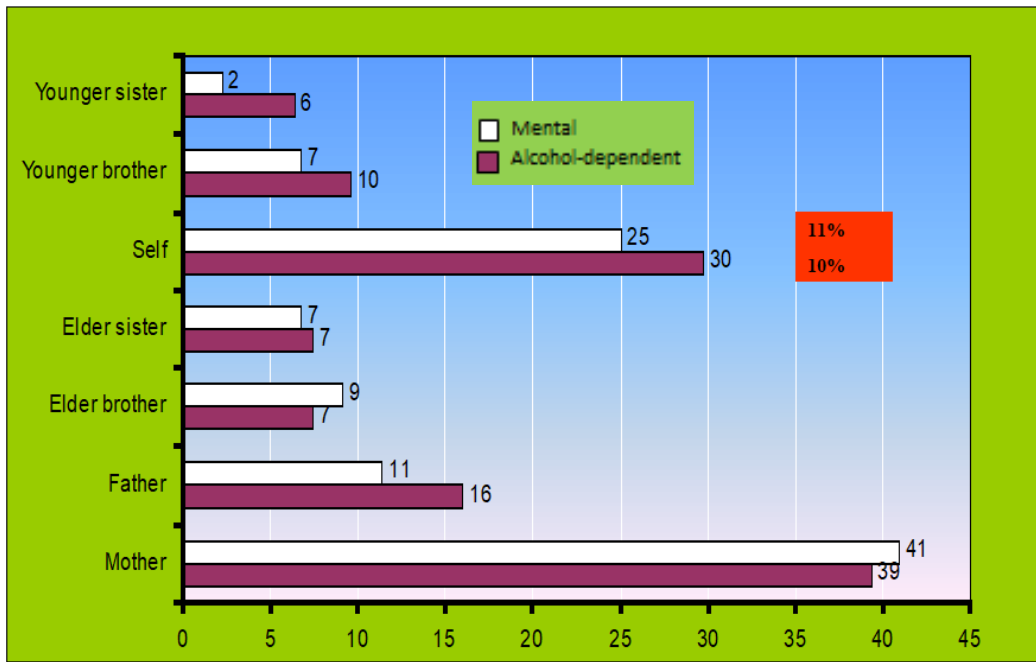
What was the impact of the problem on members of the family?

*'How affected, if at all, were the other people in your childhood household by this situation?'*

*'Very badly'* response



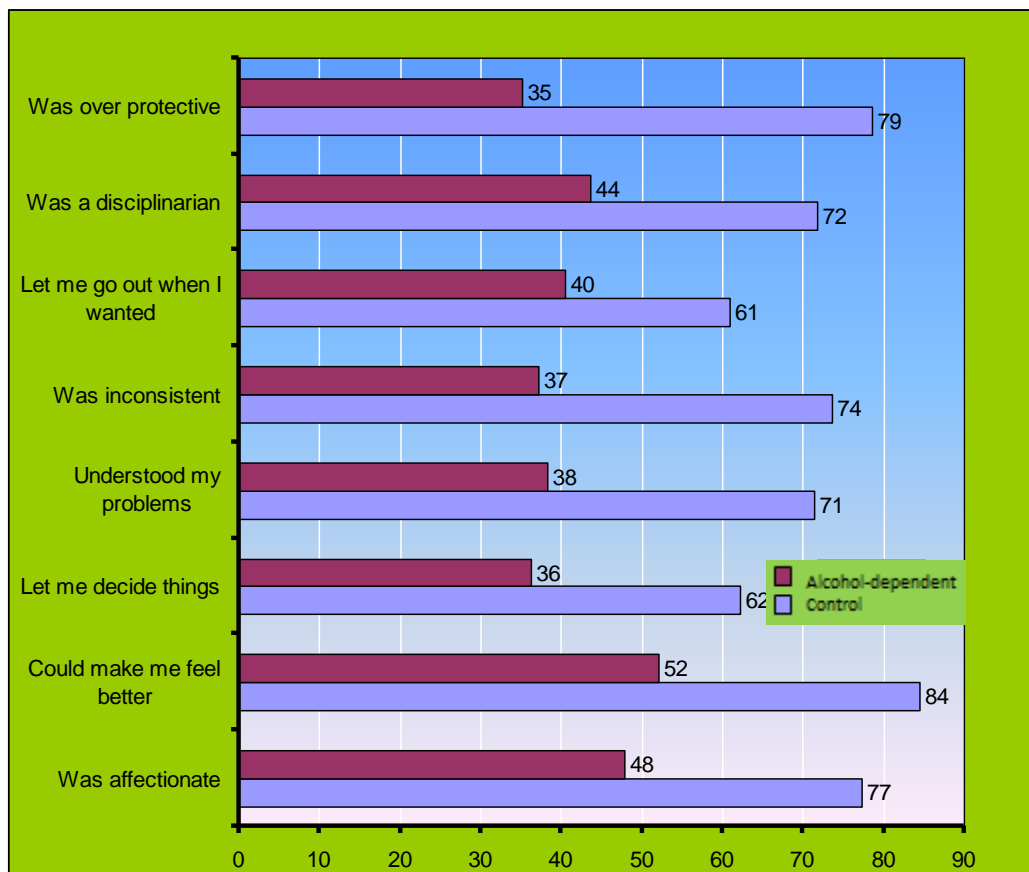
'Very badly' affected by the situation in the household



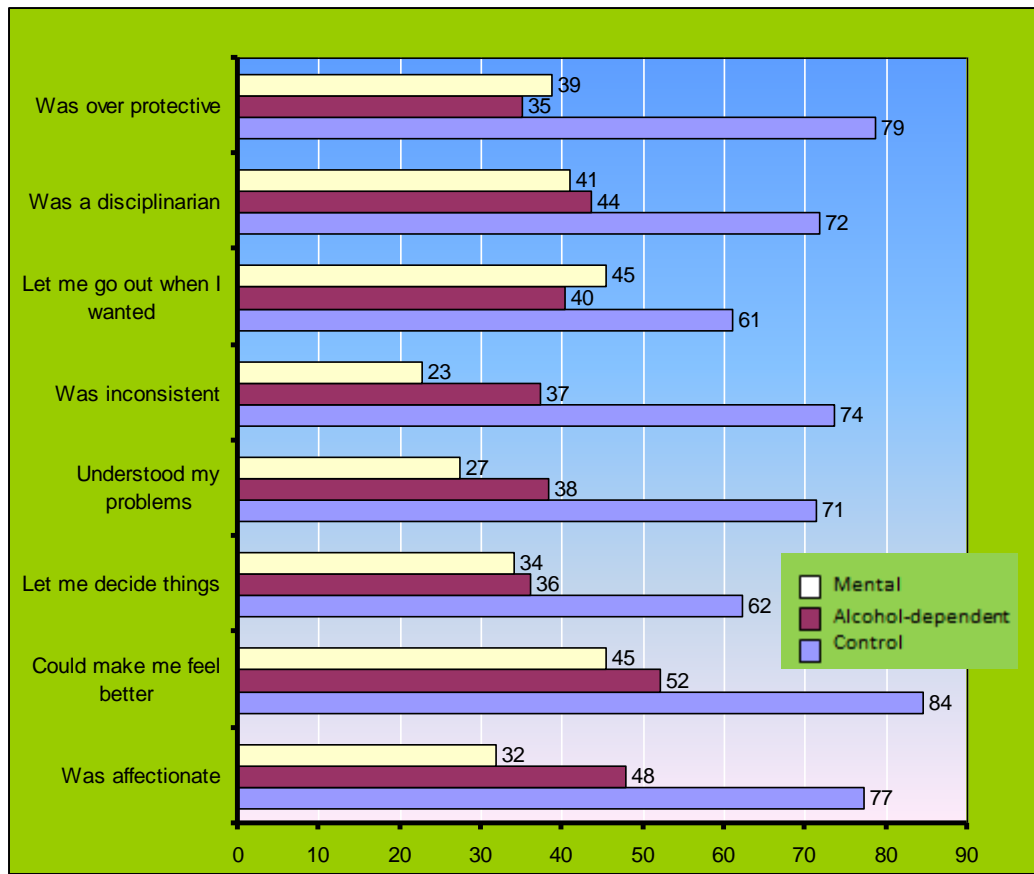
How did this translate into the relationship between the child and its parents?

*'How would you describe your mother when you were a child?'*

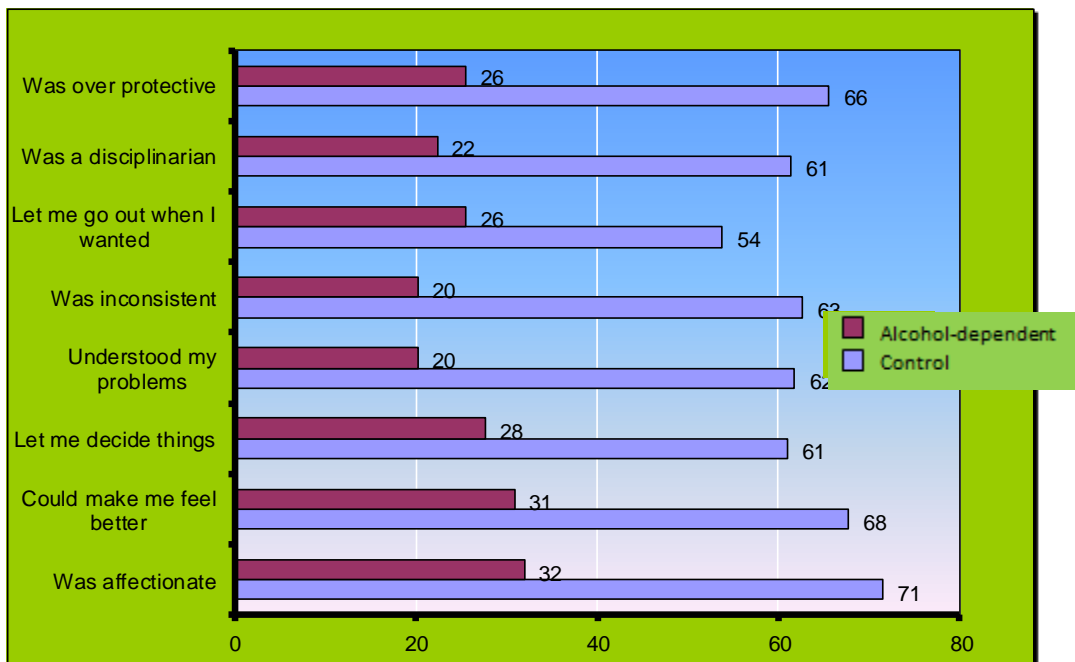
*'Just right' response*  
Mother was 'just right' for:



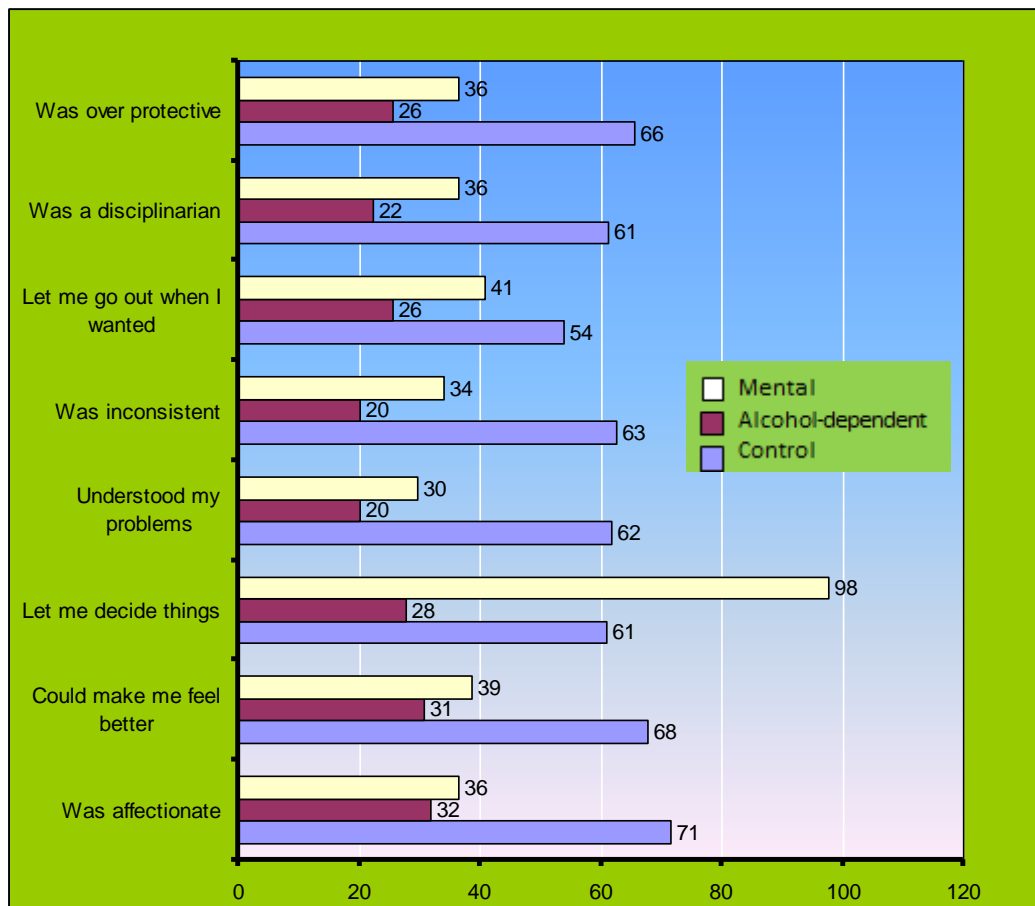
Mother was 'just right' for:



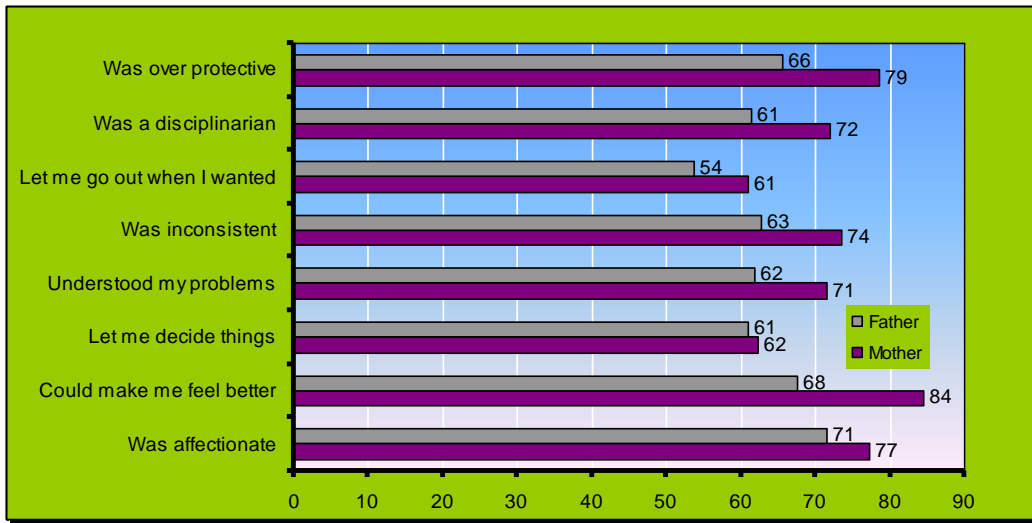
Father was 'just right' for:



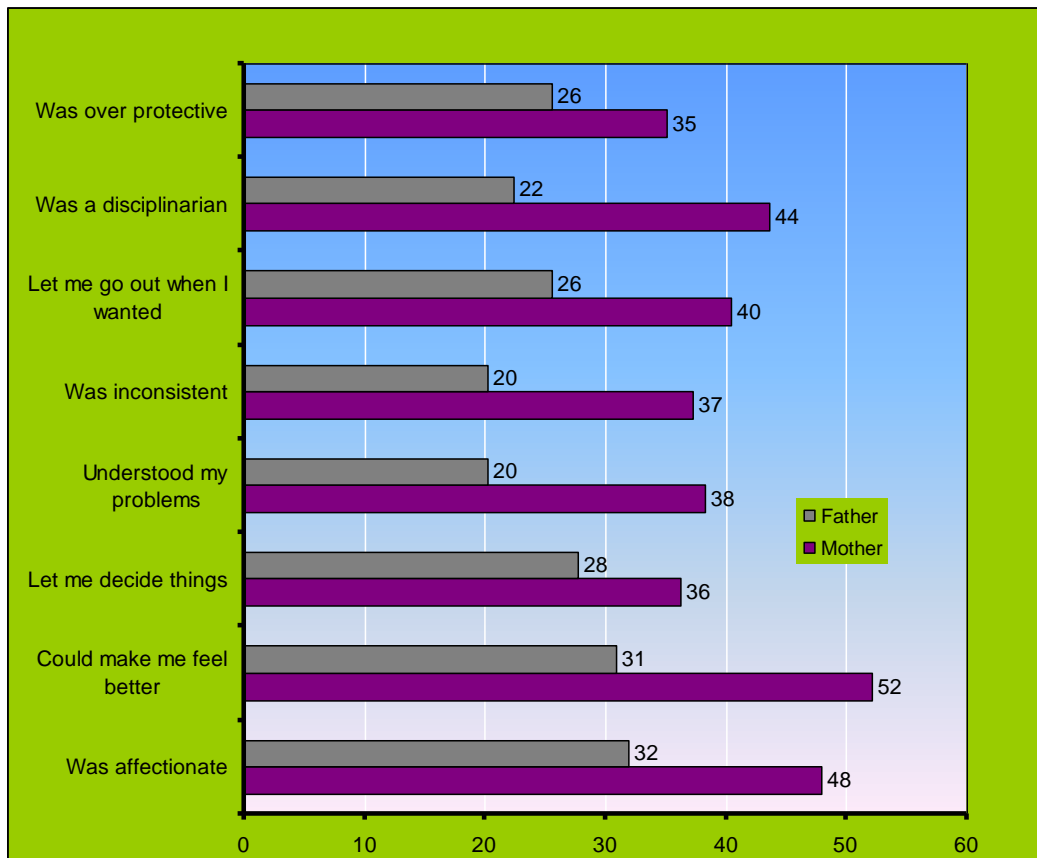
Father was 'just right' for:



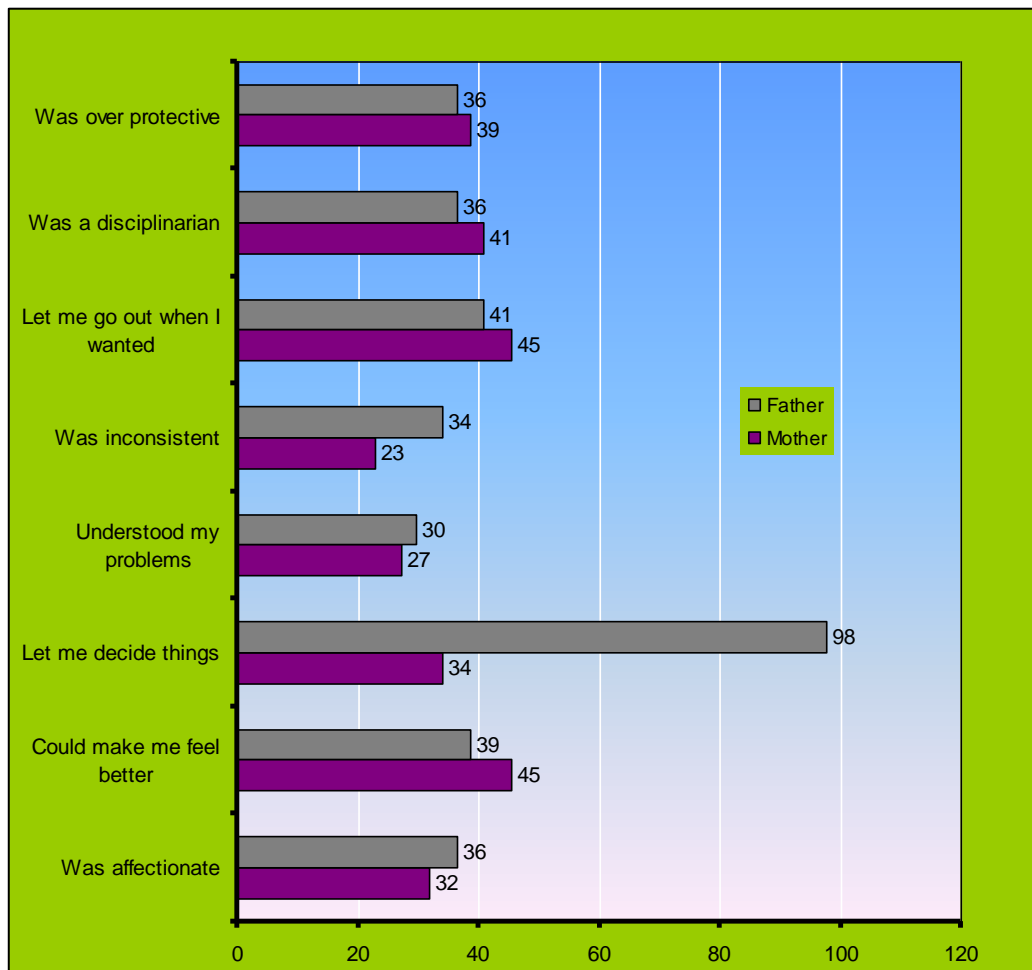
For the 'control' group, mother and father were 'just right' for



For the 'alcohol' group, mother and father were 'just right' for



For the 'mental health' group, mother and father were 'just right' for



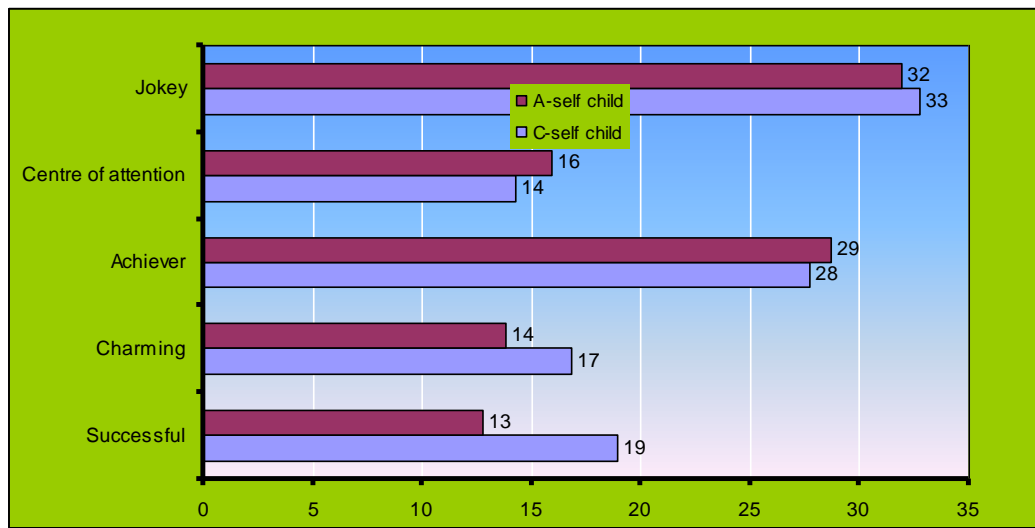
The respondents were asked to tick a series of words that described themselves when they were a child and now. Some of these words are positive characteristics, and some (more) negative characteristics.

As we have a sample of adults who did **not** grow up in an alcohol-dependent family as well as those that **did**, it is possible to compare the self-perception of these people as children, and as adults. To what extent did they see themselves as having a personality as children, that was different from the control, and has time healed the wounds?

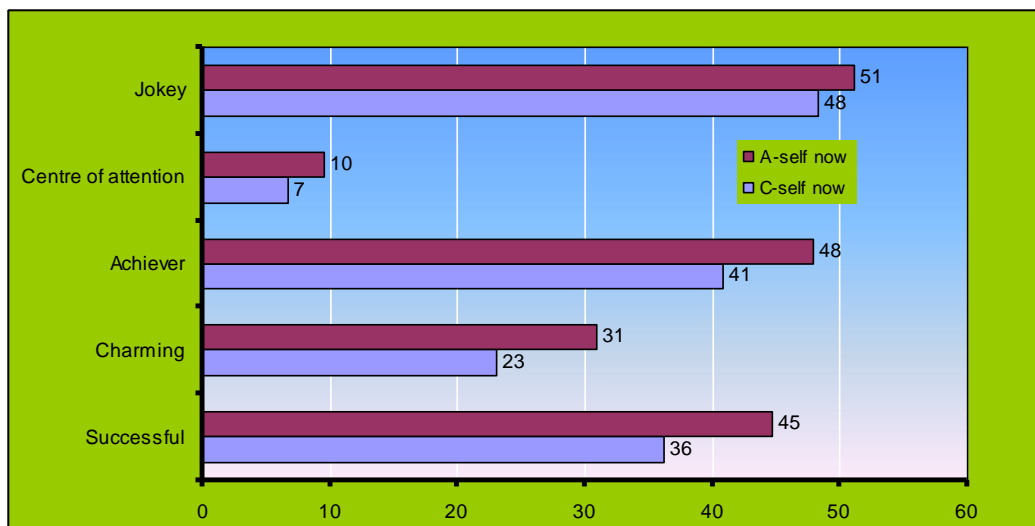
We have found that, on a few positive things, they describe themselves more positively than the control, but mostly worse, and on many negative things they describe themselves as worse. Moreover, time does seem to have reduced the level of negativity on a number of the characteristics, but all.

Firstly, the **good news** for children of alcohol-dependent parents (every cloud has a silver lining). Which positive characteristics are they better than the control?

Positive things as a child – alcohol-dependent families are on par or do better



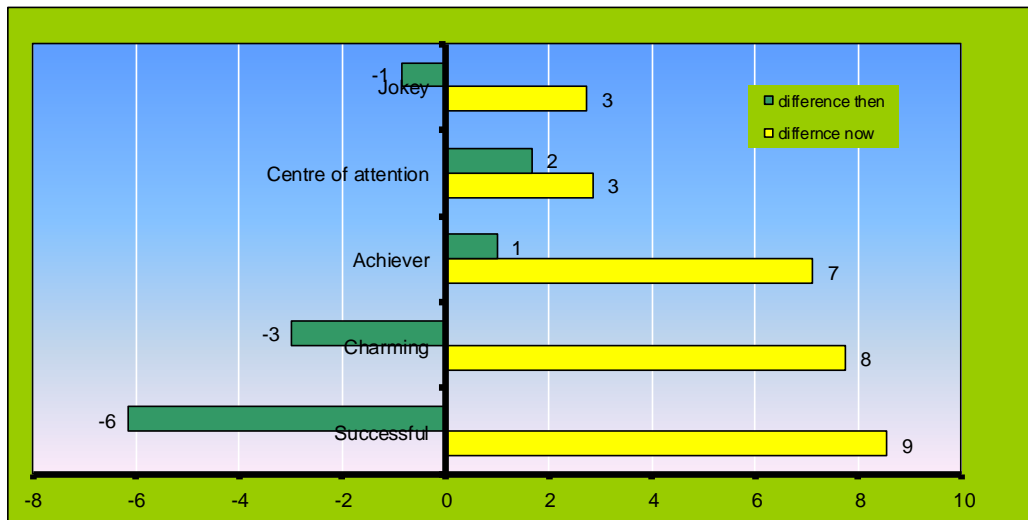
Positive things as an adult – alcohol-dependent families do better



On the two characteristics, children of alcohol-dependent families see themselves in a better light than the control as they get older.

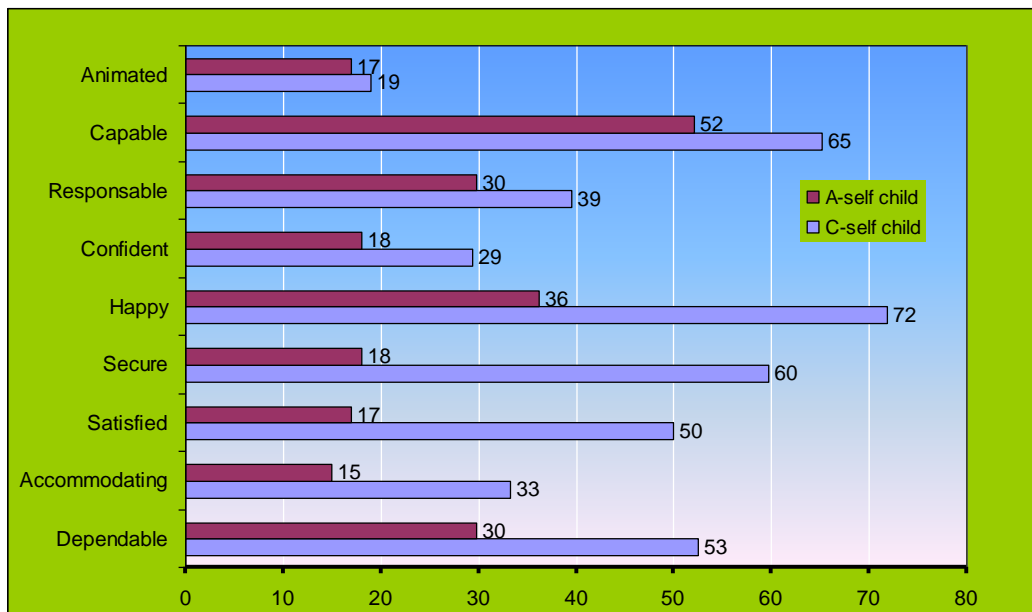
The positive things where children of alcohol-dependent families perceived themselves less well *as children* than the control, and **still do**, but by not such a degree.

Time has healed a bit.

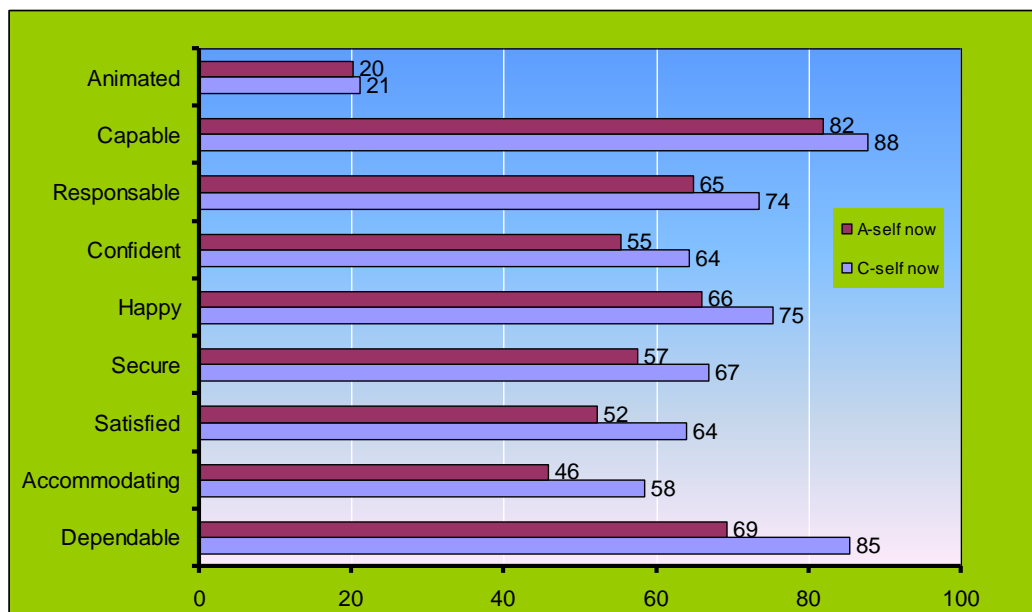




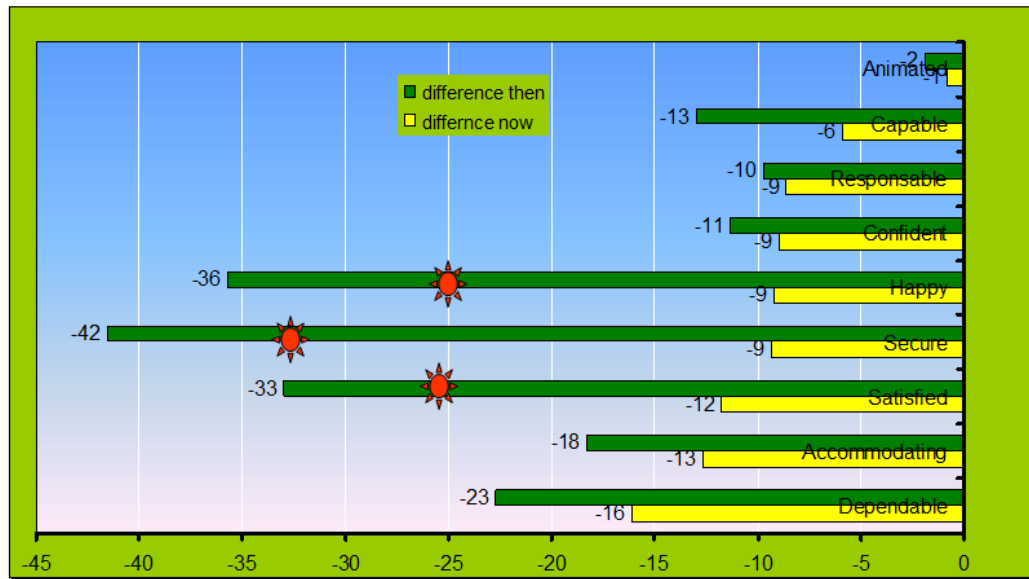
Positive things as child – alcohol-dependent families still worse as an adult



Positive things as an adult – alcohol-dependent family do less well

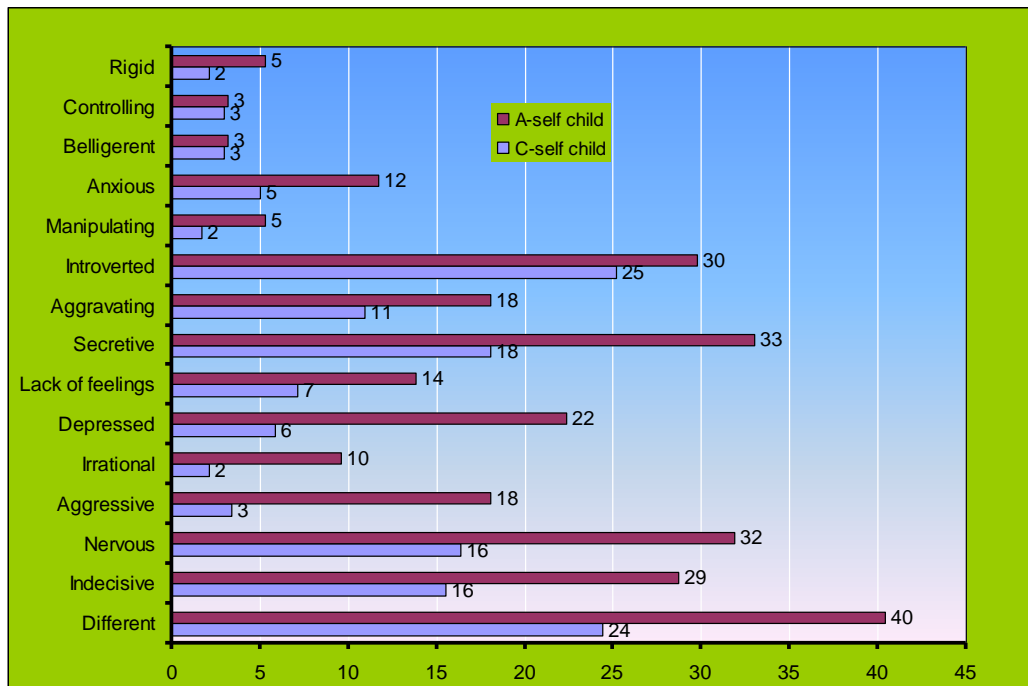


Positive things some have improved

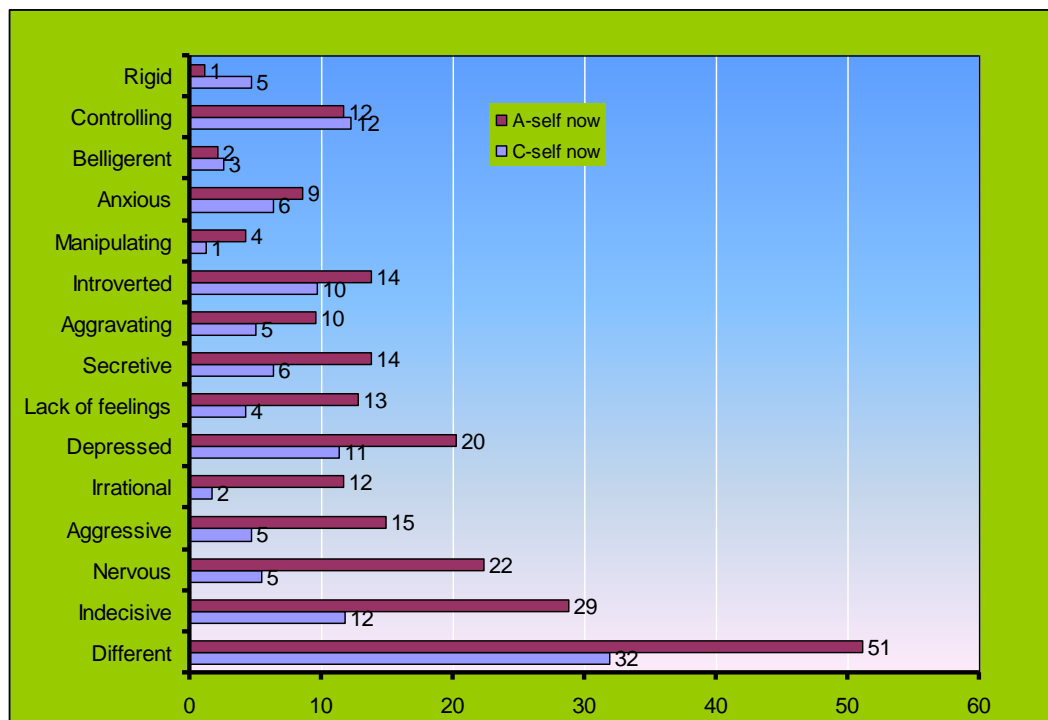


Negative things that children of alcohol-dependent families perceived themselves as having more of, in comparison to the control, as children, and still do, but with hardly any difference. The passage of time has not improved these negative self perceptions.

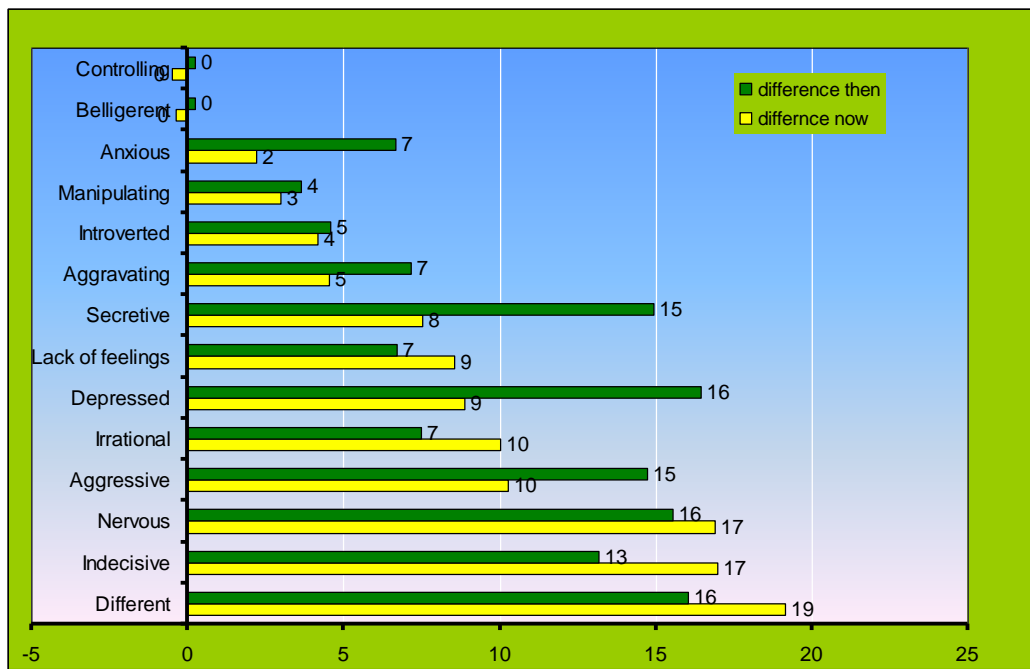
Negative things as a child – alcohol-dependent families do worse on most



Negative things as an adult – alcohol-dependent families do worse on many

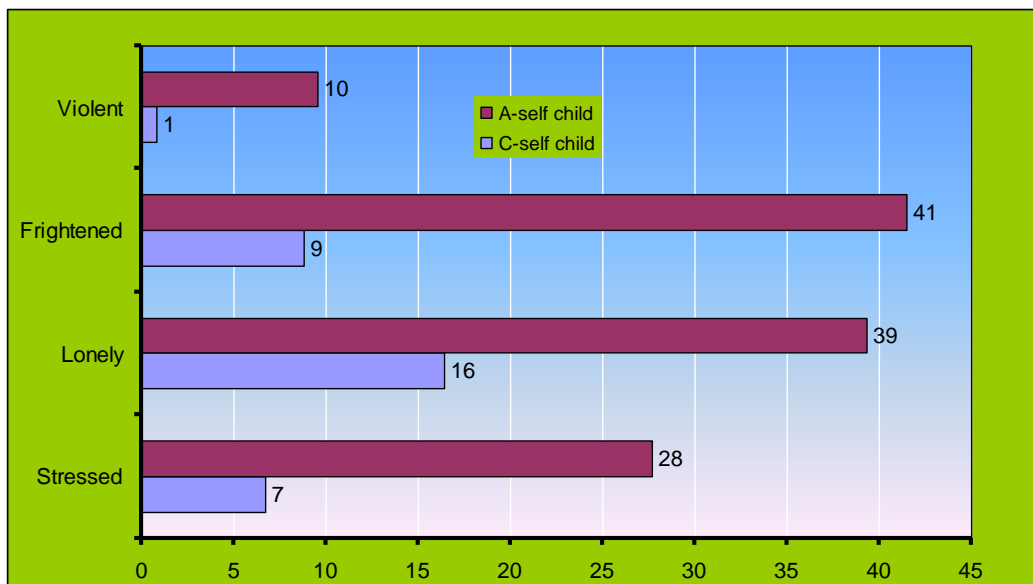


Improvements with time but not by much

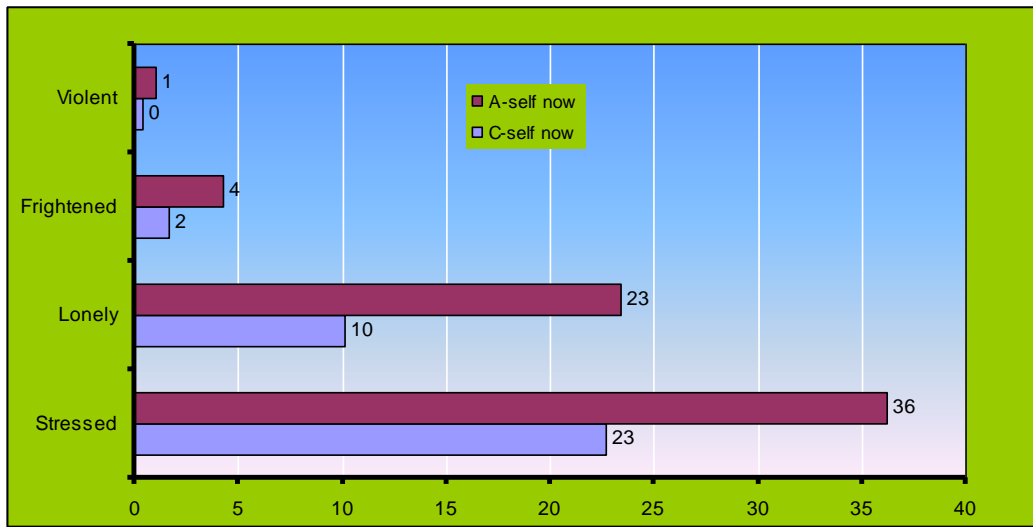


Now the **negative** things which children of alcohol-dependent families perceive themselves worse than the control, but which time has reduced the difference

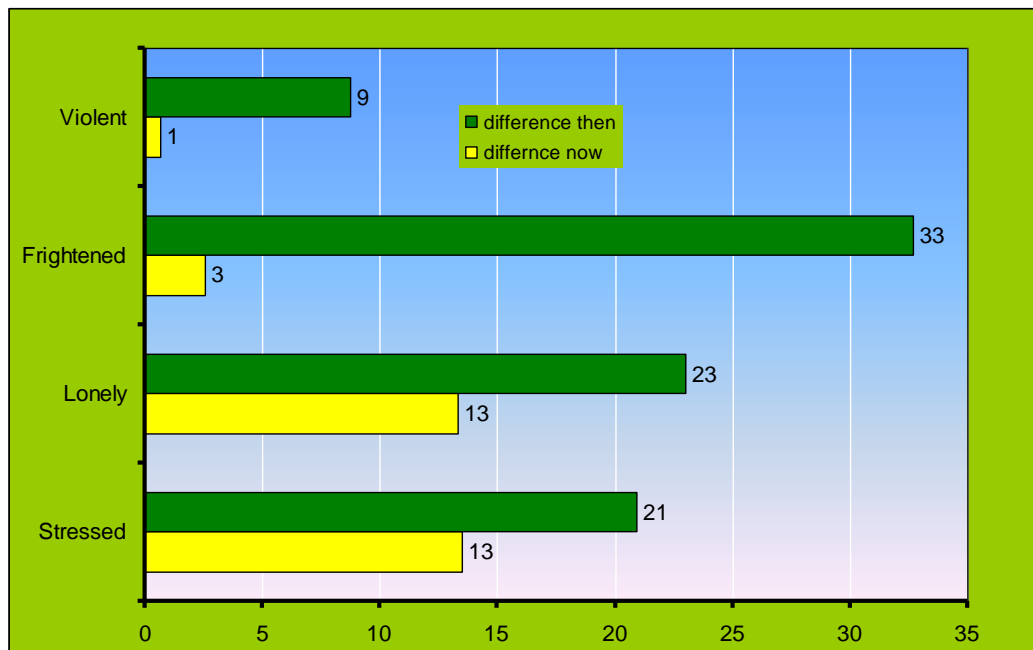
As a child



### Negative things as an adult – alcohol-dependent families do worse



### Negative things that have reduced



As adults COAs are **more** likely to see themselves as *achieving, charming and successful*.

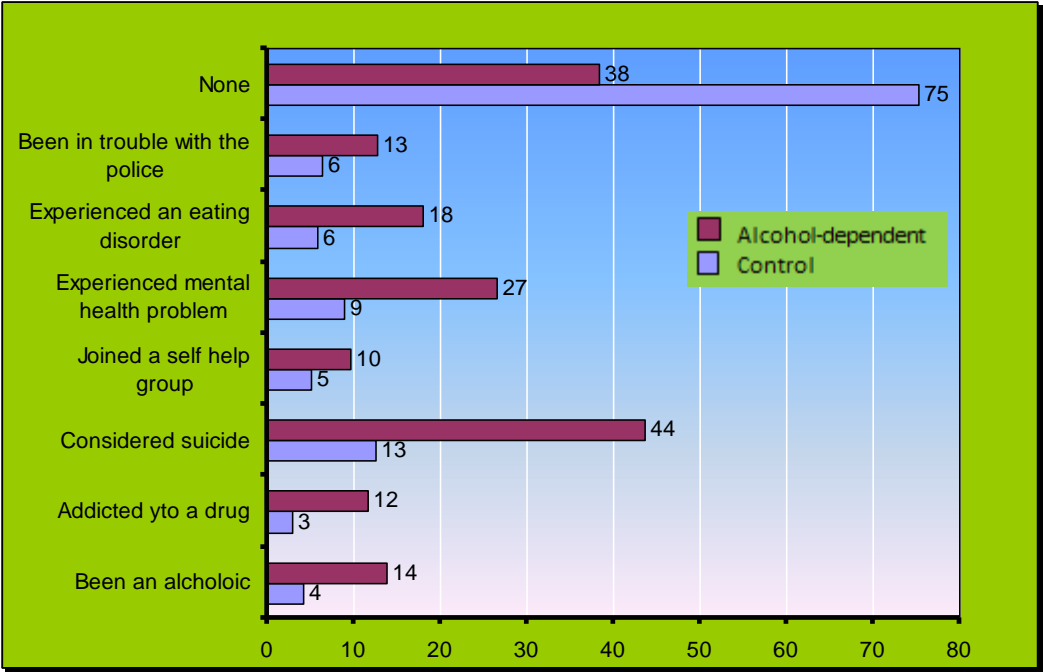
However, they are **less** likely to see themselves as having a large number of other positive characteristics: *responsible, confident, happy, secure, satisfied, accommodating and dependable*

However, improvements have been made since childhood on *happy, secure, satisfied*, where time seems to have helped

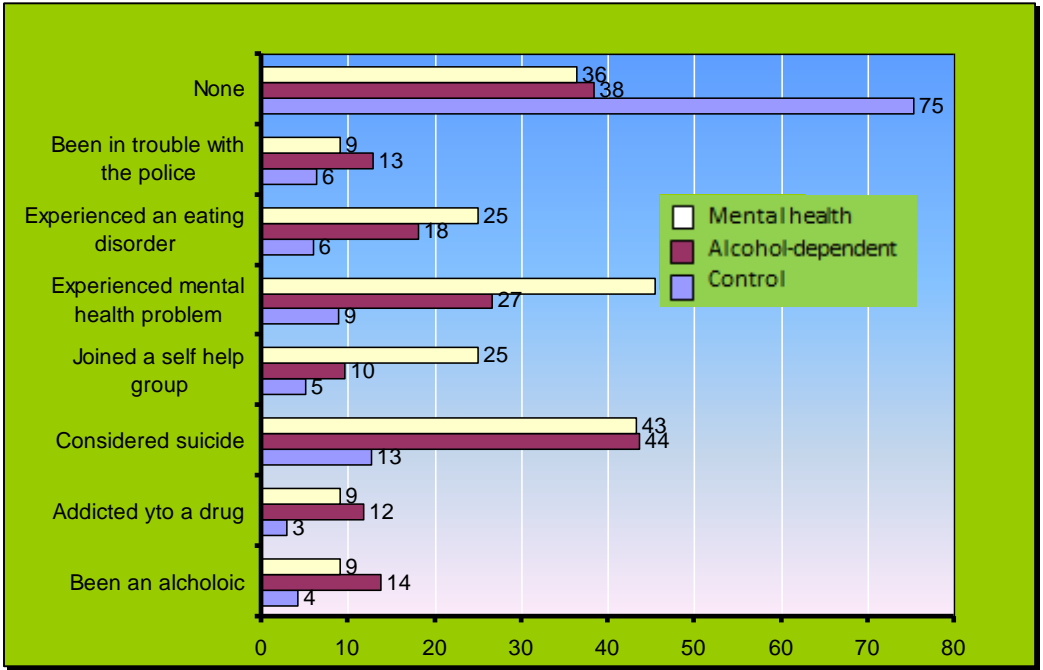
They are also **more** likely to see themselves as having a large number of negative characteristics: *lack of feeling, depressed, being irrational, aggressive, and being nervous /jittery, indecisive and different to different people*. There have been small improvements on most of these since childhood

They are also more likely to see themselves as being: *lonely, and stressed*. Both these were worse when they were children, as was being *frightened*, which was a major thing as a child but is about the same as the control as adults

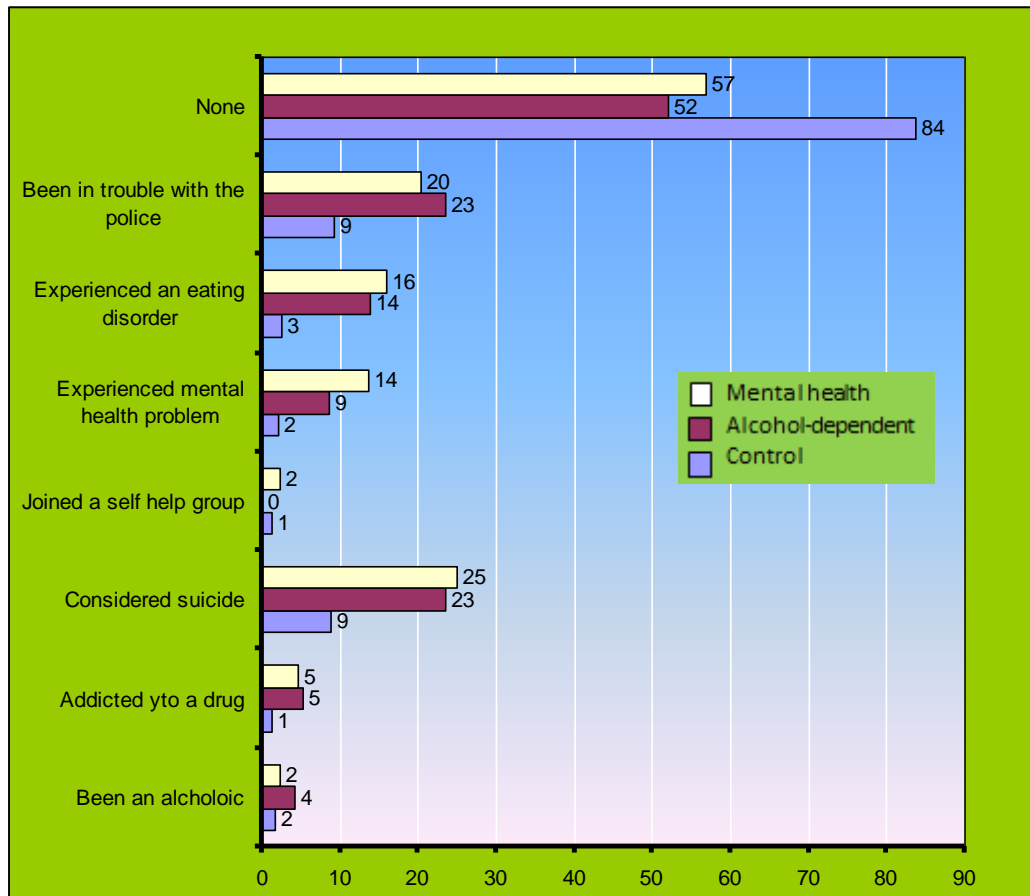
As an adult



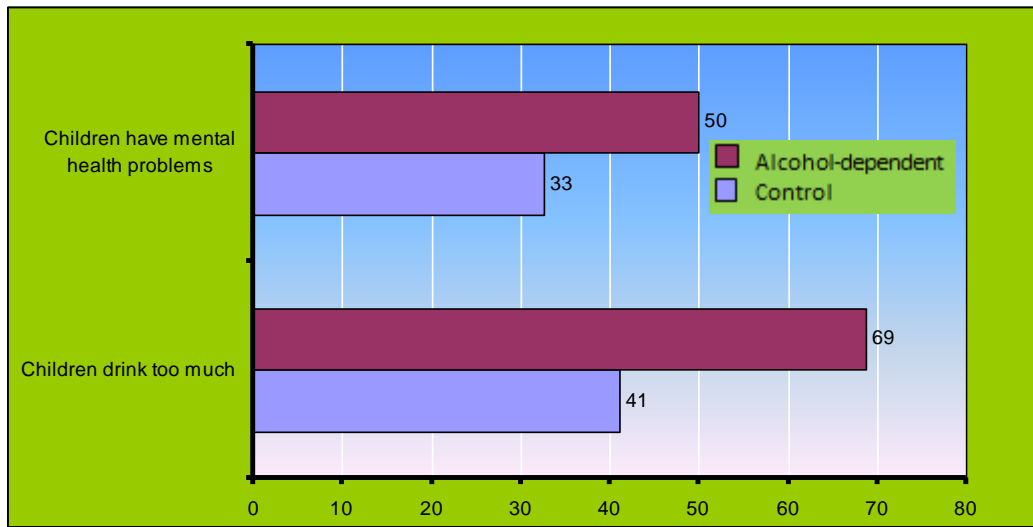
As an adult



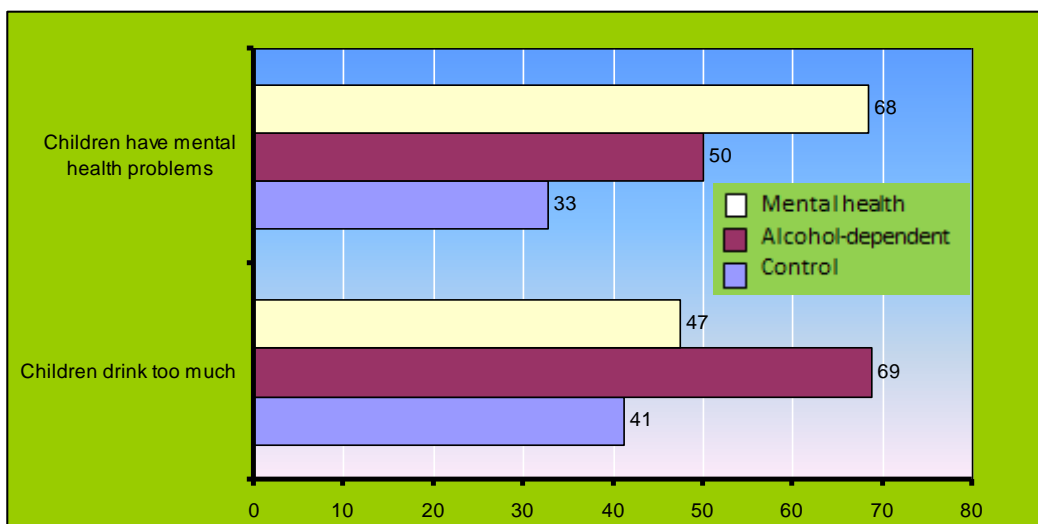
# As a child



Worry about children in the future



Worry about children in the future





### So what have we found?

- In the country, over 16% of people experienced growing up in a home that had had a severe trauma involving death disablement or long term separation, mental illness, or at least one of their parents drinking too much. 3.5% of people grew up in homes with more than one of these. There is some variation by demographics of the reporting of these problems, with them being a little more prevalent amongst women, social grade E, and less prevalent amongst the old. Alcohol-dependent parents in particular are reported more often the lower the social grade of the respondent.
- 6.2% of adults claim that they grew up in a family where one or both the parents drank too much. This is greater than the number who grew up in a home where one or both the parents suffered from severe mental illness (4.3%), and therefore indicates that this situation is more prevalent.
- There seems to be an association between homes where at least one of the parents had severe mental illness and drank too much.
- The likelihood of a person being prepared to help in the survey increased from 38% of people who had not grown up in such homes to over 80% of people who grew up in homes where all three were present. This obviously suggests a wish on the part of these people to 'talk' about their childhood situation.
- The majority of people who had been in a home with one of these 'problems' had tried to hide this from people outside. The proportion varied a little, with 70% of homes where a parent drank too much trying to hide it, compared to 75% of homes with severe mental illness, and 55% of homes in which a severe trauma had occurred. Of these the majority felt that their parents had succeeded in hiding the problem from the outside world (61% for alcohol-dependent parents, 62% for severe mental illness and 56% in the case of trauma). This means that approximately 40% of household that have this problem remain hidden from society.
- There were some differences in the characteristics of the three samples, with children of alcohol-dependent parents drinking more than the control (though not excessively), being more likely to be unemployed and or not looking for work than the control, more likely to be divorced, and more likely of having a job in which they played out a role that was not really them. To this extent, they had some similarities to the group that had grown up in household with severe mental illness who were appreciably more likely to be divorced, unemployed and playing out a role in their jobs. This latter group had a slightly different age profile, being a little younger, and more concentrated in the 34-45 age range than the control. The high divorce rates present in both the alcohol-dependent and mental illness groups meant that the natural father was often not in the house for the these groups, and his absence was increasingly likely as the child got older, though offset against the greater likelihood of the mother remarrying.
- The family environment between the control group and the alcohol-dependent group was described in dramatically different ways, though there was a considerable similarity between the households of the 'alcohol' group, and the 'mental illness' group. This is the first evidence in the survey that the intensity of the problem of growing up in a household in which at least one of the parents drank too much is of a similar magnitude to that of growing up in a household where one of the parents suffered from severe mental illness.
- The control groups were very much less likely to describe their household in terms of shortage of money, arguments, violence, stress, worry, and the embarrassment of taking friends home.

- They were much more likely to describe it in terms of good times, happiness, fun, affection, pride, helping one another and of friends being welcome. 25% of those from homes in which there were mental illness said that the 'problem' had affected them 'very badly', 30% who had grown up in alcohol-dependent homes said this, (though only about 10% said that this was now true). However, about 40% of the two test groups said that the mother had been 'very badly' affected, at the time.
- The relationship that the respondents had with their parents was much better for the test group where the majority said (on almost every aspect they were asked about) that their parents were doing it 'just right', neither 'too much' nor 'too little'. Though the father generally got a slightly lower rating. In comparison to this, only the minority of parents were judged to do this in the two test group homes, with the mother and father getting similar rating from children from the 'mental illness' homes (where the incidence of the problem was more equally split between the parents), and the father being rated lower than the mother in the alcohol-dependent homes (where the father was more likely to be the one doing the drinking).
- The respondents were asked to describe their personality as a child and now. The personality was much more problematic in the case of the children from the alcohol-dependent homes' than the control group, and although on a number of dimensions, age brought some relief, mostly they continues to carry the mark of being from an alcohol-dependent home. Only in three areas did it seem that the experience had had a positive side, and that was that they where somewhat more likely to see themselves as **achieving, charming, and successful**. However, they are **less** likely to see themselves as having a large number of other positive characteristics: **responsible, confident, happy, secure, satisfied, accommodating and dependable**. However, improvements have been made since childhood on **happy, secure, satisfied**, where time seems to have helped.
- They are also **more** likely to see themselves as having a large number of negative characteristics: **lack of feeling, depressed, being irrational, aggressive, and being nervous / jittery, indecisive and different to other people**. There have been small improvements on most of these since childhood.
- They are also more likely to see themselves as being: **lonely, and stressed**. Both these were worse when they were children, as was being **frightened**, which was a major thing as a child but is about the same as the control as adults.
- There are some dramatic differences in the reported behaviour of the two test groups and the control, with many more claiming that they have considered suicide, had eating disorders, drug addiction, and being in trouble with the police, especially as a child, as well as having above average alcohol and mental health problems.
- The experience and background of the two test groups leads them to worry more than the control group that their children may in the future drink too much or suffer mental health problems.

### Conclusions

- Although these are preliminary findings, it is clear that more adults grew up in an alcohol-dependent home in which at least one of the parents drank too much, than grew up in a home with severe mental illness. So it is clear that this is a more extensive problem. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the characteristics of these two groups (in comparison with a control group) are very similar, showing considerable distress in their childhood, and clear indications of the way that it that there childhood has affected their personality and behaviour as adults.