



Children of Alcoholics and Children of Drug Abusing Parents: Setting The Record Straight

by Robert A. Zucker and Hiram E. Fitzgerald

In the nation's fervor to deal with the problems of drug abuse among its citizens, it has more often than not neglected the largest group of affected children: the children of alcoholics. It is here that most of the major consequences and costs of drug abuse play out. Here some of the major breeding grounds for future generations of drug abuse are nurtured.

Children in Drug Abusing Families: Generic "Drug Problem" or a Specific One?

The popular myth is that the harder drugs form the bulk of the nation's drug problems. The most recent national study of rates of psychiatric disorder, the National Comorbidity Study conducted by Ronald Kessler and his associates (Kessler et al., 1994) indicates otherwise. United States population estimates derived from this survey show that one in four individuals have had a substance use disorder at some point in their lives, and one in nine has had an active diagnosis over the past year. The lifetime prevalence rate for those with an "other drug" diagnosis but no alcohol diagnosis is only 1 in 32 and the one year rate is only 1 in 62. Put another way, of those who have had any substance use disorder, 88 percent have had an alcohol diagnosis, sometimes with and sometimes without an "other-drug" diagnosis. This point is almost as strongly made when one looks at the more severe forms of drug involvement disorder.

Among those with a diagnosis of drug dependence (i.e., excluding those just with drug abuse); 82 percent were either alcohol dependent or both alcohol and other drug dependent (Kessler et al., 1994; Kessler et al., 1997).

These figures describe rates of individual disorder in the adult population. However, when they are viewed from a family perspective, they are also an indicator of family difficulty among that subset of individuals who are parents. Within that framework, the problem of children whose parents have a drug problem is primarily one where alcohol is the parental drug of abuse.

A recent report using data from the 1996 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (Huang, Cerbone & Gfroerer, 1998) provides an even better estimate of this problem as it impacts children. Projections from the sample indicate that approximately 8.3 percent of children in the United States under the age of 18 are living in households where one or both of the parents has been actively alcohol dependent in the past year. If you include illicit drugs as well as alcohol, the figure increases to 10 percent. Only 17 percent of the family drug problem involves only drugs other than alcohol. This is not common knowledge either in the popular press or among policy makers, where drug dependence and its impact on children is characterized as a problem of illicit drug use.

What Family Characteristics Are Indicators For Greater Child Risk?

Other research allows an even tighter specification of the highest family risk environments. It is apparent that heaviest alcohol use occurs in the 18 to 30 age range of men and women (Office of Applied Statistics, 1998). All the data imply that exposure to a drug involved parent is greater for children with younger parents.

Chilcoat, Breslau and Anthony (1996) found that parent monitoring, as an indication of both effective parenting as well as a protective factor against child drug involvement, was less likely when mothers had a substance abuse diagnosis. Poorer caregiving practices are known to occur among younger parents (Belsky, 1984; Field et al, 1980). In other words, child rearing risk is greater with younger parents who are also more likely to be drug involved.

The effects for children growing up in addicted families is cumulative. The child's witness of a parent's arrest for drunk driving or drug possession is a shaming experience. When such accounts appear in the media, what is often ignored is that the parental event is not just an event for the adult. It is also a marker of a set of family experiences that are taking place over a long period of time.

Possession of illegal drugs without a prior history of drug involvement is highly unusual. It requires a resource network to obtain such drugs, and it assumes an addiction history that has involved a progression from softer to harder drugs over some period of time. With these kinds of preoccupa-