



## Pharos Service

*Parental alcohol and other substance misuse – guidance for parents, carers and professionals on how to talk with children.*



**Changing childhoods.  
Changing lives.**

# Pharos

## Why talk with children?

It can be difficult for adults to know how to talk with children about a parent's substance use or addiction. For families, this has often been a "family secret" so children may have kept their worries hidden. This can impact on children's health and well-being. They can feel unsafe, scared or worried. It can help to talk about how they feel, and for them to have some clear understanding about their family circumstances. Children may feel that they are not important or not loved if it seems their parent is putting alcohol or drugs before them. It can help make sense of their experiences if they have some understanding of addiction.

Workers in Pharos have been helping children and families to talk about parental substance misuse since 2007. The ideas in this leaflet are suggestions based on our experiences, and will need to be adapted for each individual child.

Taking time to learn about a child's experiences and how they have been impacted will help you think about how best to talk with them. Some examples of experiences children may have had:

- Witnessing conflict – arguments and fighting.
- Missing school or being late for school.
- Not having social activities or being able to bring friends home.
- Lack of routine and boundaries – inconsistent parenting.
- Noisy parties in the house.

- Taking on caring responsibilities

## Some principles to keep in mind when talking with children are:

- Don't tell a child something that is not true. This can lead to confusion, and will not help build trust with the child.
- Keep information age appropriate and child-led.
- If you don't know how to answer the child's question in an honest, age appropriate way, tell them that their question is a really good one, that you want to be sure you can answer it properly, and that you will try to find out the answer for them. This will give you time to think about the answer and seek advice if needed.



## Talking



## Listening

# Alcohol

## Some questions children ask about alcohol and how to answer them

### Why do people drink alcohol?

Lots of adults drink alcohol. Sometimes they drink it because they like the taste, sometimes they drink it because it helps them relax or have fun with their friends. Sometimes they drink it to help them stop worrying. If adults have had a busy day at work sometimes they drink to help them relax. Alcohol is often drunk at social events like weddings, birthday parties and barbeques. Most adults can drink without it being a problem because they are able to control it and stop when they have had enough.

### What does alcohol do?

Alcohol is a drug. Unlike some drugs, it is not against the law for adults to use it. A drug is something which, when it is in your body, changes the way you feel, how you act and what you are able to do. Alcohol can affect people in different ways, and can become a problem if people drink too much of it. Some of the affects that children can notice about their parents are:

- Their eyes might look different
- Their voice might sound different
- It can make them drowsy or go to sleep
- It can make them be unable to walk properly
- It can make them move their hands and arms differently
- It can make them talk, laugh or shout louder
- It can make them forget to do things they should do
- It can make them become angry and sometimes violent
- It can make them become sad or depressed
- It can make them be unable to think clearly or make good decisions

If mums or dads have drunk a lot of alcohol, it can make them feel unwell afterwards, even the next day. Sometimes people argue and fight a lot when they have been drinking.

## **Why do some people not stop drinking?**

For some people, drinking too much alcohol can become a bigger problem because they find it difficult to stop. Some people drink to help them cope with stress or to help them forget difficult things. They might worry that they wouldn't be able to cope if they stopped drinking. When people keep doing something that is causing them harm and find it hard to stop, this is called "addiction". Some people can get addicted to alcohol.

Some people do not feel that their drinking is a problem, or that it affects anyone else. They might not realise that they are not looking after their children or that their drinking is affecting their relationships. They might not think anyone notices that they are drinking. Some adults are especially surprised that children know they are drinking.

## **How do people stop drinking?**

When someone thinks that their drinking is a problem, they can decide to try to stop. Sometimes people will need help to do this from a special type of nurse, doctor, counsellor or social worker. They may need to look at better ways of coping with stress, and might need to take special medicine while their body gets used to not having alcohol. Some people need to go to stay in a special unit where they can get extra help while they get used to not having alcohol.

## **Why do people start drinking again?**

When someone has had a problem using alcohol, it is difficult for them to get used to life without it. Often they will stop drinking for a while, then start again. This is called a "lapse" or "relapse". If this happens, they may need to get some help again for a while. This doesn't mean that they have "failed" or don't care – it is something that can happen while they are practicing being without alcohol.

Some people find it helpful to meet up with other people who have had problems with alcohol for extra support.

## **Why do people try to hide it?**

Some people find it difficult to ask for help because they feel embarrassed or worried about what might happen. They may feel that other family members and friends will be disappointed, frustrated or angry with them so try to hide it.



# Drugs

How children are affected by parental drug use depends on a number of factors such as which substance or combination of substances is used, pattern of use etc. Many of the same principles in relation to talking about alcohol use can be applied when talking about other drug use. Because some drugs are not legal, it can be more difficult for families and children to talk openly about their experiences.

## Some questions children ask about drugs and how to answer them

### What are drugs?

A drug is something a person either smokes, eats, drinks, or injects into their body that affects their brain and makes them act differently. Some drugs, like alcohol and nicotine in cigarettes are legal so lots of adults use them. Some other drugs like cannabis, heroin and cocaine are illegal so it is against the law to use them.

### Why do people take drugs?

When people feel sad or frightened, they sometimes try to find things to make them feel better. They might do helpful things like:

- Talk to friends
- Go for a walk
- Listen to music
- Play sports

Sometimes people do things that are not good for them, thinking it will make them feel better. This might

be things like drinking a lot of alcohol or taking drugs.

When a person takes drugs, it might make them feel happier or calmer for a short while. But when the drug stops working, they feel worse than they did before. Then they might take more drugs and find it very hard to stop taking them.

### What do drugs do?

When someone is taking drugs, it affects their brain and makes them do things they would not normally do. Some drugs might make them fall asleep and not be able to wake up for a long time. Some other drugs might make them very active, noisy or cross.

### How do you stop taking drugs?

Some drugs are very "addictive". This means that a person's body gets used to them and wants more of them. When this happens, it is very hard to stop taking them. Other people might want the person to stop taking drugs, but they can only stop if they decide for themselves (and it can be hard to make good decisions when you're taking drugs).

Children's questions about recovery and relapse can be answered in a similar way to those about how a person recovers from alcohol use.

*"I learned to cope and I had fun. I'm not really on my own and it's not my fault. Thank you"*

Child who attended the Pharos Groupwork Programme

## **What about drugs that are prescribed by a doctor?**

Doctors prescribe medicines or tablets for people who need them to help them feel better if they are sick or in pain. It is good to take these drugs or medication in the way that the doctor or pharmacist advises. However, some of these medications can be addictive – so that once people get used to taking them, they start to need them more and more. Sometimes this can happen slowly so people don't realise that they are becoming addicted. Sometimes people can start to buy tablets from places other than the pharmacy. This can be risky because the tablets might have other substances added, or might be too strong. It can also cost a lot of money.

## **What can children do about it?**

Children can sometimes try to "fix" the problem. It is important for them to know that they cannot change their parent. Some important messages to give children are:

- It is not your fault that your parent drinks too much or uses drugs and it is not your job to help them stop drinking. That is something they have to decide to do themselves.
- Remember, you are not the only family where a parent drinks too much alcohol or uses drugs. In Northern Ireland, it is estimated that about 1 out of every 10 or 12 children has a parent who has a problem with alcohol.

- You can look after yourself by finding things to do that make you feel happy and relaxed. This can be things like spending time with friends, listening to music, playing sports, or going to youth clubs.
- It can be hard to tell someone else about your parent drinking or using drugs, and about what is happening to you. But if you are worried about your parent it is always best to tell someone you trust how you feel so they can make sure you are safe. It is always O.K. to ask for help. People you could tell might include a family member, a teacher or a youth leader.

## **Some other useful supports are:**

- 'Sam the Alien' - a story book and resource about Parental Substance Misuse created by Pharos. Contact the service to receive a copy
- Childline - phone 0800 1111 or online chat at [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)
- Steps to Cope – an online resource for children who have parents with substance misuse or mental health difficulties. [www.stepstocope.co.uk](http://www.stepstocope.co.uk)
- A range of information, resources and support services can be found at [www.drugsandalcoholni.info](http://www.drugsandalcoholni.info)

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TALKING

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