



01. Purpose of this Briefing

This briefing considers learning from a number of local children's cases, involving children of parents who misuse substances, including un/born babies.

02. Background

Substance misuse refers to the abuse of drugs and/or alcohol. Whilst there may be different treatment methodologies for adults with these problems, they are considered together because the consequences for the child are quite similar. Substance misuse refers to both illicit drugs, alcohol, prescription drugs and solvents. Many substance misusing adults also suffer from mental health problems, which is described as Dual Diagnosis.

07. Resources to support practice

[Children of Parents who Misuse Substances procedure](#)
Building Confidence in Practice Resources – Professional Curiosity for [Practitioners](#) and [Supervisors / Managers](#)
“Parents with substance use problems: learning from case reviews” – NSPCC, December 2023

06. Reviewing Practice

- Remember parents who misuse drugs and/or alcohol may be good enough parents who do not abuse or neglect their children. It is important not to generalise or make assumptions about the impact on a child. It is, however, important that the implications for the child are properly assessed.
- There is a risk in focusing on the adult's difficulties and supporting their attempts to control their behaviours that the impact on the child can be overlooked or seen as a secondary consideration.
- Do not rely on self-reporting around consumption – explore any signs which contradict self-reporting.
- If you are in contact with a child in a drug/alcohol-misusing environment, ask yourself “What is it like for a child in this environment?”
- Remember Specialist Substance Misuse Services ([Turning Point](#)) should be invited to and attend / provide information to any meeting concerning the implications of the parent/carer's substance misuse problems for the child.



05. Professional Curiosity

All agencies need to work together in tackling the problems caused by substance misuse in families in order to safeguard children and promote their well-being. This would include having as comprehensive an understanding as possible of the extent and range of substances being used by parents/carers. Professional curiosity around self-reported drug use and sharing this information across agencies is essential to gain as full a picture as possible of substance misuse.

03. Risks and Safeguarding Concerns

- Substance misuse can impact on the capacity of a person to parent a child. Children can also be vulnerable when parents are withdrawing.
- Children's physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and developmental needs can be adversely affected by their parent's misuse of substances. These effects may be through acts of omission or commission.
- This behaviour can put the child at an increased risk of neglect and emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, either by the parent or because the child becomes more vulnerable to abuse by others. Children may take on a caring role for their parent and/or siblings and feel they have the responsibility to solve their parent's problems.
- Children may be introduced to drug and alcohol misuse at an early age by the behaviour of parents and the availability of substances within the home. This increases the risk to the child, as well as making it more likely that they will repeat the cycle and become problematic substance users themselves.

04. Substance Misuse and Un/born babies

The pre-birth impact of substance misuse on the foetus includes low birth weight, premature labour, infections, risk of haemorrhage, and impact on cognitive development. Newborn babies may experience foetal alcohol syndrome or other drug withdrawal symptoms. They could be at risk due to co-sleeping. A parent might use substances to reduce withdrawal symptoms in their baby. Mothers can transmit illegal substances to their baby via breast milk, by accidental contamination and through passive smoking. Becoming a new parent could be a stressor regarding substance use. If you encounter a pregnant substance user whose degree of substance misuse indicates that their parenting capacity is likely to be seriously impaired, [make a referral to Children's Social Care](#).