

# Rebuilding Lives: Parents and Children On the Path to Substance Use Disorder Recovery

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We have long acknowledged that children are significantly impacted in various ways when growing up in a home affected by substance use disorder. Clinical observations and decades of research reveal the diverse types of harm children experience due to parental substance use disorder. Some common challenges informed by research indicate that children growing up in a home with a parent who has substance use disorder include:

1. **Guilt:** Children may experience a sense of responsibility for their parent's drinking problem, mistakenly believing they played a role in causing it.
2. **Anxiety:** The fear of arguments, violence, or unpredictable behavior can lead to constant worry and emotional hypervigilance in children.
3. **Embarrassment:** Children may harbor feelings of shame regarding their family's "secret" and withdraw from friends or other family members as a result.
4. **Confusion:** Mood swings and unpredictability from the drinking parent can instigate uncertainty and inner turmoil within the child.
5. **Inability to Trust:** Broken promises and repeated disappointments can make it difficult for the child to develop trust and form close bonds with others.
6. **Anger:** It is common for children to harbor resentment towards the drinking parent, and they may redirect their anger towards the non-drinking parent due to a perceived lack of support and protection.

7. Depression: Feelings of loneliness and helplessness are prevalent among children growing up in alcoholic households, contributing to depression.

These challenges during childhood can translate into issues that persist into adulthood. Growing up with an impaired parent because of substance use disorder can result in enduring effects throughout various aspects of their adult life. Here are ways in which these childhood challenges can manifest as adult issues:

1. Emotional difficulties: Being raised in a household with parental substance use disorder can create obstacles in expressing and managing emotions. Children may have learned to suppress their feelings or turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms. Adults may struggle with emotional regulation and encounter challenges in forming and sustaining healthy relationships.
2. Impaired Ability to Have Healthy, Mutually Satisfying Relationships: Children raised in a family where there is a member with substance use disorder often develop severe tendencies to prioritize others' needs over their own. This inclination can persist into adulthood, leading to struggles in setting boundaries, low self-esteem, and approval-seeking behavior.
3. Substance use issues: Children of people with substance use disorder face an elevated risk of developing the disorder themselves. Exposure to substance use during childhood may normalize problematic substance use behaviors, making them more susceptible to substance use problems in adulthood or even adolescence.
4. Trust issues: The context of growing up with broken promises and trust issues can make it difficult to trust others in their adult lives. Establishing and maintaining healthy, intimate relationships may pose challenges.

Mental health challenges: The emotional turmoil experienced during childhood can contribute to adult mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Seeking professional support may be crucial for managing these challenges effectively.

It's essential to recognize that not everyone who grew up in an alcoholic household will necessarily encounter these issues, as individual experiences and resilience levels vary.

Acknowledging the potential challenges of children growing up in the family context of active addiction can empower them to ask for and accept help for the effects of these experiences.

We assume that parental recovery is beneficial for children's emotional and mental health. Still, there seems to be an unrealistic expectation that the mere fact of parental sobriety magically transforms the children, neutralizing the trauma they experienced in active addiction.

Therapists and researchers working with families in recovery understand that children do not passively recover and that even family dynamics of early recovery can be a traumatic experience for the family and the children.

The parent with substance use disorder typically enters treatment and recovery in response to a crisis, sometimes catastrophic. These crises affect the whole family; all attention goes to the person transitioning into recovery. Children in families with addiction often take a back seat to the most recent crisis. This lack of being prioritized may persist into early recovery as parents focus on their recoveries.

Recovery in the system signifies a significant shift in the family's balance, structure, and functioning. The positive changes in emotional, social, and financial aspects and stable routines benefit the family. They are often insufficient for the emotional and psychological recovery of the children. The transition to stability can be disorienting for children accustomed to a chaotic, conflicted, and unpredictable system.

Children who may have assumed parenting roles due to parental impairment are suddenly expected to revert to a more typical childhood. As the parents attempt to reintroduce structure to family functioning, the children may need help adjusting to new routines, bedtimes, and family meals. The children may perceive these changes as punishment--taking away something they liked. Recovering parents can involve the children in adapting family interactions, encourage everyone to work on individual recovery, and proactively re-negotiate family roles and responsibilities.

Parents often do not communicate with their children about these changes. Furthermore, many parents in recovery, having grown up in addicted families themselves, are inadequately prepared for proactive problem-solving in parenting. Recovery provides an opportunity to learn life skills, and parents must consider their children throughout this process.

Recovering parents can support their children by involving them in the recovery journey, even if the non-substance-using spouse enters recovery first. Early recovery may involve breaking old family rules and fostering open communication about thoughts and feelings. Recovering parents can also be proactive in teaching their children about addiction, preparing them for changes in the home and the ways they do things, and reassuring them that they will be cared for.

In families affected by addiction, repression of feelings is common. Children who are unfamiliar with expressing emotions may act out during recovery. Recovering parents must address incidents appropriately, putting aside guilt and avoiding extremes in discipline. Parents need to acquire new parenting skills and prepare themselves to confront challenges, including the experimentation with substances by pre-adolescent and adolescent children.

Trust is a crucial issue for both parents and children in recovery. Parents should openly discuss their steps to maintain their recovery gains and encourage children to express concerns about a potential return to old

behaviors. Trust is rebuilt gradually through consistent, trustworthy behavior.

Dealing with these issues requires tailoring approaches to each child's needs. Parents unfamiliar with developmental stages should educate themselves and work on parenting issues in counseling, focusing on replacing old dysfunctional behaviors with new, healthy parenting skills in their treatment plans.



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After exploring the dynamics of family recovery from substance use disorder and the impact it has on children, the importance of nurturing emotional connections within the family unit becomes obvious. "Family Feelings Meetings: A Brief Lesson" is a simple but practical guide for fostering emotional connections and promoting open communication within the family. It offers a structured approach to regular family meetings, emphasizing equality, respect, and a judgment-free environment for expressing emotions. "Rebuilding Lives: Parents and Children On the Path to Substance Use Disorder Recovery" focuses on understanding and navigating the effects of substance use disorder on family systems. "Family Feelings Meetings" takes us further by providing a proactive strategy for building emotional well-being. These meetings, centered around core principles such as emotional connection and effective communication, create a space where every family member's feelings are valued. Families can promote personal growth, resilience, and overall mental health by developing emotional management skills.