

Hidden Harm: The Impact of Parental Alcohol Misuse

The wide range of harms that are caused to children, as a result of parental alcohol misuse, is known as 'Hidden Harm', as the harm is often not publicly visible. This means these children are often not known to the appropriate services and that they suffer harm in a number of important ways that can impede their physical, emotional and social development.

These children can suffer in silence, they often do not know where to turn for help, and the impact of the parental alcohol misuse has a deep and long-lasting impact on their lives, which may not fully emerge until young adulthood and beyond. For a child, harmful parental drinking can shape their every moment from the time they wake up to the time they go to bed. Will Mam drink or Dad drink today? What mood will they be in? Will I go to bed hungry?

A child can take on the role of parent in the family, making sure brothers and sisters are fed, getting them dressed and out to school. In the most severe cases, a family situation can deteriorate to the extent where children are emotionally, physically or sexually abused or neglected – dirty nappies going unchanged, children going without regular meals.

Not every child living with parental alcohol misuse will experience the same degree of harm – a stable adult making sure the comforting family routines of bedtimes and mealtimes are followed can make a huge difference to a child's life. However, children in homes already experiencing challenges such as poverty, domestic abuse and mental illness, as well as parental alcohol misuse, can face an almost insurmountable range of challenges.

Children who live with parents who misuse alcohol are amongst the most vulnerable in society. It is imperative that we ensure the best possible start in life for every child through effective prevention of alcohol harm and early intervention when it occurs.

What is the scale of the problem?

Due to the issues of stigma, secrecy and fear of the repercussions surrounding alcohol misuse there are clear challenges in collecting data on children affected by parental problem substance use.

However, some of what is known from an Irish perspective is summarised below:

- A National Audit of Neglect Cases indicated that parental alcohol misuse was a factor in 62% of neglect cases.
- Alcohol in the home was named as a key child welfare issue in the Report of the Independent Child Death Review Group as it was an issue in one third of the cases of unnatural deaths reviewed. It was the second most prevalent issue after neglect and twice as prevalent as drugs in the home.
- An examination based on HSE child welfare national reports, showed that one in seven child welfare cases were due to parental drug/alcohol abuse. However, this figure was a significant underestimation, given that only one reason for child welfare was recorded. When an in-depth analysis was conducted, confined to one county, one in three child abuse cases was found to involve parental alcohol abuse.
- The Steering Group Report on a National Substance Misuse Strategy states that alcohol was identified as a risk factor in three-quarters of Irish teenagers for whom social care workers applied for admission to special care.

The voice of Irish children was heard on this issue when the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's (ISPCC) National Children Consultation surveyed almost 10,000 children aged 12 to 18-years-old on the effects of parental alcohol use on their lives.

The ISPCC's findings showed that one in eleven young people said that parental alcohol use affected them in a negative way. The negative effects included emotional impacts, abuse and violence, family relations, changes in parental behaviour and neglect.

Many of those children briefly described the impact of their parent's drinking on their lives, providing us with a glimpse into the effects of this drinking on their day-to-day lives:

"It worries me; I can't get on with my life as I am taking care of my mum"

"When they get drunk, they don't know what they are doing. It's embarrassing. I hate it"

"Roars at me and calls me scumbag and other bad words which hurt my feelings"

"You feel invisible"

"They just chose alcohol over children"

"I have to mind my sister while my mother looks for my father in the pub"

"If they're getting loaded, why can't I?"

What can we do to address Hidden Harm?

Alcohol's Harm to Others in Ireland, a report for the Health Service Executive (HSE) by Dr Ann Hope, states that "while the severe child abuse cases tend to come to the attention of the health and social services, there is a larger pool of families with less noticeable risky drinking behaviour and problems.

In Ireland, given that an estimated 271,000 children under 15 years of age are living with parents who are regular risky drinkers, there is an urgent need to implement effective alcohol policy measures and regulate the affordability, availability and marketing of alcohol to break the negative cycle of harmful drinking among adults in order to provide protection for children from harm".

The Public Health (Alcohol) Bill is evidence-based legislation that aims to reduce the damage that alcohol causes to individuals, families and society by reducing our alcohol consumption, with a particular focus on protecting children and young people from alcohol harm. It must be implemented as a matter of urgency.

We must also improve the identification, assessment, recording and planning for children, young people and families affected by alcohol misuse.

Túsla and the HSE's addiction services have worked together to produce a Hidden Harm Strategy Statement, due to be published shortly, which addresses what needs to happen to create the structures, processes and continuum of care to effectively respond to Hidden Harm, in respect of both alcohol and drug use. The implementation of this Hidden Harm Strategy must be made a priority.

AlcoholAction
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Working to reduce alcohol harm

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