



# Reciprocal Recovery

By Jeannette L. Johnson and Juanita J. Leonard



The effects of addiction treatment on adults are well known. The literature is quite clear: when adults stay in treatment, they reduce their alcohol, heroin and cocaine use,



their involvement in illegal and criminal activity goes down, and their engagement in health-risking behaviors decreases (www.bsasinc.org). Treatment works and adults are seeking help in unprecedented numbers.

Many of these adults seeking treatment have children, and in some cases, the children come along to the treatment clinic while their parent participates in the treatment regimen. Indeed, you can go into many clinics and observe that the corners of these waiting rooms have small tables littered with coloring books, crayons, and other toys that have typically been donated to the clinic for the entertainment of the smallest clients.

But are these children clients? Although the government recognizes that primary prevention is an effective strategy to stop the intergenerational transmission of substance abuse, and gives millions of dollars to schools, faith-based organizations, and after-school programs, very little is done for the children who come along to their parents' treatment clinic. We miss an opportunity to reach these children. After all, we know that they are the ones who are at the greatest risk for

becoming alcoholics by virtue of their parents' alcoholism or other drug use. We know that they are the ones who may come walking into the treatment clinic of their own accord, with their own addiction or other problems, perhaps within the next decade.

When parents are in recovery, their children need support and education so they can make sense of the changes. When they participate in a prevention program, such as a group support program, they can also become active participants in their family's recovery program, and they do not have to stand passively by while only the parent receives help.

Treatment programs, if they work, engage the clients to learn about living a life without drugs or alcohol. It means to live differently, to think differently, and to act differently. Recovery from addiction is an actively evolving lifestyle, and the children of these adult clients are actively evolving with the parent. Perhaps we should involve the children in the recovery process by providing something for them while they are at the clinic.

Most prevention programs that are designed for children teach them some basic facts about alcoholism and drugs; they teach them about relationships, families, and themselves. Primarily, the children learn that they are not responsible for their parents' behavior. They learn that they did not cause the parent to abuse drugs or alcohol and that they cannot stop the parent's drug taking

behaviors. Indeed, the camaraderie they achieve with other children and the knowledge that they have likeable peers who live in the same type of environment also teach them fundamental truths about themselves. First they learn that they are not alone, and they learn that there can be more to their lives than the disease of alcoholism. They learn about life's possibilities.

Essentially what these children find is a safe haven. They meet adults who will talk to them openly about what may well have been their "family secret." The isolation and stigma are quickly lifted when they meet other children who share the

same experiences. They gain hope and become free to pursue their own interests with the surety of knowing that their actions do not cause their parents to drink

or take drugs.

What does this do for the home environment? It puts the focus back on the parents and their problems. The problem is no longer hiding the drinking from the child or denying that there is a problem. The child who tried to manipulate sobriety is removed from this responsibility. Reciprocal recovery: when one changes, the other one does too. It doesn't matter who starts first, only that the change begins.

*Jeannette L. Johnson, Ph.D., formerly Director of the Center for Studies on Children and Youth, University at Buffalo, NY, is now Deputy Chief of the Scientific Review Branch of the National Institute on Aging. Juanita J. Leonard is a Research Consultant with Active Guide, LLC, Denver, CO.*

---

**“ Recovery from Addiction is an Actively Evolving Lifestyle...”**

---