

To Walk With One Child

by Jerry Moe

"CARING ABOUT A CHILD IS ALL THAT IT TAKES TO START."

All too often alcoholism and other addictive problems become a family legacy. More than fifty percent of today's alcoholics are the children of alcoholics (COAs), and there are millions challenged by other serious problems. It is essential to spare children from unnecessary years of silence, shame, and suffering. Through effective prevention measures, NACoA members can play a major part in this process. Individually and collectively, we can be a voice and a steadying force for children who can't always speak for themselves. Our tools include accurate age appropriate information, skill building, and the bonding and attachment derived through healthy relationships.

Accurate, Age Appropriate Information

The alcoholic homefront is armored by denial, delusion, and steadfast adherence to the strict "no-talk" rule. Consequently, COAs don't always understand what is happening in their families and, not too surprisingly, some believe that it's all their fault. The predominant feeling for many children isn't sadness, anger, or hurt; it is overwhelming confusion. Tasha, age seven, shared: "Mom says Dad is drinking again. Dad says he isn't. Someone is lying. I am confused. I'll just try hard to figure it out." COAs need accurate information about alcohol, other drugs, and the disease of alcoholism. By learning about denial, blackouts, relapse, and recovery, youngsters cannot only make better sense of what's happening at home, but also may come to see that they are not to blame and they can't make it all better. Providing children with these important facts in an age-appropriate manner is crucial, so they are not overwhelmed, burdened, or further confused. Al-Anon's wonderful book, *What's Drunk Mama?*, helps six-year-olds to comprehend these facts, while nine-year-olds get help and hope from the National Association for Children of Alcoholics' posters, such as Spider Man urging youngsters to "Talk with someone you trust." In much the same way Gerald T. Rogers' poignant film, "Lots of Kids Like Us," teaches ten and eleven-year-olds to take better care of themselves and stay safe.

Important messages for COAs to hear include:

- Alcoholism is a sickness.
- You can't make it better.
- You deserve help for yourself.

- You are not alone.
- There are people and places that can help.
- There is hope.

COAs may gain access to such information in a variety of settings: a book offered by a church youth group, the Alcoholism Tends to Run in Families brochure tacked on the wall at the local community center, a presentation at a scout meeting, or a poster at the pediatrician's office which "opens the door" and makes a difference in a child's life. Sometimes understanding begins with a caring neighbor who takes the time to listen, laugh, and play.

Skill Building

COAs are at greater risk for many behavioral and emotional problems. Empowering COAs with a variety of life skills helps them cope with many difficult challenges. For example, some COAs face difficult situations with family violence, neglect, and other problems. These children can learn a variety of coping and self-care strategies to stay safe. Other COAs may allow their feelings to build up inside until they are ready to explode or become a spiraling mass of frequent headaches and stomachaches. They can learn how to identify and express their feelings in healthy ways, especially to safe people they can trust. Others may lack confidence and self-esteem. These youngsters can learn to love and respect themselves through experiences where they have opportunities to succeed and thrive.

Studies on resilience have confirmed the importance of the above skill building activities and have illuminated other important skills as well. Resiliency research examines various protective factors which allow individuals to overcome the odds and stand up to adversity. Emmy Werner, Ph.D.'s longitudinal study points to many traits COAs can develop to deepen their strengths and resilience: Develop autonomy and independence.

- Develop a strong social orientation and social skills.
- Engage in acts of "required helpfulness."
- Develop coping strategies for day-to-day, unusual, and emotionally hazardous experiences they may face.
- Perceive their experiences constructively, even if those experiences cause pain or suffering, and gain other people's positive attention.
- Develop a close bond to maintain a positive vision of life.

Many prevention/early intervention programs today help youngsters to develop these very tools and skills. Student assistance programs and other prevention strategies in schools, children's programs in alcohol and other drug treatment centers, and church youth groups introduce youngsters to these skills and provide a safety net for children to practice and deepen them. It's not just trained professionals who offer these programs. Community volunteers, with on-going training and supervision, lead groups and run camps in youth centers, recreation programs, neighborhood clubs, and a variety of other settings.

Even if they go back to families with active addiction, COAs who are assisted in these ways are better prepared to handle the various problems they may encounter. Shelby reported in group how he handled last week's visitation with Mom:

"When I got out of the shower I found Mom passed out. This happens a lot. I tried something different this time. I called Dad to pick me up. I left Mom a note. I'll try again next weekend. I just want to be a kid. I just want to be safe."

Today there are programs helping other ten-year-olds do just that: be a kid and be safe.

Bonding and Attachment

While accurate, age-appropriate information and skill building help COAs immeasurably, perhaps the most important gift is the bonding and attachment children attain in healthy relationships with others. As a result of broken promises, harsh words, and the threat of abuse, children in many alcoholic families learn the "Don't Trust" mantra all too well; silence and isolation can become constant companions. In their book *The Resilient Self*, Drs. Sybil and Steven Wolin describe "Relationships" as an integral part of the Resilience Mandala. In her research, Werner noted that resilient COAs often had a nurturing adult in their lives.

Building trust is a process, not an event; time is the key. Simply caring about a child is all that it takes to start. Listening, regular time together, playing with, validating, respecting, and empowering a youngster will build a positive connection, for children don't care about how much adults know until they know how much adults care.

As bonding grows, a nurturing adult's words take on added meaning and significance as the youngster deeply considers the source. A child may hear accurate information about alcoholism in a brand new way. Moreover, a kid can build upon his or her strengths and resilience as a result of the conscious modeling provided by that caring adult. There simply can't be resilient children unless resilient adults lead the way. Whether we have children of our own or not, many of us can become a nurturing adult in a young child's life. A youngster desperately in need of such an alliance is very close by.

Making a Difference

At a recent training, Jane, an elementary school counselor, spoke about the nurturing adults in her life while growing up.

"She was my third grade teacher. She taught me to believe in and love myself. She helped me realize how capable and competent I

was, far different from the messages I heard in my alcoholic family. It wasn't until the eighth grade that I found another teacher just like her. I knew it the minute I walked into her English class."

Today Jane is that nurturing adult in many young students' lives. Perhaps more significantly, she teaches these children how to connect with other caring adults as well. Recovering folks, like Jane, take pride in giving to others the beautiful gifts they received, or wished for, as children.

Virtually everyone has a part to play, parents, relatives, teachers, doctors, judges, ministers, coaches, counselors, neighbors, seniors, concerned community members - the list is endless. Whether it is creating a solid relationship, presenting the straight facts age-appropriately, or engaging in skill building activities, adults, reaching out only in ways in which they are comfortable and capable, can make a real difference in one child's life. Join hands and walk with one child. Help this youngster find a path to hope, health, and wellness. A path which Tasha, Shelby, and Jane are most grateful they have discovered.

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