



Parents In Recovery

by Brenda A. Miller



Many parents in recovery from alcohol and drug problems are themselves children of alcoholics. Yet their addiction does not need to result in their own children experiencing the same problems. Parents often feel guilty as a result of recognizing how their behavior has affected their children. Parents need to know that their own recovery is a powerful message to their children about the ability to turn one's own life around.

Families that have been affected by an addicted parent can be resilient and can achieve renewed strength as a family. We have two ongoing projects that work with families with parental alcohol/drug problems that illustrate this.

One study examines the impact of a family skills-based training program for parents and children to prevent children's alcohol and drug use. This project is being conducted in collaboration with our Canadian neighbors in Ontario. This international focus allows us to examine also how cultural differences and health care/social support systems differences might support prevention efforts.

Families with at least one parent who has had alcohol problems and with a child between the ages of nine and twelve are assigned to either an intensive 14-week program with family skills building or a more traditional information-only approach.

In our prevention program, a woman was greatly distressed because her daughter partied with an older female friend and became drunk. The mother was very concerned that her daughter was going to develop alcohol problems, much as she had.

Using the skills that we had been working with, the mother was able to recognize her own strengths in addressing the problem and recognize the strengths that her daughter possessed to correct her mistakes. Rather than viewing this episode as a failure, this mistake became a "teachable moment." Such moments need to be viewed by parents as an opportunity to teach the child how to reevaluate decision-making, look for alternatives, make amends, see outside help when necessary, and go on with life.

The other study includes mothers in alcoholism treatment and in the community with their children between the ages of ten and sixteen. These families are followed over 12 months to examine maternal parenting practices among women who are in recovery or are currently drinking, as compared to women in the community. Maternal parenting practices that are related to children's alcohol/drug use are then examined.

From these studies, a number of different observations are emerging about difficulties for families with active parental addiction or families with a parent in recovery. Although sons and daughters experience some of the same stresses, there are sometimes differences in their responses.

Male children may be more likely to respond by acting out in some manner that gains the attention of

the parents or teacher. Anger and rebellion may appear on the surface. As these children become older and larger, their behavior can become more intimidating to parents, particularly mothers.

For daughters the stresses may appear more internal, with self-consciousness and self-doubt emerging in the process. Teenage girls may become more vulnerable to older male attention and seek early escape from the family in the form of an intimate relationship. Some of our early findings suggest that sons and daughters have similar patterns of experimenting with alcohol and drug use at early ages. Thus, some of the sex-based differences that we thought would be more protective of females may no longer exist.

With parents in recovery, there are many new messages and ideas in a life without alcohol or drugs present in the family. These messages and ideas take time to absorb. Healing can be best accomplished in families in which structure has been established and in which positive family communication is valued.

A major component of the family skills based program is to help establish this communication with clear messages, and with the children encouraged to ask questions when they do not understand. It is within the structures of everyday experiences such as family meals, fun and activities, and attendance at cultural and religious events that positive family values and lessons can be handed down across the generations.

Brenda A. Miller, Ph.D., formerly Director of the Center for Research on Urban Social Work Practice at the University at Buffalo, New York, is now Senior Scientist at the Prevention Research Center of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Berkeley, CA.