Start with the Heart

Helping children from addicted families

An alarming number of children, approximately one in four, are growing up today in families plagued by alcoholism and/or other drug addiction. All too often this addiction becomes a family legacy, passed from one generation to the next. While this may sound bleak, there is good reason to be hopeful. Parents, caring professionals, and concerned community members can protect these children from becoming part of a tragic cycle.

Start with the Heart

The simple, generous act of caring about a child can be the catalyst that eventually helps that child overcome the confusion and despair caused by a parent’s addiction. That’s all it takes.

By showing interest in and concern about a child, you can help that child feel secure and confident — confident that she isn’t to blame for her parent’s addiction or resulting behavior and that she can succeed. By giving the child accurate, age-appropriate information, working together on skill building, and giving the child the opportunity to experience the bonding and attachment derived from healthy relationships, you can make a significant contribution to that child’s life.

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Provide simple yet accurate information

Children of alcoholics/addicts often don’t understand what is happening in their families. And not surprisingly, many truly believe that their parent’s drinking or other family problems are all their fault. The predominant feeling for many of these children isn’t anger, sadness, or hurt; it is overwhelming confusion. Six-year-old Elliott summed it up when he said, “I saw Daddy drinking, but he told me he wasn’t. I’m confused.”

When working with young children, people are often inclined to withhold as much information as possible, either because they think the children won’t understand or because they are trying to protect or shield the children from troubling situations. But young children caught in the tangle of family addiction need accurate, age-appropriate information about alcohol, other drugs, and addiction. This allows them to not only make better sense of what they’ve witnessed at home but also to realize that alcoholism is a disease, they are not to blame, they can’t make it all better, and there are other children who are experiencing similar problems. Providing children with these important facts in a simple manner is crucial in preventing them from feeling overwhelmed, burdened, isolated, and even more confused.

Build skills

Children of alcoholics are at risk for many behavioral and emotional problems as they grow and develop. Empowering these children with a variety of developmentally appropriate life skills will help them cope with the many difficult challenges they face. They need to learn how to identify and express their feelings in healthy ways. They need to learn to identify safe people they can trust with whom to discuss their feelings. They need to develop a variety of other coping and self-care strategies.

Even at a young age, these children can be taught and encouraged to develop ways to stay safe. And when given opportunities to succeed and thrive, they can learn to love and respect themselves. Besides learning coping skills, young children affected by alcoholism can benefit tremendously from the consistent, everyday routine a Head Start classroom provides.

There are many helpful materials available that are designed specifically for young children affected by family addiction. Al-Anon Family Group has published a wonderful book called What’s “Drunken,” Mama? to help young children comprehend these facts. Other books for children include Elephant in the Living Room, by Jill M. Hastings and Marion Typpo, My Dad Loves Me, My Dad Has a Disease, by Claudia Black, I Wish Daddy Didn’t Drink So Much, by Judith Vigna, and I Know the World’s Worst Secret, by Doris Sanford. There is also a coloring book published by Hazelden titled Winthrop and Munchie Talk about Alcohol for even younger children. Another good resource for children is the film Twee, Fiddle, & Huff, which teaches children about addiction, how to take good care of themselves, and how to stay safe.
Develop relationships
While simple yet accurate information and building life skills help children of alcoholics immeasurably, perhaps the most important gift you can share with a child is the bonding and attachment derived from healthy relationships.

Building trust is a process, not an event — and time is the key. Simply caring about a child is all that it takes for a relationship to bloom. Listening, regular time together, playing with, validating, respecting, and empowering a child are all important ways of establishing positive connections. Even the best information can end up being useless if there isn’t first a foundation of trust, because children don’t care how much an adult knows until they know how much the adult cares.

And through healthy relationships, a child can build upon his strengths as a result of the conscious modeling provided by a caring adult. Whether we have children of our own or not, many of us can become a nurturing adult in a young child’s life. A child who is desperately in need of such an alliance is sure to be very close by.

Make a difference
Virtually everyone has a part to play — parents, grandparents, relatives, teachers, program directors, and other concerned community members. Whether that role is in creating a solid relationship, providing age-appropriate information, or helping children build positive coping and social skills, adults who reach out in ways in which they are comfortable and capable can make a real difference in a child’s life. Start with the heart — caring about a child is all it takes.

Jerry Moe, MA, is national director of Children’s Programs at Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage, California, and Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas. An Advisory Board Member of the National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA), he is internationally known as an author, lecturer, and trainer on issues for young children from addicted families. Moe received the 2000 Ackerman/Black Award from NACoA for his outstanding work on behalf of children of alcoholics, and in 1993 he was awarded the Marty Mann Award for outstanding communication in the alcoholism and addiction field. His books include Kids’ Power: Healing Games for Children of Alcoholics; Conducting Support Groups for Elementary Children; Discovery… Finding the Buried Treasure; Kids’ Power Too: Words to Grow By; and The Children’s Place… At the Heart of Recovery.

Important messages for children of alcoholics to hear:
* Alcoholism is a sickness.
* It’s not your fault.
* 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.

Teach children from addicted families the Seven Cs:
1. I didn’t cause it.
2. I can’t control it.
3. I can’t cure it.
4. But I can learn to take care of myself by...
5. …Communicating my feelings.
6. …Making healthy choices.
7. …Celebrating myself.

Recommended resources
* Twee, Fiddle, & Huff video (available in English and Spanish), produced by Hazelden: call (800) 328-9000 or visit www.hazelden.org.
* What’s “Drunk,” “Mama?” by Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters: call (757) 563-1600.
* Winthrop and Munchie Talk About Alcohol, by Michael Hacker: call (800) 328-9000 or visit www.hazelden.org.

The other books listed in this article can be purchased from most major bookstores.