

# Living with an Alcoholic Parent

By Deanna Muranelli, Putnam Family & Community Services Prevention Educator, Haldane Central School District

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Growing up in a home with an alcoholic parent is more common than one might think. One in five Americans has lived with an alcoholic family member. Since alcoholism runs in families, these children have a greater risk of becoming alcoholics themselves. These children also exhibit some form of abuse or neglect throughout their childhood. The potential lack of emotional support from a parent can cause a mix of feelings.

Some of the feelings can include the following:

- **Guilt.** The child may see himself or herself as the main cause of the mother's or father's drinking.
- **Anxiety.** The child may worry constantly about the situation at home. He or she may fear the alcoholic parent will become sick or injured, and may also fear fights and violence between the parents.
- **Embarrassment.** Parents may give the child the message that there is a terrible secret at home. The ashamed child does not invite friends home and is afraid to ask anyone for help.
- **Inability to have close relationships.** Because the child has been disappointed by the drinking parent many times, he or she often does not trust others.
- **Confusion.** The alcoholic parent will change suddenly from being loving to angry, regardless of the child's behavior. A regular daily schedule, which is very important for a child, does not exist because bedtimes and mealtimes are constantly changing.
- **Anger.** The child feels anger at the alcoholic parent for drinking, and may be angry at the non-alcoholic parent for lack of support and protection.
- **Depression.** The child feels lonely and helpless to change the situation.

Children are often embarrassed by their home life and do not want others to know there are problems at home. The following behaviors signal a drinking or additional issue at home:

- Failure in school; truancy
- Lack of friends; withdrawal from classmates
- Delinquent behavior, such as stealing or violence
- Frequent physical complaints, such as headaches or stomachaches
- Controlled and/or overachievers
- Abuse of drugs or alcohol; or
- Aggression towards other children
- Risk taking behaviors
- Depression or suicidal thoughts or behavior

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It is important to recognize that children and adolescents will benefit from educational programs on substance use as well as the treatment options and support groups offered for alcohol addiction. These children are four times more likely to become an alcoholic and education or therapy may greatly reduce this risk.

The Putnam Family & Community Services Substance Use Prevention Education Team addresses these issues through presentations, discussion and activities which help students understand alcoholism, identify and manage emotions they may be experiencing, and seek help from the school and community resources available to them. Our Prevention Educators are on site at participating schools/school districts to work with students on a day to day basis and assist with both education and early intervention when required. They work closely with school staff to identify children who may need additional help based on the signs and symptoms observed, and can assist with referral to the needed services as required including counseling services in the PFCS Substance Use Clinic for parents or family members.

### *Resources:*

[http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/Facts\\_for\\_Families\\_Pages/Children\\_Of\\_Alcoholics\\_17.aspx](http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families_Pages/Children_Of_Alcoholics_17.aspx) --American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry