

PREVENTION WORKS!

CHILDREN LIVING IN STRESSFUL ENVIRONMENTS: A RESOURCE KIT

VII. Talking Points

- Children who live in stressful environments include (but are not necessarily limited to):¹
 - Children of alcoholics/addicts (COAs);
 - Children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD);
 - Children in families with mental health disorders;
 - Children in families with disabilities, HIV, or chronic illness;
 - Children who have been abused/witnessed abuse;
 - Children of military personnel/veterans or who live on/close to military bases;
 - Children of divorced or absent parents/orphaned or foster children;
 - Children of immigrants or in bicultural families;
 - Children who have experienced disasters; and
 - Children who are homeless.
- These children are at increased risk for substance abuse, mental disorders, and other serious problems, including physical illness.
- Although many of these children will demonstrate resiliency and may gain valuable skills and lessons learned from adverse circumstances in their lives, they are more likely than children who do not experience such stresses to develop serious problems of their own.
- When the stressors in their lives stem from destructive adult behavior, children may grow up to repeat similar patterns, carrying the cycle of addiction and other trouble to future generations.
- For example, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) estimates that: “. . . children of alcoholics (COAs) are between 4 and 10 times more likely to become alcoholics themselves than are children who have no close relatives with

¹ For example, the Urban Institute’s National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF) survey has measured six “stressful family environments” relating to economic status, health, and access to health care but not in relationship to substance abuse in either adults or children. Based on their criteria for stressful circumstances, however, the NSAF study concluded that “family stress is associated with behavioral and emotional problems” and estimated that 22 percent of children under age 18 lived in what NSAF deemed stressful family environments. A PDF file about the study is available at www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/anf_b17.pdf.

alcoholism. COAs also are more likely to begin drinking at a young age and to progress to drinking problems more quickly.²

- “Given recent research indicating the negative impact of alcohol use on neurodevelopment of adolescents, the relationship of ACEs [Adverse Childhood Experiences] to early initiation of alcohol use is particularly worrisome,” notes Robert F. Anda, M.D., M.S., co-principal investigator of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)–Kaiser Permanente ACE survey.³
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA’s) Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) points out that COAs “may have increased resilience when they benefit from the efforts of supportive adults.”⁴ Research has revealed that many children with drug- or alcohol-dependent parents benefit tremendously from adult efforts to help and encourage them. Children who cope best with the traumatic effects of living in families where there is alcoholism or drug addiction often trace their sense of well-being to support from a nonalcoholic parent, family member, teacher, or other significant adult in their lives.⁵
- Substance abuse contributes to and increases stress in the lives of children, as do many other stressful environments in which many of them live, either temporarily or over the course of many years. Substance abuse is often a link between problems in the lives of parents and other caregivers⁶ and between the kinds of stress likely to increase the chances that a child will engage in substance abuse.
- Just as adults with substance abuse problems may have multiple problems in their lives, environments that are stressful to children may co-occur as well. For example, 41 to 65 percent of individuals with a lifetime substance abuse disorder also have a lifetime history of at least one mental disorder.⁷
- Children who live in a stressful environment are more likely to experience additional adverse consequences in their lives, and the more of these present in the lives of children,

² National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (January 2006). *Underage drinking: Why do adolescents drink, what are the risks, and how can underage drinking be prevented?* Alcohol Alert No. 67. Rockville, MD: NIH. Retrieved March 19, 2008, from <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/AA67/AA67.pdf>.

³ Anda, R. F. (n.d.). *The health and social impact of growing up with alcohol abuse and related adverse childhood experiences: The human and economic costs of the status quo*. Rockville, MD: National Association for Children of Alcoholics. Retrieved March 19, 2008, from www.nacoa.org/pdfs/Anda%20NACoA%20Review_web.pdf.

⁴ CSAP. (2003). *Children’s program kit: Supportive education for children of addicted parents; Children of alcoholics: Important facts, 2–9*. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA.

⁵ SAMHSA, CSAP. *Hot topics: Children and addiction*. DHHS Publication No. (SMA) 01-3544. Retrieved January 4, 2008, from <http://csat.samhsa.gov/publications/youcanhelp.aspx>.

⁶ The 2005 *Prevention Works! Substance Abuse and Other Problems Resource Kit*, available to NPN members on the password-protected *Prevention Works!* Web site, examines several of these linkages, primarily from the perspective of adult substance abuse.

⁷ SAMHSA. (2002). *SAMHSA report to Congress on the prevention and treatment of co-occurring substance abuse disorders and mental disorders*. Retrieved March 19, 2008, from www.samhsa.gov/reports/congress2002/CoOccurringrpt.pdf.

the greater the likelihood that they will turn to alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs early in life; develop mental health problems; and/or acquire other serious problems.

- In addition to encouraging the efforts of supportive adults, SAMHSA's CSAP says that group programs facilitated by nurturing adults can reduce feelings of isolation, shame, and guilt among COAs and encourage positive peer influence and mutual support. Helping such children develop competencies like forming and sustaining close relationships, expressing their feelings, and problem-solving can increase their resilience.⁸ All children who live in stressful environments need and deserve help and support.

⁸ CSAP. (2003). *Children's program kit: Supportive education for children of addicted parents; Children of alcoholics: Important facts*, 2–9. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA.