

Your family and alcohol



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Is alcohol affecting your family?

When someone in a family drinks too much or too often, their behaviour can affect the entire family. In Ireland, we accept a lot of the harm caused by alcohol which can mask significant problems for both parents and children. Research highlights that 1 in 10 Irish parents reported that children experienced one or more harms as a result of someone else's drinking in the past twelve months.†

Behavioural changes

Problem drinking and its effect on the family depends on who is drinking – a teenager, adult child, spouse or partner – and how much and how often they are drinking. In its more advanced form, problem drinking can result in aggression, irritability, verbal and emotional abuse, rudeness, criticism and domineering behaviour.

Physical aggression can range from threatening to pushing, punching, hitting and breaking furniture or other objects.

Often, the problem drinker will lie and blame others for their behaviour to protect themselves.

If this is happening in your family, you may experience ongoing stress and strain, chaos and disruption. This may impact on your self image and self confidence and leave you feeling powerless to change the situation especially if you have been dealing with it over many years.

Alcohol may be a problem for your family if any of these sound familiar:

- Family relationships are strained or damaged due to drinking.
- There are money problems because of drinking.
- There are arguments when drinking or about the consequences of drinking.
- Accidents and injuries happen because of drinking.
- Drinking and dealing with its after-effects becomes the focus of family life.

Some common responses include:

- Resignation or inaction in relation to the person and their behaviour.
- Standing up to the person and their behaviour.
- Withdrawal and non-engagement with the person as a form of self protection.
- Focusing on the problem drinker at the expense of your own needs.
- Believing the person has to hit “rock bottom” before they will be ready to change.

Parenting and alcohol

If a parent is regularly drinking too much and too often, it can get in the way of their parenting and can cause problems for their children.

Children rely on their parents for food, clothes, and a safe and warm environment. Children also need care, support and clear and consistent boundaries so they can grow and develop into responsible, well-adjusted adults.

Harmful drinking can change a reliable, caring parent into an unpredictable one.

†Hope A. (2013). Alcohol's harm to others in Ireland. Dublin: Health Service Executive

Drinking too much or too often can disrupt important family routines such as mealtimes, school and bedtimes. This creates worry and fear for children.

You or your spouse or partner doesn't have to be dependent on alcohol for your drinking to affect your child. Regular, harmful drinking can also cause problems.

Ways in which a parent's drinking can affect their child

A parent's drinking can affect their child's physical, emotional and social development. Often, children suffer in silence. This is known as hidden harm, as these children often do not have the words to describe what they are going through or feel ashamed to talk about what is happening in their family for fear of being disloyal. They may not be noticed by anyone unless the child behaves in a very different way to their normal behaviour.

How do children experience harmful drinking?

For some children, harmful parental drinking can shape their every moment, from the time they wake up to the time they go to bed.

- Will Mam or Dad drink today?
- What mood will they be in?
- Will I go to bed hungry?

This kind of uncertainty can lead to deep insecurities in a child. For example, as a result, a child can be feeling anxious and depressed which can affect their ability to concentrate in school.

Some children take on the role of a parent in the family, making sure brothers and sisters are fed, getting them dressed and out to school, and trying to protect them from verbal or physical abuse. This takes its toll on a child and often can affect these children into their adult lives.

Helping your children understand

Children can recognise and understand far more about their parents' problems than parents realise. Children sense tension, conflict and know something is not right but may not know the cause. Therefore, it is important that children are protected as much as possible from the effects of drinking.

Try to see the family from the child's point of view by listening to them and by taking action to make things easier for them.

Make sure your children are looked after and protect them as much as possible from the effects of the drinking. Listen to your children. Ask how they are.

A stable adult taking notice of a child's mood and making sure that the comforting family routines of bedtimes and mealtimes are followed can make a huge difference to a child's life.

Family members' reactions to the problem drinker often set the tone for the family atmosphere. The information and support you receive about how best to respond will in turn help your children.

Resistance is common, recovery is possible

It can be very challenging trying to help someone come to terms with their drinking. However, when a parent gets effective help for their harmful drinking, there can be real benefits for their children and the entire family.

- If you are worried about someone, the first step is to acknowledge that their drinking is causing problems. In conversation with the person it is important to be firm and respectful but you can be direct and refuse to make excuses for them or rationalise their reasons for their drinking.
- Don't isolate yourself from your friends and family. Ask for help and support. There are people who can help you. You are not betraying anyone by talking about what is happening for you and your family.
- Talk with your children about what's happening in a way that they can understand without overburdening them whether it's your alcohol use or your partner's alcohol use that's causing problems.

If you are affected by a family member's drinking, it's important to remember that:

- You cannot control someone else's drinking.
- You are not to blame for their drinking.
- You cannot fix their drinking problem.
- You are not alone.
- You do not have to accept abusive or dangerous behaviour.

What can you do?

- Take your life back – you need to look after yourself first if you want to continue to care for your family/children.
- Talk to the person who has the drinking problem and tell them how their behaviour is affecting you with 'I feel' statements. Let them know that it is not acceptable to behave badly.
- Talk to your local alcohol and drug service, addiction counsellor or GP (family doctor) for help and support for yourself, your relative or friend. Talking can help you to understand what is happening within your family and how best to respond to the problem drinker.
- Realise that recovery can take time.
- Realise that decisions about what to do can be difficult. Only you can decide the choices you can best live with.
- Take time out for yourself – go for a walk, spend time on your own, meet a friend.
- Try to engage with a family support programme specific to addiction.
- Use the helpful resources listed on the back of this leaflet.

Sources of help

HSE

If you are concerned about your own drinking or that of a family member, visit **askaboutalcohol.ie** for information concerning problem drinking and effects on family life and children.

Contact the **Alcohol and Drugs Helpline** for information and support services.

Call **1800 459 459**

from Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 5.30pm

or email **helpline@hse.ie**

For information on other drugs visit **drugs.ie**

Other supports:

Al Anon: alanon.ie, phone: **(01) 873 2699**

Family Support Network: fsn.ie,

phone: **(01) 898 0148**

The Rise Foundation: therisefoundation.ie,

phone: **(01) 764 5131**

For Children:

Barnardos: barnardos.ie, phone: **1850 222 300**

Barnardos Publications: (1) Helping Teenagers to Cope with a Parent's Problem Drug or Alcohol Use

(2) Coping with a Parent's Problem Drug or Alcohol Use for children age 6-12yrs.

<https://shop.barnardos.ie/26-parenting-positively?p=2>

Childline: childline.ie, phone: **1800 66 66 66**

Reach Out: ie.reachout.com

If you are concerned about the safety or welfare of a child living with parents who have an alcohol problem, you can contact **Tusla**, the Child and Family Agency, for advice on **(01) 771 8500**.

If you think a child is at immediate risk of harm, contact the **Gardaí** on **112** or **999**.