

Aug 2025

## LSCP factsheet: parental substance use problems

### What are parental substance use problems?

Most parents<sup>1</sup> who drink alcohol or use drugs do so in moderation. However, this can become a substance use problem if they engage in excessive and harmful drinking or drug use or if they are dependent on alcohol or drugs (including prescription drugs).

### Why does it matter for safeguarding?

Parents who have a substance use problem can have chaotic and unpredictable lifestyles which can make it hard to recognise and meet their children's needs: this may result in children being at increased risk of a number of harms.

#### Neglect

Parents who have a substance use problem may have difficulty:

- Staying organised and providing their children with good routines;
- Keeping their home and family clean;
- Recognising and respond to their children's physical needs, like food and clean clothes;
- Paying for food, clothing and essential bills;
- Keeping the home safe from harmful substances and equipment;
- Providing good supervision, especially if they lose consciousness.

#### Emotional abuse

Parents who have a substance use problem might be:

- Emotionally unavailable for their children;
- Less responsive to their babies and children;
- Less willing to engage in meaningful play, stimulation and interaction;
- Less able to respond in ways to encourage further action;
- Irrational, unpredictable or withdrawn.

#### Physical abuse & Domestic abuse

Parents with substance use problems may have difficulty controlling their own emotions. Harmful and excessive drinking can contribute to child physical abuse or domestic abuse.

### How might this impact children?

As well as increasing the risks of children experiencing abuse and neglect, parental substance use problems can adversely impact children's health and development.

#### Pregnancy

During pregnancy, alcohol and drug use can put unborn babies at risk of birth defects, premature birth, being born underweight and developing withdrawal symptoms. Unborn children might also be at risk of developing [fetal alcohol spectrum disorder](#) (FASD).

---

<sup>1</sup> We use the term parents to refer to parents and carers

Aug 2025

### Emotional & Psychological

Parental substance use problems have been linked to the development of insecure, disorganised attachment patterns. Children might feel unloved and unwanted. They can present with higher rates of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.

### Educational & Cognitive

Children of parents with chronic substance use problems are likely to have more problems at school in terms of learning needs including possible learning difficulties, reading problems, poor concentration, generally low performance, disruptive behaviour and higher rates of absence.

### Social & Behavioural

Children might find it more difficult to form healthy relationships and might show increased likelihood of aggressive or withdrawn behaviour. There is also a greater risk of them developing a substance use problem as they grow older.

## What safeguarding responsibilities are associated with parental substance use problems?

### Report

If you are concerned that parental substance use problems are impacting, or likely to impact, the health and development of a child or unborn child you should report these concerns based on [threshold of need](#) following your organisational safeguarding procedures.

### Assess

Practitioners must work with children and families to identify and assess concerns and intervene appropriately. Assessments must be holistic and consider the child's development and parental ability to meet the child's needs.

### Review

Children's needs exist on a continuum and so it is important there are regular reviews to establish whether there are any changes to the child's development or parental ability to meet the child's needs which change the threshold of intervention and level of response.

## What does an effective assessment look like?

An effective assessment **must** consider the child's health and development **and** the parent's ability to meet the child's needs, along with wider family and environmental contexts.

They should:

- ☒ Focus on the child and their needs. Consider:
  - ☒ Are they at increased risk of abuse and neglect?
  - ☒ Has their health and development been impaired, or likely to be impaired?
  - ☒ Is the home safe, for example, could the child accidentally access or consume substances?
- ☒ Be clear about what life is like for the child, based on their own voice.

Aug 2025

- ☑ Be clear about any actual or likely impact on the child's health and development.
- ☑ Consider if the child has any caring responsibilities.
- ☑ Contain detail about parental drug and alcohol use. They should specify what substances are consumed with what frequency and be clear about the impact on parenting ability.
- ☑ Consider the precipitating factors for parental substance use problems and identify appropriate support and interventions.
- ☑ Consider the wider environment, including support networks, housing and finances.
- ☑ Involve the views of non-resident parents and extended family and friends.
- ☑ Triangulate information, and seek expertise, from other services, including health services, substance use services and criminal justice agencies as appropriate.

### What does an effective review look like?

Effective reviews are child focussed. The question at the heart of an effective review is whether the things that have been done make any difference to the child's life and whether the risk has reduced.

It is not just about whether an action has been completed, but the difference it has made. So, for example, if a parent has engaged with a substance use service the review should seek to establish what has changed for the child as a result.

Effective reviews require multiagency input and expertise. If, for example, a parent has reduced or stopped their substance use then we would want the expertise from their support worker as to whether or not this is sustainable.

Effective reviews should always have a contingency plan. This means that if substance use has reduced or stopped, there should be a plan in place to both identify any change *and* take action if there is a change.

### Further reading:

- [London Safeguarding Children Procedures: parents who misuse substances](#)
- [Research in practice: the impact of parental substance misuse on child development](#)
- [NSPCC learning: parents with substance use problems](#)