



Central Office: 505 Silas Deane Highway, Wethersfield, CT 06109 Phone (860) 721-2822 Fax (860) 721-2823

Berlin: 240 Kensington Road, Berlin, CT 06037 Phone (860) 828-7017 Fax (860) 828-9248

Newington: 131 Cedar Street, Newington, CT 06111 Phone (860) 665-8586 Fax (860) 665-8533

Rocky Hill: 761 Old Main Street, Rocky Hill, CT 06067 Phone (860) 258-2770 Fax (860) 258-2767

www.ccthd.org

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Children of Alcoholics also Need Help

February 2, 2002 was the beginning of National Children of Alcoholics Week. We are all familiar with alcoholism and the many related physical, emotional, and social problems associated with this disease. We may even be aware that organizations exist to help the spouses and children of alcoholics, but few of us appreciate the importance of help and support for these collateral victims of alcoholism.

At present, according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, there are an estimated 26.8 million children of alcoholics living in the United States; over 11 million are under the age of 18. In addition, 76 million Americans, or about 43% of the U.S. adult population, have been exposed to alcoholism in the family. And 1 in 5 American adults (18%) lived with an alcoholic while growing up. These figures are important because they reflect a sizable portion of the population at risk for physical, social, and emotional problems throughout their lives.

Physically, children of an alcoholic parent are 4 times more likely to develop alcoholism than children of non-alcoholics. This is partially because genetic factors play a role in the development of the disease (studies reveal that 1/3 of alcoholics have at least one parent who is alcoholic), and partially because children base their own drinking behavior on their perceptions of their parents' drinking patterns. They accept alcohol related forms of behavior as "normal." Children of alcoholics are more likely to marry into families where alcoholism is prevalent than children of non-alcoholics.

Cognitively and emotionally, children of alcoholics also fare poorly compared to their peers from non-alcoholic families. They have lower self-esteem, show symptoms of depression and anxiety (crying, bed wetting, fear of attending school, difficulty making friends, nightmares), score lower on tests measuring verbal and cognitive skills, and have impaired ability to express themselves. These children are more likely to repeat grades in school, score lower on IQ, verbal, reading, and math tests, and not graduate from high school. A child living in an alcoholic home often feels guilty, embarrassed, angry, and confused, and frequently has difficulty forming close relationships.

Society, too, suffers from the rippling effects of alcoholism. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry notes that alcohol is "a key factor in 68% of manslaughters, 62% of assaults, 54% of murders and attempted murders, 48% of robberies, and 44% of burglaries." This is in addition to the tremendous losses in lives and property damage due to alcohol related motor vehicle accidents. Separated and divorced men and women are 3 times more likely to report the presence of alcoholism and drinking problems in their spouse than adults who remain married. Children of alcoholics frequently witness family violence and often are the targets of physical abuse and other forms of child abuse. They are more likely to be truant and require referrals to counselors and psychiatrists. They experience greater physical and mental health problems than children of non-alcoholic parents, requiring in-patient treatment 2 to 3 times more often. The total health care costs for children of alcoholics is 32% higher than for children from non-alcoholic families. It is estimated that alcoholism and related problems cost our society \$166 billion each year.

Young children of alcoholics grow up to be adult children of alcoholics who continue to have problems. Their self-esteem is low, they have difficulty expressing feelings and developing healthy intimate relationships, feel isolated and alone, have difficulty in problem-solving and completing projects, act impulsively, and lie unnecessarily. Because they have no frame of reference for a “normal” life, they have difficulty having fun, constantly seek approval, judge themselves harshly, and demonstrate extreme loyalty even when it is neither necessary nor deserved. They may act completely irresponsibly, or be overly responsible.

Not all children of alcoholic parents develop problems, however. Some children thrive despite the problems at home. A study of these resilient children revealed they shared several characteristics, including being able to obtain positive attention from other people, possessing average intelligence, having adequate communication skills, a caring attitude, a desire to achieve, and a belief in self-help. Nearly all children of alcoholics can benefit from educational programs and help groups such as Al-Anon and Alateen. Professional counseling can also help these children to understand they are not responsible for their parents’ drinking problems, and they can get support and develop coping strategies. They may also develop more resiliency if non-alcoholic adults help them become autonomous and independent, to view their experiences from a constructive standpoint, to engage in acts to help others, and to develop strong social skills. If one parent is non-alcoholic, he or she can protect the children by maintaining healthy family rituals (such as sharing meals, vacations, holidays), providing consistent significant others in their children’s lives, and confronting the alcoholic with his or her problem. Adult children of alcoholics may choose to obtain professional help to assist them in learning skills for relating to others, accepting themselves and making positive changes while not judging themselves too harshly, and discovering strengths and talents and building on them.

A number of resources exist to learn more about alcoholism and children of alcoholics. Adult Children of Alcoholics World Service Organization, Inc. at (310) 534-1815, www.adultchildren.org, the Counseling Center at the University of Indiana at www.couns.uiuc.edu, the Adult Children Educational Foundation at (703)821-2925, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at www.aacap.org, and the National Association for Children of Alcoholics at (301) 468-0985 and nacoa@erols.com all offer valuable information.