

## The Impact of Alcohol Use and Alcohol Abuse on Children

Alcohol is a psychoactive substance whose properties are linked to dependence due to its ability to suppress the central nervous system at high doses. It is a common beverage used in most social gatherings, and most of the times, societies overlook the health and social damages it can cause. Although drinking alcoholic beverages is regarded as a way to celebrate, socialize, or relax, drinking too much to deal with life pressures has negative consequences. It is estimated that alcoholism accounts for the global burden of disease in 7% males and 2% females. Additionally, according to WHO, globally, alcohol consumptions is linked to 3 million deaths annually. In this bulletin, we will tackle the impact of parental alcohol use and abuse on children's development.

### Alcohol Use

Alcohol use is a broad term that usually means using alcohol from a single occasion through alcohol dependence. Lower doses of alcohol can induce feelings of euphoria and talkativeness. Moderate alcohol use for healthy adults includes taking one drink daily for women and up to two drinks for men. The gender differences is because the metabolism of alcohol is different in men and women. A drink is 355 ml of beer, 148ml of wine, or 44ml of distilled spirit. There is a thin line between moderate and heavy use of alcohol. At first, individuals may start to consume alcohol to have a good time and unwind. However, when there is trouble, e.g., when pressures in life set in, one is not able to control their drinking patterns then it becomes a problem.

### Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol abuse refers to drinking an excessive amount of alcohol over a long period leading to a lack of control of one's drinking behaviour. Alcoholism is also known as alcohol use disorder and is the most severe form of alcohol abuse. Individuals who struggle with alcoholism often become dependent and feel that they cannot normally function without alcohol. Experts define alcohol use disorder as:

- Inability to fulfil ones' major responsibilities/tasks at work, school, or at home.
- Continued drinking even when its harmful to drink, e.g., drinking while driving
- Recurrent alcohol-related crimes
- Continued drinking despite persistent interpersonal or social problems.



Individuals with alcohol use disorder cannot stop drinking once started until they reach their tolerance level and have withdrawal symptoms such as sweating, shakiness, anxiety and nausea.

### How often do we see Alcohol abuse?

Globally, men are more likely to be affected with a burden of 7.4% compared to women with a burden of 1.1%. In Kenya, the prevalence of alcohol use disorder in males is 7.1% and 0.9% in females. Alcoholism can cause serious problems to an individual's organs, such as the liver and the brain. It is estimated that globally, 3 million people die annually because of alcohol-related problems accounting for 5.3% of all deaths.

### Effects of exposure to alcohol abuse and its consequences on children

Alcoholism does affect not only an individual but also those around him/her. Research has established that children as young as 3 to 5 years old can recognize alcoholic beverages by their smell. Second, children as young as 3 years have developed alcohol schema, and that children as young as age 8 years have developed a concept of alcoholic drinks.

### Genetic influence and congenital disability

The effect of parental alcohol abuse on their offspring is well established even during the conception period. For example, maternal drinking during pregnancy is linked to fetal alcohol syndrome, which the child will have to live with throughout their lifetime. Moreover, babies whose fathers consume excessive alcohol when trying to conceive are likely to experience impairment in their brain development.

### Poor emotional development and mental wellbeing

Children in families where alcohol use dominates family life are at risk as their parents may not have the ability to provide a safe environment. Moreover, such parents cannot provide for the child's psychosocial needs, which can cause adverse long-term effects such as emotional and behavior problems and other mental health problems. The mental health problems such children arise from deprived affection and unloving parents. Leaving with a parent struggling with alcoholism may lead to feelings of rejections due to a lack of warmth from the parent. Rejection by parents impacts a child's self-esteem and has serious consequences on their future parenting capacity. Children can get sad, frustrated, depressed, and anxious because they feel helpless when they see their parents intoxicated with alcohol.

### Increased risk for behavior problems

Parents with alcohol use disorder often have unpredictable behavior, which creates an unstable home environment. Such environments are chaotic and may lead to children's behavior problems. Children living under such circumstances are likely to be aggressive, angry and engage in antisocial behavior as a coping strategy to their situation. Moreover,

such children likely get involved with the criminal justice system due to minor crimes committed or delinquent behavior.

### Inappropriate modelling

The family is the basic unit where children get socialized. Children learn behaviour through observing and interacting with those they are closest to. Parents act as models for their children's future behaviour and pass on the next generation's drinking culture. Children's negative experiences of their parents' alcohol use seem to be more related to the adverse consequences of drinking than drinking *per se*.

- First, the children will feel guilty and embarrassed about their parent's behavior. The adult may think that he/she is funny and witty when drunk, but the child instead thinks of the behavior as strange.
- Second, children may develop anxiety issues as they are so worried and uncertain about what might happen next, especially if the intoxicated parent engage in any form of abuse.
- Third, they might develop anger as a coping mechanism due to the avoidance of fear and confusion in their life. They may also be angry at the other non-drinking parent they may view as having failed to protect them. Children may also become angry at the drinking parent and fail to form a good relationship with them.
- Lastly, children may develop depression as they struggle with esteem issues and social phobias. Research has also established that children with heavy drinking parents show an increased likelihood of heavy drinking in adolescence and adulthood.

### **What if the parents drinking alcohol in the presence do not get intoxicated, violent, or abusive?**

Some parents use alcohol responsibly and give a stern warning to their children to never use alcohol; that is, they drink wine and preach water. Other parents may be permissive and even offer a few sips to their children. Regardless of which point this is done, early-onset alcohol use is significantly associated with an increased likelihood of developing alcohol problems in adolescence and alcohol use disorders in adulthood. Moreover, alcohol is also one of the gateway drugs in the progression into illicit drug use. It is likely that even if children are warned against taking alcohol, they may be curious to experiment with the euphoria of drinking alcohol and drink in secret. Perhaps children pay less attention to their parents' spoken cautions about drinking when the parents are smokers and drinkers than when the parents are nonusers. The effect of parental substance use behavior on adolescent behavior suggests that what parents communicate nonverbally by what they do is more important than what they say. On the other hand, perhaps some parents who drink alcohol provide convincing arguments to their children against use and hence buffer the example of their behavior.

### Risk for later child Alcohol Abuse

Even in families with permissive parents, it is clear that alcohol sipping or tasting by young children occurs most often in the family context and that it may reflect explicit family socialization into alcohol use. At the same time, parental drinking and parental approval of teen drinking do relate to adolescent drinking, the child's personal characteristics matter. For instance, some children will never drink alcohol even if their parents allowed them to drink, while some children will abuse alcohol even if their parents were non-abusers and clearly explained to them the dangers of alcohol use. This is because;

1. We all have different genetic predispositions to alcoholism
2. Differences in tolerance of deviant behavior
3. Parental drinking behavior is further exacerbated by involvement in delinquent and other problem behaviors
4. The child's perceptions of peer approval and models.

For parents who abuse alcohol, the chaotic home environment may lead to depression and other mental health problems in their children. Therefore, children may start drinking alcohol as a coping mechanism to their problems.

### Child maltreatment

Child maltreatment refers to all forms of physical, emotional, sexual abuse, neglect and other exploitations to the child that lead to potential harm to the child's health, dignity, development, and survival.

Children whose parents have alcohol use disorder are likely to experience maltreatment as follows:

- Excessive alcohol use by parents and caregivers reduces their ability to feel responsible and reduces the number of resources (time, money etc.) spent on their children. Therefore, children are likely to be neglected as parents fail to meet their basic needs.
- Alcohol abuse can impair the cognitive and physical functioning of an individual. This may lead to a lack of self-control and violence to the people around them, including children.
- The association between alcohol abuse and mental health problems are well established. In addition, parental poor mental health increases the risks of child maltreatment.

## Impact on parenting

Parents struggling with alcoholism are likely to reverse their parenting roles and rely on their children for their psychosocial support. Children may feel confused over their roles as they have to look after their parent rather than vice versa. Most of the children in such homes are likely to start taking care of their family at an early age and become caregivers to their younger siblings. These responsibilities become a burden and affect their school achievement and ability to socialize with their peers. In addition to the chaotic and unstable family environment, poor parenting makes children get inadequate parental care. Chronic exposure to such environments makes children perceive such environments as normal and are likely to replicate the same toxic environment to their children in future.

## What can be done?

### 1. Providing information

Information on alcohol use and abuse and its impact on the should be easily accessible to parents. There is also a need for a continuous general public awareness campaign that enlighten the communities to talk about their struggles with alcoholism openly. This will reduce stigma to the affected families and help families realize that there are avenues for non-judgemental support. Creating awareness should also be done in schools so that the affected children do not face barriers to seeking help.

Additionally, all parents/caregivers should develop clear and healthy communication with their children and talk openly about alcohol and substance use and its effects. Parents should not give stern warnings but explain why they should not drink alcohol at their age. Parents who use alcohol and allow a few sips for their children are crucial to educating children on what it means to see them drinking. Explain to the children what this means to them; they are more susceptible to engaging in drinking behaviour at early onset and teach them how this may affect their lives.

### 2. Screening and early identification

Stakeholders working with children should be aware of the impact of parental alcoholism on children and identify the signs exhibited by such children. These signs can include absenteeism, withdrawal from class activities, avoidance of topics concerning their homes, poor personal hygiene etc. All the stakeholders working with parents and children should be equipped with adequate knowledge and skills to screen and assess parental suspected alcoholism and refer such parents to receive appropriate care.

### 3. Prevention and early intervention

Parents whose alcohol behavior is detected at an early stage can get interventions to prevent further harm to the child's health. Pregnant mothers should access specialised prenatal and antenatal care to screen for any health-related issues that are associated with alcoholism.

### 4. Support for children

Children should be supported so that they become resilient. When children have good social

support outside the family, they can rebuild their confidence, high self-esteem, positive relationships, and problem-solving skills. It is essential to assess the needs of the specific children and offer psychosocial services tailored to their needs. Counselling and general support to help them deal with the disruption caused in their home environment will help them deal with emotional and behavioral problems they may be exhibiting. The following are some of the services that can be offered:

- Assessment on the impact of parental alcohol use disorder on the child's development
- Opportunities for group or individual counselling to discuss what they are going through
- Provision of recreational activities to compensate for lack of such activities at home rebuild self-esteem and confidence.
- Offer interventions to build resilience and offer support.

#### **5. Support for parents**

It is crucial to identify the needs of the parents and understand the issues involved in being a parent and offer the needed support.

Parents should be provided with services geared to increase awareness on the impact of their behavior on children and improve their parenting skills. The following are some of the support services that can be offered to parents with alcohol use disorder to enhance their parenting:

- Group or individual counselling services tailored to discuss the underlying problem that cause alcohol problems.
- Practical assistance to help them with reducing the burden of maintaining a home e.g budgeting.
- Provision of general life skills with a particular focus on anger management and communication skills to reduce arguments and violence at home.
- Parenting skills and establishing boundaries at home to help the children's behavior may be affected by their drinking behavior.

#### **6. Availability of rehabilitation centres**

Some parents may need specialized care to treat alcohol use disorder. It is therefore, essential to ensure that such residential and out-patient services are available for effective treatment. Additionally, residential rehabilitation centres may provide an opportunity for the parent and the child to be away from each other for a short period apart which may be beneficial as the parent can focus on treatment.

Families should also be provided with interventions programs that focus on the family.

#### **7. Policies that offer support to families affected by alcohol abuse**

There is a need to develop policies that support families who are affected by alcoholism in Kenya. The government should provide a budget to support children's basic needs who are directly affected by their caregiver's alcohol abuse to reduce neglect.

There is a need for the Kenyan government to recognize that alcohol abuse is a major



problem and create a social burden and an economic burden to the country.

There should be a clear government referral functional system for families affected by alcoholism which can either be accessed for free or at affordable charges.

### Summary

Alcohol abuse is a problem that affects most Kenyan children, and there is an urgent need to address this problem. The impact of parental alcohol use/abuse has far-reaching consequences throughout a child's life course. In addition, children whose caregivers/parents have alcohol problem are likely to have various developmental impairment, which has severe implications in society. Therefore, there is a need for creating awareness on the impact of alcohol abuse and provide much-needed support and intervention programs to the affected families.