

How can I help my child if my partner is addicted?

OTHER TITLES

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WHEN YOUR PARTNER HAS A PROBLEM, it affects the whole family. You may be learning to deal with the drinking, the drug use or the gambling because you love your partner. But you probably worry about your children. Perhaps you are attending counselling or a support group yourself. If so, you may have learned that there are steps you can take to make this situation a little easier for your child.

Living with an addicted parent can influence your children in many ways. It can affect their physical and emotional health, their ability to trust in people, and the way they feel about themselves. Sometimes, your children may feel that the addiction is their fault, and that it's their job to try to fix the problem. They may believe that they should try to control the behaviour. When they can't, they may feel sad, frustrated, scared, helpless and angry. Of course, children don't cause these problems and they cannot possibly fix them.

It's important for the children of addicted parents to know that they are not alone. Many families are affected by the abuse of alcohol or other drugs, and gambling.

As a parent, you are not alone either. There are addiction and mental health services to help families an addiction problem, and there are other resources you can turn to. This information sheet contains some suggestions that may help you reach out to your child.

Typically, children living in families where there is an addiction learn three rules: don't talk, don't trust and don't feel. These rules may never be said aloud, but they are silently absorbed within the family. The results are not healthy for children.

Don't talk

Many children try desperately to keep the addiction a secret. They learn to hide the problem, and not talk about it. They may be embarrassed or ashamed of the

addiction, or they may think that nobody will understand. You can help your children to overcome this fear. Encourage them to talk to you about their feelings.

At first, your child may not be able to find the right words to express their feelings. Talking about feelings will be a new experience, and it takes time to learn how to put feelings into words. You may want to use the "Feelings Word Search" on the activity page. This will help give your child some words to use so that they can begin to put names to their feelings. Your child may also want to draw pictures to show how they feel at different times.

Don't trust

In many families, children learn that they can't trust their addicted parent. This is because people who are addicted often make promises they can't keep. You can help your child learn to trust again by showing that they can trust you. When you follow through on your own promises, and do what you said you were going to do, your example makes a big difference to your child.

When your partner is unable to make a commitment, explain why to your child. Be open and honest about the problem. Lying about the reason for your partner's behaviour will only give your child more reason not to trust. And there is no reason why you should try to make excuses for your partner's behaviour. That sort of response is called "enabling behaviour." It's an easy habit to fall into, but it doesn't

help. Your child knows there is a problem, and needs your understanding and support. You can help your child by assuring them that the addiction, and the behaviour that goes along with it, are not their fault.

Don't feel

Your children may have kept their feelings bottled up for so long that they have trouble talking openly about them. Try to explain to them why it's important to talk about their feelings. You can point out that when they talk about feelings, they share their sadness and loneliness. They'll feel better and happier if they can let go of the feelings they've kept inside for so long.

Talking about feelings is an important step toward developing emotional health. When you encourage your children to identify and talk about their feelings, you're helping them to understand that these feelings are normal.

Talking about feelings also gives you an opportunity to discuss ways of dealing with those feelings. What do they do when they feel sad? How do they react when they're feeling scared? For example, if your child is angry, it is not okay to hit a friend. It is okay to talk about it, or to go for a run. Explore with your child how they handle their feelings now, and how they might handle those feelings in the future.

When you help your child learn how to deal with their true feelings, you're giving them a valuable tool for coping with life. Children who never learn how to handle feelings are more likely to find other, less healthy ways of coping. They may find themselves eating too much, betting, or trying alcohol or other drugs as a way of managing their feelings.

Try to get your children to tell you how they really feel about the way things are at home. Be open to what they have to say. Reassure them that all feelings are okay; the important thing is to discuss those feelings, and to find healthy ways of dealing with them.

Some common defences

Your son or daughter may be hesitant to acknowledge the feelings they have inside. Children whose lives are unpredictable and unstable often develop their own defences. Defences are the ways they have for taking care of themselves, so that they can avoid being hurt.

A child may act out, or withdraw from the world around them, or try really hard to be perfect. When you know about this behaviour and can recognize it, you can begin to explore what

feelings the child might be trying to hide.

They may be acting out to get attention, withdrawing to hide the addiction from their friends, or trying too hard to be perfect to impress their addicted parent. These are all ways of behaving that children will develop in order to deal with a situation that is beyond their control.

Although these defences help them cope with what is going on in their lives, they can also cause problems. The class clown may get into trouble a lot. The quiet, shy child may be overlooked and forgotten. And the perfectionist may be crushed when something doesn't go right. If you see these type of behaviour in your children, encourage them to talk about how they are really feeling. When they learn to be comfortable with their positive and negative feelings, they can start to believe in their ability to handle difficult emotions and situations.

What you can do

Children need to know that they did not cause the addiction and they can't make it go away. You provide support for your child when you repeat this message, and when you encourage your child to talk honestly about feelings. You also help when you avoid talking about your own adult problems in front of the children. With your guidance they can begin to understand that an addiction is an adult issue, and it is up to the adult to get better.

Even young children can understand that there are some things they can do to make themselves feel better. They can talk about their feelings, spend time with others who understand, make backup plans when their addicted parent doesn't follow through on promises, and have a safety plan ready to use in an emergency.

Feeling safe

If your child doesn't feel safe with your addicted partner, you can talk about this problem with the child. Ask them to describe the times when they have not felt safe. Discuss with them ways of coping in those situations. For example, if they are afraid to drive with your partner because of the adult's use of alcohol or other drugs, you may be able to think of a backup plan. Perhaps they could carry the phone number of an adult they trust, and money to make a phone call.

All children need to feel safe and secure. Help your child to think of people they do feel safe with, and reassure them that it's okay to talk with these people about the addiction, and about what is going on at home.

Coping with an addiction

Although you can always hope that your partner will choose to get help, and encourage them to do so, your son or daughter can still learn to respond to the addiction in healthy ways. The child's life is out of balance, but your understanding will make a difference. Share your hobbies and interests with them. Show them a new skill, and keep high expectations for them. Be a good role model by not abusing alcohol or other drugs, or gambling excessively.

And remember, your children still love your partner, even though they don't like his or her addictive behaviour. Help them to understand that this is okay. It's possible to love someone very much even though the way they are behaving makes you feel sad and disappointed.

Children who grow up in homes where there is a problem with addiction are at greater risk of facing addiction themselves. But most will grow up to be healthy individuals, especially if they have the love and support of a caring adult. You can help your children to be strong and resilient by being the adult they can count on for unconditional love and support.

For more information

We understand that everyone's needs are different. Whether you want to prevent your child from using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, or you want to help your child deal with a drug problem, we can help. Information and prevention programs, group and family counselling, outpatient and residential treatment, and the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs program are offered by Alberta Health Services and its funded services to help your child and your family.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.

Activity Page

S	A	D	M	J	V	X	G	L	A	D	I
C	S	K	B	O	R	E	D	M	R	J	L
A	N	G	R	Y	M	S	J	Q	S	F	D
R	M	U	Z	O	H	Z	B	J	C	R	X
E	X	C	I	T	E	D	G	E	R	U	P
D	L	R	U	Y	L	F	M	A	D	S	Z
A	V	O	K	B	P	U	Y	L	Z	T	M
H	U	R	T	W	L	R	B	O	N	R	H
A	M	L	M	S	E	I	M	U	S	A	Q
P	L	O	V	E	S	O	Q	S	X	T	M
P	O	B	M	R	S	U	F	M	Q	E	Z
Y	R	P	L	E	A	S	E	D	M	D	N

1. Feelings word search

frustrated, bored, glad, hurt, furious, mad, jealous, sad, love, helpless, happy, angry, pleased, excited, scared, joy

How many of these feelings do you have?

Which ones are hard to talk about?

Are there any feelings you would like to tell others?

Tell me about a time when you felt happy.

Tell me about a time when you felt sad.

Tell me about a time when you felt scared.

2. Make a family collage

Encourage your child to look through magazines and newspapers and cut out pictures that remind them of family and friends. On a big piece of paper, have them glue the pictures into a collage. Explain to them that there is no right way to do this. When it is done, ask them to tell you about the pictures. Who do the pictures represent?

3. Design a safety plan

Sit down with your child and have them make a list of all the people they trust on a small piece of paper. It could be their babysitter, grandparents, teachers, baseball coach, or any other adult they feel comfortable with. Beside the names, have them write down the people's phone numbers. On the back of the piece of paper, tape 35 cents. Tell your child that they can carry it with them and when they don't feel safe, they can call one of those people.

4. Make alternative plans

Help your children to identify other people who can do special things with them if Mom or Dad does not follow through on promises.

Attend my hockey game _____

Teach me to rollerblade _____

Attend Parents Day at school _____

Name some other special events, and the people who could be there:
