

Children living in homes where there is a substance use problem need to have the problem explained. Life at home may be chaotic. There may be strange behaviour, arguments and tears. Outside the home, family members may act normal, keeping their problems hidden. If no one explains the problem, children may draw their own, often wrong, conclusions. They may respond to the situation in unhealthy ways. For example, they may:

- take on an unusual amount of family responsibility
- try to be perfect at everything they do
- become withdrawn and isolated
- become aggressive or act out in other ways
- use substances themselves.

Children living in homes where there is a substance use problem are likely to experience a variety of confusing feelings, including:

- worry
- anger
- sadness
- uncertainty
- fear
- blame
- resentment
- guilt
- rejection
- shame.

Children need to know that it's ok to have these feelings, even the scary ones. They need to know that it's all right to reach out for help and to talk about their feelings. Having a healthy, caring, trustworthy adult in their lives can help them to sort things out.

Children in this position need to be helped to:

- identify and express their feelings
- know that other families have similar situations
- realize that they are not responsible for the person's problems or the person's recovery
- understand that recovery is a long and complex process with many ups and downs.

Explaining a substance use problem to children can be difficult and awkward. Give them only the amount of information appropriate to their age group. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind:

- **Toddlers and preschool children** understand simple, short sentences. They need concrete information and not too much technical language. Explain the problem

- simply and then try to make the child's life as normal as possible. After explaining the problem, engage the child in a fun activity.
- **School-aged children** can handle more information than younger children. They might already have had drug information sessions at school. Be prepared to answer their questions honestly.
 - **Teenagers** can manage most information. They will have had drug awareness lessons at school, and may have questions about the substance their relative is using. Teenagers need to discuss their own thoughts and feelings about the situation. They may worry about what other people, especially their peers, think of them and their family. Sharing information encourages teenagers to talk and to ask questions.

What to tell children

- **Let children know that the family member has a problem with alcohol or other drug use.** Explain that this affects the person's behaviour, mood and judgment; when the person is using, he or she may say or do things that same person wouldn't say or do if sober.
- **Reassure children that they did not cause the problem.** Children may blame themselves for the person's problem. Explain that no matter what their behaviour, they did not cause the person to drink or use drugs, nor can they change or stop the way the person behaves. Children may need to hear this often.
- **Tell children that it is not their responsibility to take care of the person with the substance use problem. Children may worry about the person's health.** Explain that it is not their problem to solve. It is an adult's job, such as a doctor's, to look after the person.
- **Encourage children to continue with regular routines and to find other activities and interests outside the home that they enjoy, such as sports or drama.** Allow children to be children. They should not take on the problems of the family home.
- **Help children to identify a trusted adult whom they can contact if they need someone to talk to, or feel unsafe.** Letting children work out who to ask for help can make them feel less isolated and more empowered. Make sure the person knows that the child may call, and that the child has that person's number. If children need to talk to someone but want to stay anonymous, suggest they call the Kids Help Phone (1 800 668-6868).

Outside the home

Talk with children about what to say to people outside the family. Families and children may not want others to know about the substance use problem. They may worry that others would view them negatively if they knew about the problem. However, if friends don't know about the problem, they can't offer support. This support can help everyone cope with the situation. Each family needs to discuss and decide how open to be about this issue. Encourage children to engage in healthy activities with their friends.

During recovery

Once the person with the substance use problem has reached his or her recovery goals, children need to be reassured that the person is again available and interested in them. To re-establish a relationship with the children, the person may need to explain past behaviour and to plan special times together. Children may need to talk about their feelings, and to have those feelings understood and accepted.

Children need to know that recovery takes time and may not be smooth. Recovery is a good opportunity to talk about the problem, to help children process what they have experienced, and to help them prepare for the possibility of relapse.