



Adult and child family members affected by their relatives' heavy alcohol use, drug use, or gambling have a greatly increased risk of ill-health, but they continue to be neglected in research, policy and practice

**family
 harm to others
 addiction**

In terms of research, policy and practice, 'affected family members' (AFMs), both adults and children, continue to be neglected. What research there has been, qualitative and quantitative, paints a fairly clear picture: AFMs experience multiple emotional, social and financial stressors, and disruption of family relationships sometimes involving emotional abuse, 'coercive control' and physical violence. They face difficult coping dilemmas, often struggling to refocus attention on their own rights and needs. AFMs are often left uninformed about what is happening and there are a number of barriers that stand in the way of them receiving the support they need. Research consistently shows AFMs to be at increased risk of ill-health, notably depression for adults and educational, emotional, behavioural, and friendship problems for children, made worse if there is exposure to additional family health or social problems.

This disturbing picture is essentially the same whether the problem is one of alcohol, other drugs or gambling; but there is comparatively little focus on AFMs exposed specifically to alcohol misuse, and the situation of professional/academic neglect is even worse for AFMs exposed to gambling problems.

The total number of AFMs who need help remains unknown but estimates suggest it is very large, constituting in itself a very significant and largely unrecognised public health problem. Professionals are often perceived by AFMs as lacking in knowledge and understanding. It is important that those in specialist and general services such as social work, mental health services, primary care, education and generic youth services, receive better training in understanding and working with children and adult AFMs. Scarcely any intervention methods for AFMs in their own right have been thoroughly researched and none has been adopted widely (let alone as a matter of routine) despite a number of promising methods being reported.

The most important factor is the availability and accessibility of help for child and adult AFMs.

What is needed now is:

- More of a research, policy and practice focus on the affected family members (AFMs) - both adults and children affected by alcohol, drug or gambling problems in the family. Adult AFMs have been particularly neglected; they are an at-risk group themselves and are also often in the best position to protect children in the family.
- Better information about the numbers of adults and children affected by family substance misuse or gambling problems, and about the numbers of services wholly or partly working with them.

- More pre- and post-qualification training about parental and family alcohol misuse and problem gambling for social workers and professionals in a range of other specialist and general services such as primary care, mental health, education and generic youth services.
- Increased availability and accessibility of helpful approaches for AFMs in their own right and wider adoption of, and research into, intervention methods, of which there are a number of promising examples.

READ MORE

Orford, J. (2016) AR Policy Paper 6: [Addiction in the Family - Adult and child family members affected by their relatives' excessive substance use or gambling](#). ALICE RAP

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Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) (2003): [Hidden Harm: responding to the needs of children of problem drug users](#). Report of an inquiry by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. Home Office

Manning, V., Best, D., Faulkner, N., Titherington, E. (2009): [New estimates of the number of children living with substance misusing parents: results from UK national household surveys](#). BMC Public Health 9: 377

Orford, J., Velleman, R., Natera, G., Templeton, L., Copello, A. (2014): [Addiction in the family is a major but neglected contributor to the global burden of adult ill-health](#). Social Science and Medicine, 78, 70-77

Templeton, L., Velleman, R., Hardy, E., Boon, S. (2009): [Young people living with parental alcohol misuse and parental violence: 'No-one has ever asked me how I feel in any of this'](#). Journal of Substance Use, 14, 139-150

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