

# *Sober Parenting Matters*

When a Parent Over-Drinks — Kids Are at Risk

## **FACING THE FACTS**



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# Primer: Children of alcoholic parents

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While a substantial number of children of alcoholics (COAs) experience problems in adulthood, there are many other COAs who become successful adults and show few or no signs of difficulty. Growing up in an alcoholic home does not necessarily mean an individual will develop problems, but it does serve as a very real and significant risk factor.

**14.4M**

Adults had Alcohol Use Disorder in 2018.

**45%**

Of Americans have been exposed to some form of alcoholism in their family.

**10%**

Of all children in America currently live with an alcoholic parent.

Although children try to keep their parent's alcoholism a secret, teachers, relatives, other adults, or friends may sense that something is wrong. Teachers and caregivers should be aware that the following behaviors may signal a drinking or other problem at home:

- **Failure in school** or truancy;
- **Lack of friends** or withdrawal from classmates;
- Delinquent behavior, such as **stealing or violence**;
- Frequent **physical complaints**, such as headaches or stomachaches;
- **Abuse of drugs or alcohol**;
- **Aggression** towards other children;
- **Risk taking** behaviors; and
- **Depression and/or suicidal thoughts** or behavior.

## Did you know?

High achievement may be used as a coping mechanism by adult children of alcoholics. These high achieving children gain praise and attention from outside the alcoholic home in what would be considered socially acceptable ways.

Achievement often becomes an escape for the child from the many stressors and unpredictability that exist in the home environment to a more "normal" functioning world that is predictable and controllable. The child may learn to separate these two environments and use the environment outside the home as a reprieve from home life and as a source of personal validation and worth.

## Four things you need to know about adolescent children of alcoholics:

1

**Children of addicted parents have a high rate of behavioral problems.** One study comparing children of alcoholics (aged 6-17 years) with children of psychiatrically healthy medical patients found that children of alcoholics had elevated rates of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder). Research on behavioral problems demonstrated by children of alcoholics has revealed some of the following traits: **lack of empathy for other persons; decreased social adequacy and interpersonal adaptability; low self-esteem; and lack of control over the environment.** Research has shown that children of addicted parents demonstrate behavioral characteristics and a temperament style that predispose them to future maladjustment.

2

The failure to develop personal autonomy, social skills to deal with interpersonal challenges, and psychological self-reliance can eventually **generate a great deal of anger.** This anger may be experienced in myriad ways by these children, but they also learn that they cannot express the anger directly and overtly for fear of being abandoned.

3

**Children of addicted parents score lower on tests measuring school achievement and they exhibit other difficulties in school.** In one study, 41% of addicted parents reported that at least one of their children repeated a grade in school, 19% were involved in truancy, and 30% had been suspended from school. Children of addicted parents compared to children of non-addicted parents were found at significant disadvantage on standard scores of arithmetic.

4

**Children of addicted parents may benefit from supportive adult efforts to help them.** Group programs reduce feelings of isolation, shame, and guilt among children of alcoholics while capitalizing on the importance to adolescents of peer influence and mutual support. Competencies such as the ability to establish and maintain intimate relationships, express feelings, and solve problems can be improved by building the self-esteem and self-efficacy of children of alcoholics.

Several studies have identified and clarified some of the basic “rules” operating in an alcoholic home:



**1. Don't talk about family problems.**

Problems the family encounters are to stay within the family. It is unacceptable and forbidden to share problems with outsiders.



**2. It is not appropriate to express feelings openly.**

Feelings are often not allowed to be expressed or addressed openly in the alcoholic family system.



**3. Limit communications.** The child may often limit communications with others outside the home in order to maintain the family secrets. In the unpredictable environment, it's also hard to know when an expression will receive a negative response that may also evoke negative consequences.



**4. Nothing is ever good enough,** but you are still expected to strive for unobtainable perfection. Children live within a world of extremes and see things in an absolute or polar manner, while believing they have caused the events that have made them either good or bad. When something bad happens, it occurs because of something he/she did or did not do. The need to be the perfect child (and eventually, the perfect adult) results.



**5. You have to work for the benefit of others and you can't be selfish.** The child who grows up in an alcoholic home is often taught that consideration of one's own personal needs and wishes is inappropriate.



**6. “Do what I say, not as I do.”** Many parents who have problems with alcohol urge their children not to engage in similar behaviors. Unfortunately, the modeling behavior of the parent is a very strong learning tool.



**7. Play is not something you do.** As teenagers and adults, many COAs have trouble relaxing and experiencing personal enjoyment. Self-worth is often predicated on accomplishments, and they can never achieve enough to feel worthy and acceptable. Consequently, they constantly must “prove” their own worth.



**8. Whatever else, avoid conflict.** Experience teaches that situations involving conflict will likely result in unpredictable aggression. Conflict may also be used by the alcoholic parent to “have a drink,” reinforcing the child's guilt for “causing” the parent to drink. The child is taught repeatedly not to trust anyone, to not talk and not feel, but at the same time are taught they must be responsible for their alcoholic parent.

**What are some other symptoms of children of alcoholic parents? In addition to the social workers' guide detailed next, here are two different lists of commonly exhibited characteristics.**

In her 1983 landmark book, the late Janet G. Woititz outlined 13 common characteristics. Children of alcoholics:

- Guess at what normal behavior is;
- Have difficulty following a project through from beginning to end;
- Lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth;
- Judge themselves without mercy;
- Have difficulty having fun;
- Take themselves very seriously;
- Have difficulty with intimate relationships;
- Overreact to changes over which they have no control;
- Constantly seek approval and affirmation;
- Feel that they're different from other people;
- Are super responsible or super irresponsible;
- Are extremely loyal, even in the face of evidence that the loyalty is undeserved;
- Are impulsive. They tend to lock themselves into a course of action without giving serious consideration to alternative behaviors or possible consequences. This impulsively leads to confusion, self-loathing, and loss of control over their environment. In addition, they spend an excessive amount of energy cleaning up the mess.

Woititz further notes that adult COAs will often take on the characteristics of alcoholics, even though they've never picked up a drink, exhibiting denial, poor coping skills, poor problem solving, and forming dysfunctional relationships.

Some of the emotions affected by an alcoholic **mother** specifically include:

- **Guilt:** The child may feel that they are the main cause of their mother's drinking;
- **Anxiety:** The child is constantly worried about their situation at home. They may fear sickness or injury of their alcoholic mother. They may also fear altercations and physical violence between their parents;
- **Embarrassment:** The child of an alcoholic mother often has the burden of living with a certain degree of secrecy. They do not invite friends to their home out of fear of being embarrassed by their drunk mother;
- **Confusion:** The child's life will often lack routine, which is an integral part of a child's development. Bedtimes and mealtimes constantly change, and a regular daily schedule does not exist. An alcoholic mother can abruptly change from being loving to angry, regardless of the child's behavior;
- **Anger:** The child will be angry at their alcoholic mother for always drinking, and they may be angry at the non-alcoholic parent for not providing support and protection;
- **Depression:** The child of an alcoholic mother will often feel lonely and helpless.

These individuals also exhibit higher rates of antisocial personality traits compared to the general population. Consequently, children of alcoholics have difficulties forming close relationships in adulthood.

The following are two screening tests that social workers give to children to help determine if they qualify as Children of Alcoholics.

**Modified CAST-6**

- Have you ever thought that one of your parents had a drinking problem?
- Did you ever encourage one of your parents to quit drinking?
- Did you ever argue or fight with a parent when he or she was drinking?
- Have you ever heard your parents fight when one of them was drunk?
- Did you ever feel like hiding or emptying a parent's bottle of liquor?
- Did you ever wish that a parent would stop drinking?

*Scoring: three or more 'yes' answers—probably a COA.*

### Children of Alcoholics Screening Test I (CAST)

- Have you ever thought that one of your parents had a drinking problem?
- Have you ever lost sleep because of a parent's drinking?
- Did you ever encourage one of your parents to quit drinking?  
 Did you ever feel alone, scared, nervous, angry, or frustrated because a parent was not able to stop drinking?
- Did you ever argue or fight with a parent when he or she was drinking?
- Did you ever threaten to run away from home because of a parent's drinking?
- Has a parent ever yelled at or hit you or other family members when drinking?
- Have you ever heard your parents fight when one of them was drunk?
- Did you ever protect another family member from a parent who was drinking?
- Did you ever feel like hiding or emptying a parent's bottle of liquor?  
 Do many of your thoughts revolve around a problem drinking parent or difficulties that arise because of his or her drinking?
- Did you ever wish that a parent would stop drinking?
- Did you ever feel responsible for or guilty about a parent's drinking?
- Did you ever fear that your parents would get divorced due to alcohol misuse?  
 Have you ever withdrawn from and avoided outside activities and friends because of the embarrassment and shame over a parent's drinking problem?
- Did you ever feel caught in the middle of an argument or fight between a problem drinking parent and your other parent?
- Did you ever feel that you made a parent drink alcohol?
- Have you ever felt that a problem drinking parent did not really love you?
- Did you ever resent a parent's drinking?
- Have you ever worried about a parent's health because of his or her alcohol use?
- Have you ever been blamed for a parent's drinking?
- Did you ever think your father/mother was an alcoholic?  
 Did you ever wish your home could be more like the homes of your friends without a parent with a drinking problem?
- Did a parent ever make promises to you that he or she did not keep because of drinking?
- Did you ever wish that you could talk to someone who could understand and help the alcohol-related problems in your family?
- Did you ever fight with your brothers/sisters about a parent's drinking?
- Did you ever stay away from home to avoid the drinking parent?
- Have you ever felt sick, cried, or had a "knot" in your stomach after worrying about a parent's drinking?
- Did you ever take over any chores and duties at home that were usually done by a parent before he/she developed a drinking problem?

*Scoring: 0-1, most likely the parent is not alcoholic. 2-5, has had problems due to at least one parent's drinking behavior. This is a child of a drinker or possibly an alcoholic. 6+, more than likely the child of an alcoholic. Stage of alcoholism needs to be determined.*

## What is recent scientific literature saying about children of alcoholics?

### *Psychopathology in the Offspring of Alcoholic Parents (1984)*

Children with either an alcoholic father or mother or two alcoholic parents and normal controls were compared with regard to symptoms, diagnoses, and past case history. The heightened psychiatric risk for all children with alcoholic parents was clearly shown by this study. Based on questionnaire data and psychiatric symptom scores, **it was not possible to differentiate between children with alcoholic fathers, alcoholic mothers, and those with two alcoholic parents.** With regard to psychiatric diagnoses there was a **tendency for conduct disorders to correlate with paternal alcoholism and for emotional disorders to correlate with maternal alcoholism**, but both types of disorders occurred with the same frequency among children with two alcoholic parents.

### *Maternal and Paternal Alcoholism and Depressive Mood in College Students: Parental Relationships as Mediators of ACOA-depressive Mood Link (2011)*

As compared to non-Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOAs) (n = 288), ACOAs (n = 100) reported more negative parent–child relationships (**i.e., greater alienation, poorer communication, less trust, greater emotional longing, and more negative attitudes toward the parent**) and **increased depressive symptoms** on the POMS. Tested parental alcohol abuse as predictor of depressive symptoms of college students. Parental relationships mediated effect of alcohol abuse on depressive symptoms.

### *Women's Reports of Negative, Neutral, and Positive Effects of Growing up with Alcoholic Parents (2018)*

Parental alcoholism does not necessarily result in negative outcomes for the offspring; we examined whether it would result in negative perceptions of the experience. Black women and White women with alcoholic parents rated and described the effect of parental alcoholism on them: **65% reported a negative effect, 26% reported a positive effect, and 7% reported a neutral effect.** We examined these ratings in relation to the women's overall adult adjustment. More positive ratings were associated with being Black and with **variables such as social support, experiencing lower family conflict, and having no alcohol problem oneself.** Human service providers need greater access to research findings to see that children from these families will be diverse in their psychological and social functioning.

*Parent Alcoholism Impacts the Severity and Timing of Children's Externalizing Symptoms (2010)*

Tested whether children aged 2 through 17 showed elevated mother-, father- and child-reported externalizing symptoms (losing one's temper, excessive verbal aggression, physical aggression to people and animals, destruction of property, theft, and deliberate fire setting). Distal effects of parent alcoholism on increased child externalizing symptoms were large and consistent. In addition, proximal and time-varying effects of parent alcohol symptoms were also found.

*Neuropsychological Executive Functioning in Children at Elevated Risk for Alcoholism: Findings in Early Adolescence (2004)*

This prospective study of 198 boys followed between 3 and 14 years of age evaluated neurocognitive functioning across three groups who varied in familial risk for future alcoholism. Measures of intelligence, reward-response, and a battery of neuropsychological executive and cognitive inhibitory measures were used. **Executive functioning weaknesses were greater in families with alcoholism but no antisocial comorbidity. IQ and reward-response weaknesses were associated with familial antisocial alcoholism. Executive function effects were clearest for response inhibition, response speed, and symbol-digit modalities.** Results suggest that executive deficits are not part of the highest risk antisocial pathway to alcoholism but that some executive function weaknesses may contribute to a secondary risk pathway.

*Social Competence in Children of Alcoholic Parents Over Time (2005)*

**Children of alcoholic parents (COAs) show deficits in social competence that begin in early childhood and escalate through middle adolescence.** Female COAs showed deficits in social competence in early childhood that receded in adolescence and that varied across subtypes of parent alcoholism.

*Parental Alcoholism, Child Abuse, and Adult Adjustment (2000)*

**Abuse histories were most strongly related to adult symptom distress and social maladjustment.** Parental alcoholism had no independent effects when controlling for abuse history.

*Behavioral Symptoms and Psychiatric Diagnoses Among 162 Children in Nonalcoholic or Alcoholic Families (2000)*

Clinical syndromes potentially overrepresented include externalizing disorders such as **conduct disorder and oppositional disorder; impairments in abstract reasoning, memory, and goal-directed behavior; problems in personal and social functioning; and excessive aggressiveness**. People with alcoholic relatives have high rates of alcohol abuse and dependence as adults, but their patterns of problems earlier in life are less clear. There was no significant relationship between a family history of alcoholism and childhood diagnoses of conduct, oppositional, or attention deficit disorders or with behavioral checklist summary scores. **However, children with alcoholic relatives apparently have a slightly higher risk for drug abuse or dependence than those without alcoholic relatives. Once familial antisocial disorders and familial socioeconomic status are controlled for, a family history of alcoholism does not appear to relate to childhood externalizing disorders**

*Intellectual, Cognitive, and Academic Performance Among Sons of Alcoholics During the Early School Years (2006)*

Background: Research on intellectual and cognitive functioning of children of alcoholics has been marked by inconsistency, with some studies unable to document deficits. Results: **Children of antisocial alcoholics (AALs) displayed the worst IQ and academic achievement compared with children of non-antisocial alcoholics (NAALs) and controls.** In addition, **children of AALs displayed relatively poorer abstract planning and attention abilities compared with children from control families.**

*Adverse Childhood Experiences, Alcoholic Parents, and Later Risk of Alcoholism and Depression (2002)*

The risk of having had all nine of the adverse childhood experiences was significantly greater among the 20 percent of respondents who reported parental alcohol abuse. The number of adverse experiences had a graded relationship to alcoholism and depression in adulthood, independent of parental alcohol abuse. The prevalence of alcoholism was higher among persons who reported parental alcohol abuse, no matter how many adverse experiences they reported. **Children in alcoholic households are more likely to have adverse experiences.** The risk of alcoholism and depression in adulthood increases as the number of reported adverse experiences increases regardless of parental alcohol abuse. **Depression among adult children of alcoholics appears to be largely, if not solely, due to the greater likelihood of having had adverse childhood experiences in a home with alcohol-abusing parents.**

*Poor Response Inhibition as a Predictor of Problem Drinking and Illicit Drug Use in Adolescents at Risk for Alcoholism and Other Substance Use Disorders (2006)*

In this longitudinal study, **poor response inhibition predicted aggregate alcohol-related problems, the number of illicit drugs used, and comorbid alcohol and drug use (but not the number of drug-related problems), independently of IQ, parental alcoholism and [antisocial personality disorder](#), child attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and conduct symptoms, or age.**