

Talking to Grandchildren about their Parent's Use of Alcohol or Drugs

Children see, hear, and wonder about everything – including their parent's alcohol and drug use.

Many families are impacted by substance abuse, and children need to know they are not alone. You can help your grandchildren understand why their mom or dad is unable to take care of themselves. Addiction is a disease based in the body and brain.

Give the basics, keep it simple, and be honest.

Children need to be given accurate information about what is happening with their parents and their family. How they understand what is happening is based on their age and developmental stage. Whatever the age of the child, they need to hear that:

1. Your parent has an illness.
2. It is not their fault.
3. The adults in your life are trying to help Mom/Dad with this problem.
You will be safe and taken care of until
4. Mom/Dad is better.

Be non-judgmental about their parent.

It can be upsetting to see how your grandchildren have been impacted by their parent's alcohol or drug use. These feelings can come across in your tone of voice, your choice of words, or your general demeanor when talking to your grandchildren about their parent's use of alcohol or drugs.

Before communicating with your grandchildren, it might be useful to check how you are feeling towards the parent. You may find it helpful to process your feelings with another adult to allow for more compassion and prepare you for your conversation with your grandchildren.

Help your grandchildren identify their feelings.

Encourage your grandchildren to express their feelings – about missing a visit with a parent, experiencing fighting in their home, seeing their parents under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Younger children can be encouraged to draw a picture and tell a story based on the image. They can talk about their feelings and be reassured that it is okay to have those feelings. With older children, use simple language and solicit their concerns, questions, and feelings. Reassure them that they are safe and that the adults are working to make things better. Ask what might help them right now.

Teach the Seven Cs

According to the National Association for Children of Alcoholics, children need to know the “Seven Cs of Addiction”:

- I didn’t **C**ause it
- I can’t **C**ure it
- I can’t **C**ontrol it
- I can **C**are for myself by **C**ommunicating my feelings, making healthy **C**hoices, and by **C**elebrating myself

Keep the door open for questions and revisit the conversation.

Children need to know that they can ask questions about their parents and substance use. Whatever the question is, always affirm the question is important and answer it truthfully, keeping in mind the child’s age and understanding. Children may not share their thoughts and feelings, so it’s helpful for the adult to revisit the conversation multiple times.

Take care of yourself

Discussing this topic is hard – ask for help. Support groups, friends, clergy, social workers, among others, can all be helpful.

Resources

- Partnership for Drug Free Kids
<https://drugfree.org>
- Garyken Center for Addiction at Boston Medical Center
<https://www.bmc.org/addiction/new-resources-massachusetts-parents>
- Children of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse (COASA)
<https://www.rfkchildren.org/our-work/community-based-services/children-of-alcoholism-and-substance-abuse-coasa/>
- American Addiction Centers: Guide for Children of Addicted parents
<https://americanaddictioncenters.org/guide-for-children>
- National Association of Children of Alcoholics (NACOA)
<https://nacoa.org>

Self-Help Groups and Resources

- Alanon/Alateen:
www.ma-al-anon.org
- Learn to Cope:
www.learn2cope.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE: **Kinship Navigator** is a program of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that assists all kinship caregivers (grandparents and other relatives) with accessing services for themselves and the children they are raising. For more information, please contact Jennifer.s.kitchenham@state.ma.us or 844-924-4546, or visit www.mass.gov/kinship-navigator

The Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren was established in 2008 to serve as a resource to the Commonwealth on issues affecting grandparents raising grandchildren and other relative grandchildren. The Commission works to provide information, resources, and support to the thousands of Massachusetts grandparents and relative caregivers by hosting community workshops, trainings, an annual conference, and maintaining an up to date website full of resources for caregivers. To receive newsletters from the Commission, or for more information, contact the Commission at www.massgrg.com. You can also contact the Director of the Commission at 617-748-2454 or e-mail colleen.pritoni@state.ma.us.