

Hidden Harms:

Advice for people working with children affected by a family member's drug or alcohol use.



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Not all drug or alcohol use puts children at risk, however, when a parent, carer, sibling or other household member's substance use becomes harmful it can impact the safety of the child and the care they receive.

Harmful substance use could include those who:

- Consume harmful amounts of alcohol.
- Are dependent on alcohol.
- Use drugs regularly or excessively.
- Are dependent on drugs.

Often, people with drug and alcohol needs are also struggling with mental health issues. They may not realise the harm they are causing to children in their lives. Therefore, it is important to approach the topic of drug or alcohol use with caution and without judgement. Try to frame the conversation around the safety of the child as a priority.

The risks to a child's health and wellbeing include:



- Neglect.
- Abuse – experiencing themselves or witnessing abuse towards someone else. This could be physical, verbal, emotional or sexual.
- Children may have access to drugs or alcohol which may result in accidental or deliberate use or ingestion.
- Disruptions in the home.
- Witnessing a parent or carer under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Unplanned co-sleeping with babies and infants on a sofa or bed is more likely where a parent is under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Co-sleeping is a risk factor for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.
- Drugs and alcohol impair a parent and carers cognitive functioning which may impact on their ability to care for the child.

It is also important to note the risks posed to pregnant women as taking drugs such as tobacco and alcohol even in small quantities can increase the risk the baby will be stillborn and can put the baby's health at serious risk.

This leaflet will help you to identify signs of harmful drug or alcohol use and how best to raise concerns.

Spotting signs

Drug or alcohol use by a parent or carer can present in different ways. Signs can include:

On adults

Changes to appearance:

changes in weight, not taking care of their appearance, smelling of alcohol or cannabis, dilated pupils.



Disruption to the child's routine



Financial difficulties



Changes to behaviour:

irritability, mood swings, seeming fearful, anxious or paranoid, seeming lethargic or despondent



Changes to their social circle



Making excuses for drinking.



Withdrawal from family members and other responsibilities



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On the child

Behavioural problems



Emotional distress



Difficulties with attendance or attainment at school



Evidence of having caring responsibilities for others in the household



Signs of neglect



In the home

Alcohol - drinks or empties in unexpected rooms or places in the property, an excessive amount of empty containers or packaging, a smell of alcohol in the property.



Drugs - drug-related paraphernalia, which could include small resealable plastic bags (baggies); powders or powder residues on surfaces or crockery; pills; syringes; rolling papers, pipes and other smoking materials; medication packaging.



Storage



If you are working with a family where one or more members of the household may be using drugs or alcohol it is important to advise them of practical steps to try and protect the child from harm. This includes:

- All medication, drugs and related paraphernalia, and alcohol should be stored completely out of sight and reach of children in a secure container or safe place.
- Consider using a locked box, or a drawer or cupboard you can lock.
- If someone in the household is injecting drugs, find out if they have a sharps box and access clean injecting equipment from a pharmacy (Islington residents can access needle exchange for free*).
- Clean up any spills or dropped doses immediately. Any substances that are snorted or 'cut' can get into the air making them much harder to clean, this is especially prevalent with cocaine use.

Safer sleeping



This is particularly relevant for families with young children or babies as some parents choose to co-sleep with their infants. It is important to advise parents on the risks of co-sleeping to reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). NHS advice on safer sleeping includes:

1. do not share a bed with your baby if you or your partner smoke or take recreational drugs, have had 2 or more units of alcohol or have taken medicine that causes drowsiness
2. do not smoke during pregnancy or let anyone smoke in the same room as your baby – both before and after birth
3. do not sleep on a sofa or armchair with your baby

Care of children



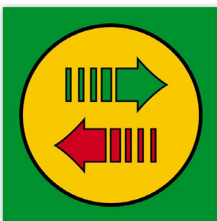
Key advice to share with a family where someone is using drugs or alcohol includes:

- A responsible trusted adult should be around to care for the children if the primary carer is under the influence or is withdrawing.
- Medication, alcohol or drugs should never be given to a baby, toddler or child of any age to soothe.
- A dummy should never be transferred from an adult's mouth to the baby.
- Ensure all household members, adults and children, know to call 999 in the event of an emergency, including an overdose.
- If a member of the household uses opiates, ensure they are aware of naloxone (an opioid overdose reversal medication) and someone in the household knows how to administer in an emergency. Training is available on overdose risk and naloxone.

Needle exchange*



- Several pharmacies in Islington are commissioned to provide needle exchange, where residents can access sterile needles and syringes, and sharps containers to return used injecting equipment. This service is for adults aged 18+ and helps to reduce the risk and spread of blood borne infections such as HIV and Hepatitis.
- When providing sterile injecting equipment, pharmacist's offer advice and can help the person access support via Islington's Drug and Alcohol Services.
- If you are aware of a family where someone is injecting drugs, talking to them about needle exchange and safe disposal could help prevent harm to children and adults in the household.
- Not all pharmacies in Islington offer needle exchange, check participating store www.islington.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health-services-in-islington/drugs-and-alcohol/reduce-harm or look out for this sticker in the pharmacy window:



Support available



There are many services in Islington who can support people with drug and alcohol needs and those affected by another person's drug or alcohol use, including children. If you meet someone who you believe may be experiencing these issues, please signpost them to the relevant services who can offer the appropriate support.

For a full list of support available in Islington, and their contact details, please visit:

www.islington.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health-services-in-islington/drugs-and-alcohol



You could also signpost parents and carers to the following national helplines:

- Talk to Frank website (talktofrank.com) and helpline (call 0300 123 6600 or text: 82111 available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week).
- Drinkaware National Alcohol Support Helpline (0300 123 1110, weekdays 9am-8pm and weekends 11am-4pm)

Local training



'Let's Talk... Drugs and Alcohol' is a training programme for people working with Islington residents affected by drugs or alcohol.

Sessions include: 'Hidden Harms: Parental and Sibling Substance Use', 'Introduction to the Better Lives Family Service' and 'Overdose Awareness and Naloxone Training' which both run bi-annually.

View all drug and alcohol training, and sign up here:

www.islington.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health-services-in-islington/public-health-training



