

Child endangerment is a term which describes the risk of harm that *may* occur when parents fail to provide structure, care and guidance. One of the difficulties faced by this is the interpretation of endangerment when reports of abuse are made.

The question that must be answered during a child abuse investigation is **“what is the harm to the child” rather than “what may happen to the child”**.

So many times the evidence is so clear but we fail to see the story behind the environment. It is true that neglect and emotional abuse are the most common types of abuse observed in drug homes. It is also true that of all types of abuse over 70% of cases involve substance abuse. Unfortunately, despite overwhelming evidence that substance abuse is a factor in a majority of social and health problems, we may fail to respond to the severity of the problem in practice due to interpretation of policy.

Addiction, like cancer, grows and spreads within and between lives. In those who do not use the substance, they suffer the consequences of drugs and ways of getting drugs impacting the safety and routine of life.

The following questions may help to answer the question of harm caused to children:

- If a parent has a job, how much family income goes for drugs?
- Has the parent ever pawned a child’s toys or possessions to buy drugs?
- Has the parent ever had sex with someone in exchange for drugs?
- Does the child describe or imitate adult activity as a common occurrence?
- If the parent smokes, injects or snorts drugs, the child may test positive for drugs as well because of exposure to drug smoke, pill residue, or tainted drugs. Has the child’s urine been tested to detect the presence of drugs?
- Is there food in the house?
- Is marijuana grown in the home? If so, check for mold spores which are a health hazard.
- Is standing water in clogged drains and toilets? This is a drowning risk for toddlers.
- Is the parent an IV drug user? This increases risk of needle sticks and indicates severe addiction.
- Are drugs kept in the home? Are they within a child’s reach?
- Who are the child’s caregivers? Are they drug free?
- Does the parent have a criminal history?
- Is the child able to sleep at night? Many drug homes have heavy traffic in and out of the home. Children may witness violence or live sex acts.
- Does the child assume adult responsibility in the home such as care for siblings, cooking, and cleaning, when it is not age appropriate?

- Is there exposed wiring in the home?
- Do parents use techniques like “shot-gunning” children at bedtime (blowing marijuana in their face to make them sleep) or giving them medication to make them sleepy and keep them out of the way?
- Do children view pills as something that “makes mommy feel better?”

These examples are only a few of the things that are very concrete examples of basic human need. Addiction is not something that a person can sober up from or get over simply because their life is unmanageable or someone asks a few questions.

Addiction is a disease of lies. A person chooses to get high and may be able to function for a while but once the brain and the drug develop a relationship, life is no longer predictable. A person begins to lie to him/herself and will also lie to you. Often these lies seem convincing at the time and there is a reason for everything that will be presented—all to preserve the next opportunity to get high.

Addiction is a disease of isolation. Children suffer because their home is full of secrets and only those who share the secret can come to the home. Therefore, children are not given out-of-school opportunities to have friends. They must spend time with siblings or children of other addicts who also share the secret.

**The rules of a drug home are simple.
Don't talk. Don't trust. Don't feel.**

The fear of breaking these rules runs deep into the hearts of the children of addicts. In fact, listening to stories of recovering people will often include stories of the secrets they held for so long and buried for as long as they could with drugs and alcohol. This is a disease of hiding. In hiding there is hurt and shame. As a society, it is so easy, so tempting to allow this ugly problem to remain a secret.

The **lies** of a drug home which must be revealed are:

- The only thing of value in the world is the drug.
- The only thing worth pursuing in the world is drugs.
- Drugs can provide all things—income, friends, self-worth, love, escape.
- Drugs are worth any effort to maintain them and are more reliable than any person.
- I can quit any time I want.
- I am in control of the addiction.
- My kids can take care of themselves.
- My kids don't need me.
- My kids don't love me.
- If we use together, I can spend more time with my kids.
- I can handle this.
- No one has told me I have a problem so I must be okay.

The **truths** of a drug home are:

- Recovery is hard but worth the effort.
- Children love their parents and want the best for them.
- Children need a safe, predictable environment to grow.
- There are people and places that can help.
- The first step to recovery is to tell the truth.
- Drugs will always be in control when they are invited into a home.
- Children need to hear acknowledgement of harm done and information about the disease of addiction.
- Children are resilient but need caring, consistent adults to express it.
- The earlier a family is given services, the better chance of restoration.
- Although feared and avoided, court ordered treatment programs can provide the external support needed for an adult to be introduced to the concepts and hope of recovery.

Please take the time to think about the impact of drugs on the lives of children and their parents who are involved in drug use, trafficking, and manufacturing.

Their safety is our responsibility.

