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Review Finds Ways Of Helping Children Of Drug And Alcohol Misusers
Science Daily — A review published in the journal *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* suggests how children whose parents have drug or alcohol problems can be protected from the consequences usually associated with parental substance misuse. Drawing on research from around the world, the review highlights ways of reducing children's exposure to risk and increasing the protective factors that promote the child's resilience.

"The children of people with drug or alcohol problems usually suffer very badly," said Professor Richard Velleman from the Mental Health R&D Unit (MHRDU), a collaboration between the University of Bath and the Avon & Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust.

"Conservative estimates suggest as many as 26 million people in the UK are affected by problematic alcohol and drug misuse in their immediate family. As a result, these family members are more likely to experience high levels of violence, witness or experience abuse, and suffer other disruptions to family life. Children whose parents misuse drugs or alcohol often demonstrate the negative effects of this through emotional difficulties, behavioural problems and social isolation. This can lead to depression and anxiety, or involve early drug or alcohol misuse and antisocial behaviour.

"Whilst it is easy to become pessimistic about the future of children brought up in these kinds of environments, we find in practice that some children are resilient; they develop no significant problems related to their parents' substance misuse.

"We have looked through the research literature on this subject and drawn on our own research with more than 1,000 people whose families have been affected by substance misuse to find out why this might be, and how we can encourage similar results elsewhere."

The findings highlight the risk factors – such as domestic violence, both parents being substance misusers, exposure to criminal activity and witnessing someone injecting drugs - that place family members at greater risk of negative outcomes.

It also shows the factors and processes – such as improving parenting techniques, helping the child learn to disengage from negative situations and support from school, family and other networks - that make children more resilient to the negative impacts

of parental drug or alcohol misuse.

"Resilience is really a process rather than a static trait and it is possible, especially for young people, to develop greater resilience to negative situations," said Lorna Templeton, deputy manager and senior researcher at the MHRDU, who also worked on the review.

"In practice this means working with family members who can help look after the children, teaching the child how to avoid problems, helping them learn how to disengage from negative, and embrace the positive aspects of their life, and looking for other stabilising influences.

"Resilience is self-perpetuating, but a central issue in its success is giving children the feeling that they had choices and were in control of their lives."

Government estimates suggest that almost four million people aged 16-65 in the UK are dependent on alcohol or drugs and a further nine million people take drugs or drink alcohol at risky levels that affect their family's wellbeing.

Assuming that every one of these people will negatively affect at least two family members, a conservative estimate of 26 million people in the UK are affected by problematic alcohol and drug misuse in their immediate family.

"There is growing recognition of the importance of involving the family in drug and alcohol treatments programmes," said Professor Velleman. However, this should not just be seen in the context of treating the individual with the problem, but also in terms of reducing the impact on the wider family. Family members are often overlooked, and it is important that they receive support in their own right; it's not just about changing the behaviour of the misuser."

Reference: Understanding and modifying the impact of parents' substance misuse on children, *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* (2007), vol. 13, 79-89, Richard Velleman & Lorna Templeton.

Note: This story has been adapted from a news release issued by University of Bath.

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/04/070430093939.htm>