

The Innocent Victims

Children, Drugs, and Abuse

After losing her job because of low productivity and poor attendance, single mom Joanne returned home to her three children. Feeling depressed, she looked for something to give her energy and to help her deal with life. She turned to what she felt would be the answer: crystal methamphetamine, or "ice." Ice allowed her to get everything done. But after her 12-hour high, she crashed. Her children, a 5-year-old, 2-year-old, and an 8-month-old infant, were left to fend for themselves for the next 72 hours while Joanne slept.

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Parents play a critical role in the healthy development of their children. Alcohol and other substances can become a negative influence in the great task of raising children. Unfortunately, substance abuse affects more than just the user. Often, innocent children become the victims. Here in Hawai'i, of the 2,234 confirmed child abuse or neglect cases reported in 1999 (Department of Human Services, Child Welfare Services Fiscal Year 1999 report), 85-90% of them are believed to be related to parental substance abuse (1999 Department of Human Services, Alcohol & Drug Abuse Addiction Strategic Plan). Actual figures of both substance abuse and child abuse are estimated to be even higher because many cases go unreported. Also contributing to the problem is Hawai'i's high rate of crystal methamphetamine use, a drug commonly known to cause violent outbursts. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA) reports that children in households involved in substance abuse are three times more likely to be abused and four times more likely to be neglected than children whose parents are not under the influence of drugs. When substance or alcohol abuse and child abuse rates are so high, it affects us all.

Substance Abuse: The Causes

Substance abuse—the irresponsible use of alcohol or the abuse of other drugs—complicates the already challenging job of parenting. Parents sometimes use alcohol and other drugs believing that it will help them cope with the stress of parenting or financial problems, not realizing their problems will only worsen. Substance abuse is also part of a cycle. Statistics show that children of substance abusers are very likely to become substance abusers themselves.

Joanne's mom, Mary, recovering from substance abuse herself, understood all that Joanne was going through. She was concerned for her daughter and grandchildren, and knew the danger involved in Joanne's situation.

Substance Abuse: The Effects

Neglect.

Substance use affects the user's life in many ways. Some drugs, such as marijuana, cause the user to become sleepy and therefore unable to attend to their responsibilities, like their job or children. Children may be left unsupervised—neglected—during a "high." A parent high on drugs may not notice a crying baby in need of a diaper change, or may not see the diaper change as a simple action. Neglect can range from the lack of supervision to malnutrition, or even inattentiveness to the health and physical needs of family or friends.

This information sponsored by the Hawai'i Children's Trust Fund. For more information, contact the University of Hawai'i Center on the Family at 956-4132 or at www.uhfamily.hawaii.edu



Center on the Family

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Get Help for Drug and Alcohol Problems

You may know individuals—possibly parents, relatives, or older siblings—who are using drugs or are unable to control their drinking. If so, they're not only hurting themselves, they're also increasing the likelihood that they will abuse and neglect their children. Moreover, their children will have difficulties dealing with drugs and alcohol in the future.

Substance abusers can't be expected to stop by themselves. Drug users or heavy drinkers need professional assistance to stop their habits.

For a directory of treatment programs, call:

Drug Free Hawai'i

O'ahu 545-3228, x34
Neighbor Islands 1-800-845-1946, x34

ASK Aloha United Way

O'ahu 275-2000
Neighbor Islands 1-877-275-6569

For help with alcohol problems call:

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) 946-1438

For help with drug addiction call:

Drug Addiction Services of Hawai'i (DASH) 538-0704

Other Resources

Wai'anae Comprehensive Center - Baby S.A.F.E. Program 668-2277

ALANON/ALATEEN 599-7755 or 948-2666

The Salvation Army Family Treatment Services 732-2802

St. Francis WATCH - Addiction Treatment for Women 547-6273

The Parent Line 526-1222

Child Abuse.

Substance abuse can turn into violence towards others. Alcohol abuse lowers inhibitions while sharpening aggressive feelings. An individual believes s/he can take risks and make decisions that are, in reality, potentially dangerous. It also lowers one's ability to handle unexpected situations. Parents are often unable to cope with their frustration and find release through violence towards their children. Other drugs may indirectly lead to violence. Stimulants, such as ice, along with violent outbursts, may cause frequent mood changes, confusion, anxiety, and hallucinations.

Abuse may not always be physical. Children also suffer psychological abuse. The frequent mood changes and erratic behavior of their parents confuse children. During the early years, children are especially in need of stability in the home—stability that may not be present anywhere else.

By age 8, Joanne's daughter had come to learn not to rely on her mother. Her mother's frequent mood swings, blackouts, and disappearances had forced her to put her schoolwork second and make caring for the younger siblings priority. She wished for a life like her friends but knew her mom had a problem that she wasn't able to control.

The effects of abuse on children last a lifetime. While these problems begin at home, they can reach the school and neighborhood levels. Low self-esteem and destructive behaviors can lead to criminal and drug problems. Many of these children grow up to continue the cycle of abuse they experienced as children. Of all child abusers, 80% were once abuse victims themselves.

Mary felt she needed to do what was best for her daughter and family. She knew there were local agencies and organizations that could help Joanne where she couldn't. She decided to make some phone calls.

What can you do?

Do your ABC's. Act on Behalf of Children. When you see maltreatment in public areas, offer help. Too often we brush the situation off or turn away, feeling it isn't our business.

There are several things you can do before the abuse starts. As a relative, encourage family members to avoid excessive use of alcohol or the use of illegal drugs, especially by pregnant women. As a neighbor, get to know your neighbors and volunteer to watch neighborhood children for busy parents. As a parent, set aside time to regularly read, talk, and listen to your children. Demonstrate and encourage respect for people and things. As a citizen, don't walk away from a situation that is potentially violent for a child. Offer to help.

Joanne realized that in order to care for her children again, she needed to help herself first. She was referred to several local rehabilitation programs for substance abusing women. Eventually, with help from professionals, support groups, and a lot of determination, she would learn the skills necessary to help deal with daily problems without the help of alcohol or drugs.

Help stop the abuse. It affects us all.