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Abstract

Research has examined the effects of parental alcoholism on children and adolescents. This paper will address the different ways teens are affected by parental alcoholism, identifying medical, emotional, and social dangers, while also trying to link specific aspects of parental alcoholism with each harmful effect. In looking at the negative effects that parental alcoholism has on the parents and children, this paper will also examine whether children become victims and suffer, or become resilient and persevere. This paper will also look at physical, social, emotional, behavioral and family structure concerns as they relate to children with alcoholic parents.

THE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL ALCOHOLISM ON CHILDREN

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Research has examined the effects of parental alcoholism on children and adolescents. This paper will address the different ways teens are affected by parental alcoholism, identifying medical, emotional, and social dangers, while also trying to link specific aspects of parental alcoholism with each harmful effect. In looking at the negative effects that parental alcoholism has on the parents and children, this paper will also examine whether children become victims and suffer or become resilient and persevere. This paper will also look at physical, social, emotional, behavioral and family structure concerns as they relate to children with alcoholic parents.

Alcoholism is a disease that is increasing in numbers across the country. It is estimated that between 11 and 17.5 million children live with at least one alcoholic parent (Johnson & Leff, 1999). Alcoholic parents struggle to maintain their own lives, which in turn often leads to the neglect of their children. Of the issues facing children today, parental alcoholism is among the more serious, manifesting in a wide variety of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive concerns. To better understand the effects of parental alcoholism on children, it is necessary to clarify what parental alcoholism is.

The Diagnostic & Statistical Manual IV (2000) defined alcohol abuse as “a destructive pattern of alcohol use, leading to significant social, occupational, or medical impairment” (p. 214). Individuals with alcohol dependence must have three or more of the following symptoms: “alcohol tolerance, alcohol withdrawal symptoms, alcohol taken in larger amounts or longer period of time than was intended, persistent desire or unsuccessful attempts to reduce alcohol use, great deal of time spent using alcohol or recovering from hangovers, important social, occupational, or recreational activities given up or reduced due to alcohol, and alcohol use is continued despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical or physiological problem that is likely to have been worsened by alcohol” (DSM IV, 2000 p. 197).

Alcoholic parents create problems for their children in many different areas, including family dynamics, role modeling, and providing social support (Richter

& Richter, 2001). These children find themselves facing several challenging, and sometimes dangerous, situations because they are often neglected and left alone to care for themselves. In other instances, children are even placed in an authoritative and leadership role in the family, commonly referred to as becoming a parentified child. (Richter & Richter, 2001). Children are also faced with aggressive behavior from intoxicated parents, increased risk when riding with a drunk driver, and an increased risk of the alcoholic parents dying, thus leaving the children as orphans (Christoffersen & Soothill, 2003).

To best identify the overall effects and risk factors for children with alcoholic parents, this paper has been organized into different sections. In the first section the actual physical health concerns will be examined, which will be followed by the social impact. Emotional, psychological, and behavioral concerns will also be examined.

Health and Well-Being of Children of Alcoholics

In examining the role parents play in the lives of their children, one of the most important and measurable aspects is that of the general health and well-being of the children of alcoholics. As alcohol abuse becomes more publicized and documented, researchers have taken a closer look at the various health concerns posed by alcoholic parents (Johnson & Leff, 1999). Poor role modeling, parental neglect, parental illness, abuse, fetal alcohol syndrome and prenatal exposure to alcohol are all areas that will help define the health concerns.

Prenatal Exposure to Alcohol

Research has shown that prenatal exposure to alcohol can create changes in brain development, leading to possible mental retardation, lower cognitive skills, or a predisposed dependency on alcohol (Young, 1997). These effects also fall into the cognitive and behavioral concerns, but because they have a medical foundation they are discussed in this section. The effects of prenatal exposure to alcohol have been well documented and reported on commercials, labels, and advertisements. However, although this information is readily available to pregnant mothers, it is estimated that 50% - 60% of women in the childbearing age range (18-44 years) consume alcoholic beverages (Brady, Posner, Lang & Rosati, 1997). Of the percentage of women age 18-44 who consume alcohol, 21% use alcohol while they are pregnant. Consequently, between 16,000 and 22,000 babies are born each year who exhibit the characteristics of prenatal alcohol exposure (Brady et al., 1997). Despite the well documented negative effects of alcohol, the percentage of females who consume alcohol has not declined drastically in the past thirty years. In fact, even with the knowledge about the effects of prenatal alcohol exposure, rates of females consuming alcohol during pregnancy has been at a steady increase (Richter & Richter, 2001).

The most well-known and severe case of prenatal exposure to alcohol is Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). FAS is attributed to the following deficiencies in children: growth deficiencies, damaged central nervous systems, facial anomalies,

and future behavioral problems. "FAS is also the leading cause of preventable mental retardation in children in the Western world" (Richter & Richter, 2001 p. 186). Children can suffer from different degrees of FAS and may not exhibit all of the characteristics, depending on the level of exposure to alcohol. FAS has wide reaching effects, from infancy to adulthood, behaviorally and cognitively.

Postnatal Exposure to Alcohol

Postnatal exposure to alcohol refers to children of alcoholics (COA). COA's make up approximately 26.8 million of the U.S. population (Richter & Richter, 2001). This number, although alarming large, may be lower than the actual number as it is hard determine alcohol abuse in poverty stricken, homeless families. It was also estimated that 1 in 4 children is exposed to alcohol dependence or alcohol abuse in their family (Grant, 2000). Many COA's have low levels of stimulation or positive activity occurring at home and thus develop cognitive deficiencies such as learning disabilities, language deficiencies, lower academic achievement, and poor performance in core academic areas (Richter & Richter, 2001). These cognitive deficiencies can often be linked to the lack of verbal communication, language exposure, and lack of positive academic leadership from the parents with the drinking problem. Many of the ill effects of parental drinking on the children stem from what the parents' behavior as a result of drinking. What parents do and fail to do becomes the real issue of deciding

why COA's develop aggressive behaviors, cognitive deficiencies, or emotional difficulties.

Modeling

It is critical to note the importance of what is and is not modeled by the alcoholic parent. Richter and Richter (2001) noted that when both parents are alcoholics the child suffers from more psychiatric disorders with more severity than they do with only one alcoholic parent. When both parents are drinking, they are both modeling inappropriate behavior, giving the children no strong role model. The most general concern with modeling is that the children will model their alcoholic parent's drinking patterns, thus encouraging them to drink early and become victims to addiction themselves. It has been found that children with alcoholic parents tend to fall at one of the extremes in alcohol abuse: they either become abusers themselves or they completely abstain from any alcohol consumption (Richter & Richter, 2001).

In order to differentiate between the genetic impact of alcoholic parents and what is learned by the children from their alcoholic parents, Goodwin (as cited in Johnson & Leff, 1999) has conducted several studies examining the effects alcoholic parents have on adopted children. Goodwin concluded that there were negative effects of alcoholic parents parenting adopted children, including an increased risk of alcoholism, heavier drinking at an early age, and hallucinations

(Johnson & Leff, 1999). This research supports the model that children are affected both biologically and environmentally by parents that abuse alcohol.

Parental Neglect

If one or more of the parents is abusing alcohol it is likely that the children are experiencing some type of neglect (Johnson & Leff, 1999). There are various ways in which children are neglected by the alcoholic parents. Neglect is defined by Morehead & Morehead (2000) as “failing in duty or performance through carelessness, as well as lack of attention or care” (p 386).

Parental neglect is also evident within the family structure. As Richter and Richter (2001) stated, children with alcoholic parents frequently grow up in confusing and unstable environments with lack of supervision, minimal emotional support, unclear boundaries and excessive conflict. Parents have responsibility within the family, but when they are abusing alcohol, many of those responsibilities are not carried out, thus disrupting the family structure and neglecting the children's needs. In some instances of unstable family structure and parental neglect, one of the children is placed in the role of leadership and responsibility for the family, a process referred to as parentification (Richter & Richter, 2001). This is especially harmful for children because they are not developmentally ready to handle the social and emotional strains of parenting. Many of the behavioral, social and emotional concerns addressed later in the paper can be attributed to parental neglect as a result of alcohol abuse.

Social Concerns

Parents with Comorbid Disorders

When investigating many of the risk factors for children of alcoholic parents, it is important to categorize the parents into two categories: high risk and low risk. High risk families include parents with alcohol abuse and other comorbid psychopathological disorders, while low risk families have parents with alcohol specific problems (Ellis, Zucker, & Fitzgerald, 1997). Studies have shown that families at the high risk level with alcohol abuse and comorbid psychological disorders have children with more behavioral and emotional problems. Maternal depression is also higher among mothers who fall into the high risk category (Ellis et al., 1997).

Children whose parents have psychopathological disorders along with their alcohol abuse put their children at risk for the many reasons. The children are more likely to be raised in a low socio economic home, they are more likely to be targets of domestic violence or witness aggressive behavior, and they are raised with low cognitive levels with little educational stimulation (Ellis et al., 1997). The amount and severity of disorders that a parent is dealing with directly affects his or her ability to care for the children. As cited in Johnson and Leff (1999), parent modeling has a significant effect on the children and is severely distorted as the parent deals with alcohol abuse and other psychological disorders. Children with alcohol abusive and psychopathological parents have a reduced

chance of having one parent model appropriate behavior such as showing protective behaviors, loving, caring and nurturing (Ellis et al., 1997).

Parental Expectations on Children's Alcohol Use

A self-fulfilling prophecy is a false belief that leads to the fulfillment of that belief (Madon, Guyll, Spoth, Cross, & Hilbert, 2003). Madon et al., (2003) examined the effects of expectations by mothers about their children's future alcohol abuse. They determined that self-fulfilling prophecies of mothers do have an effect on children's future alcohol abuse, but the severity of the effect depended on two variables: the positive nature of the expectation and the self-esteem of the children. Children with high self-esteem tended to relate better to their mother's self-fulfilling prophecies than did children with lower self-esteem. Also important to note is that the children with high self-esteem also responded with more accuracy to the expectations when the mothers' self-fulfilling prophecy erred on the side of being too positive. Mothers predicted their children's future alcohol use when their self-fulfilling prophecy stated their children would not abuse alcohol (Madon et al., 2003). Although this correlation is not all conclusive and may only effect a small population, it is important to note in that alcoholic mothers can still have a positive influence on their children's future alcohol use.

The Role of Ethnicity for Children with Alcoholic Parents

An important factor in determining the effect of parental alcohol abuse on children is the relationship between the children and parents in the family. In

examining the relationship between the children and parents, ethnicity plays a factor because roles of parents vary depending on the ethnicity and cultural background of the family. In comparing adolescents of different ethnic backgrounds, African-American adolescents had more negative expectancies towards alcohol abuse and also held a higher regard for parental disapproval of alcohol abuse than did Caucasian adolescents (Ellis et al., 1997). Ethnicity is only one of the factors that contributes to the dynamic of parent child relationships; however, it has proven to be important in examining the overall effects of parental alcohol abuse on children. As Ellis et al., (1997) noted, the degree and amount of parental alcohol abuse varies among the different ethnicities.

In a study examining Native American parental alcohol abuse, Wall, Garcia-Andrade, Wong, Lau & Ehlers (2000) found that 74% of children in a Mission Indian tribe had one or both parents with alcohol dependence. This is the highest rate for parental alcohol dependence in United States, and this Mission Indian tribe also owns the highest alcohol related mortality rate (Wall et al., 2000). With an increased exposure to alcohol dependence, Native Americans also experience increased difficulties with alcohol.

Parental Support

The effects of conflict and parental social support further explain the negative effects of parental alcohol abuse. Two types of parental support are associated with parental alcoholics: no support and mixed support. In instances

where both parents are abusing alcohol and neither parent is able to offer love, nurturing, or parental support to the children, children must find alternate ways to meet the needs neglected by parents. However, in some instances, one or more parent is able to offer positive support, but that support often occurs in conjunction with conflict (Barrera, Chassin, & Rogosch, 1993). Consequently, while the children hold their parents in high regard because of the positive support but are also bombarded with the negative conflict, the children are hurt and confused; the positive support does not override the negative conflict that includes undefined family boundaries, inconsistent parenting and discipline, unpredictable mood swings by parents, and inconsistent communication between parents and children (McGue, 1997).

The effects of other sources of social support such as family members, friends, and peers were also examined (Ge, Conger, Cadoret, Neiderhiser, Yates, Troughton, & Stewart, 1996). They determined that the effects of parental support were much more elevated than those of family, friends, or peers. To determine the reason for such a strong emphasis being placed on parental support, one must look at two factors. First, parental support is important for all of the responsibilities and roles that are involved in being a parent. It is apparent that children look to their parents for many sources of support. Secondly, there is a genetic closeness between parents and children that binds the relationship together Ge et al., (1996). With the increased importance on the relationship between the

children and their parents, it is increasingly evident why so many negative effects occur from parental alcohol abuse.

Emotional Concerns

Different Types of Emotional Disorders

Children of alcoholic parents manifest various emotional disorders (El-Shekih, 2001). Parental alcohol use can also be linked to several emotional disorders in children such as childhood depression, anxiety, guilt, self-blame, sensitivity to criticism, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Sher, 1997). When parents abuse alcohol, the emotional effects on their children tend to fall in a wide variety of categories ranging from internalizing anxiety and depression, to avoidance and anti-social behavior (Lieberman, 2000).

There are a number of limitations regarding the research on teen anxiety and depression related to parental alcoholism (Chassin, Pitts, DeLucia, & Todd, 1999). Findings have indicated that amongst teens with alcoholic parents, there is an increased amount of anxiety and depression; however, research is unclear whether parental alcoholism was a direct cause (Chassin et al., 1999). As common as it has become for children of alcoholic parents to also suffer from anxiety or depression, it is still unclear what causes the anxiety and depression, but it could be that children of alcoholic parents often have other factors or environmental conditions such as poverty, family dysfunction, and genetic mental illness that could result in these internalizing disorders (Chassin et al., 1999).

Research results vary regarding children of alcoholic parents having emotional disorders (El-Shekih, 2001). Some studies found that children of alcoholics are at a greater risk for these emotional disorders, and yet others show that there is no connection (Sher, 1997). One of the reasons given for the children of alcoholics who do not have emotional disorders is resiliency, which is the ability to maintain a determined course of action in the face of adversity; and it appears that having parents who abuse alcohol can breed this resiliency (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1988). Resiliency is also referred to as “functional adaptation; a type of Darwinian thinking in which adversity is faced with a change in behavior in order to survive and thrive” (Morehead & Morehead, p. 584).

Gender Role Differences Dealing With Self-Deprecation

Society has created different gender roles for male and female counterparts. In examining how children of alcoholics process self-deprecation differently, it is important to keep in mind these gender roles. It is more prevalent to find girls dealing with parental alcohol abuse and self-deprecation by being sad, anxious and depressed (Haatainen, Tanskanen, Kylma, Honkalampi, Koivumaa-Honkanen, & Hintikka, 2003). Conversely, males tend to deal with the family malfunction and substance abuse by distancing themselves from the family and the conflict (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1988). Female children may be more comfortable dealing with their feelings and take familial conflict personally as

they rely on the family for their love and support. On the other hand, males tend to feel less comfortable dealing with their feelings and resort to isolating and distancing themselves from the problem.

Behavioral Concerns

Teen Substance Abuse

According to Chassin, Jacob, Johnson, Schuckit & Sher (1997), there are several links connecting parental alcohol abuse and future teen alcohol abuse. Children fall victim to substance abuse for several reasons, including parental modeling, accessibility, and genetic predisposition (Chassin et al., 1997). Parents who abuse alcohol tend to keep alcohol within the household where the children can gain access to it. Also, and more importantly, parents model behavior to their children. Children not only learn to drink alcohol or abuse substances from parents, they also learn to abuse substances in certain circumstances. Children observe parents drinking alcohol for entertainment, to cope with stress or anger, to relax, and because of addiction. In each one of these instances the children perceive the situation in which the parents drink, and then in turn may model those same coping strategies and behaviors (Chassin & Barrera, 1993). To drink in order to deal with anger, depression, loss, to celebrate, or to forget is a learned behavior. Not only are the parents modeling the negative behavior of drinking alcohol, but they are also promoting unhealthy ways of dealing with problems in life.

Conclusion

Parental alcoholism has many negative effects on children. The negative effects range from minor to severe and from emotional, social, behavioral, to cognitive. In examining the research, Johnson and Leff (1999) concluded that parental alcohol abuse is the single greatest risk factor for predicting future alcohol abuse in children. Some of the problems passed down from alcoholic parents to children are passed genetically, and some are actual learned behaviors that are passed environmentally. It is important when discussing effects of parental alcohol abuse on children to remember that there is a population of children that will not experience the negative effects of having an alcoholic parent. Whether lucky or resilient, some children of alcoholic parents still live a healthy life from birth, progress at a normal rate developmentally, and become confident and competent individuals (Johnson and Leff, 1999). While other factors may play a role in the degree and severity of the effects suffered by the children, the research examined has supported that parental alcoholism has significant negative effects on children.

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