

Listening to and learning from children and young people affected by parental alcohol problems



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Listening to and learning from children and young people affected by parental alcohol problems

Across Scotland, an estimated 65 000 children are living with parental (or carer) alcohol misuse (Scottish Government, 2009). Given the common secrecy and potential stigma of problematic alcohol use, the experiences of children and young people living in families where one or both parents have an alcohol problem often remains hidden. Using a participatory research approach, this doctoral study explored children and young people's own experiences and support needs when affected by parental alcohol problems.

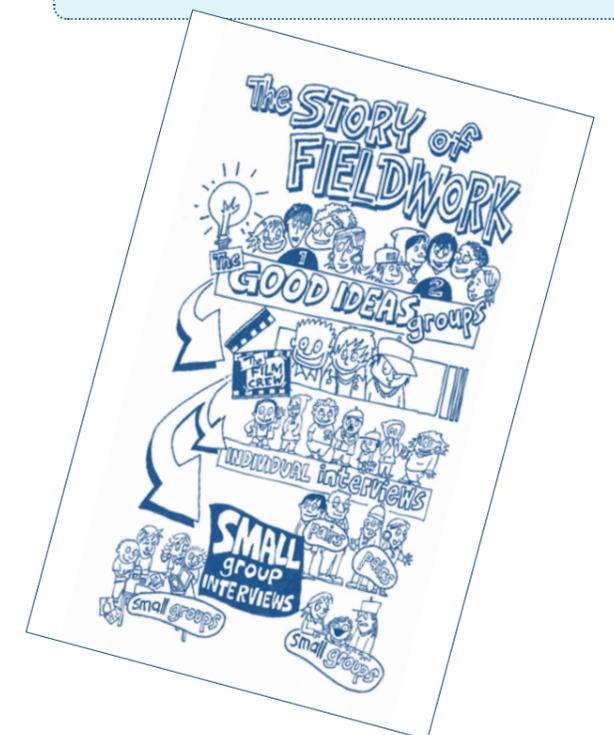
Background

In 2003, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs produced a seminal report, Hidden Harm: responding to the needs of children of problem drug users, that highlighted the scale of the problem, the serious harms posed to children and the need for accessible and coordinated services (ACMD, 2003). Although alcohol was beyond the scope of the report, the ACMD recognised the impacts of problematic alcohol use on family life and recommended for services to similarly address the needs of these children. However, the legality and general social acceptability of alcohol use, compared to illegal drug use, has meant the needs of children affected by alcohol have frequently been overlooked. The importance of this issue for children has been highlighted when analysing children's telephone calls to the free confidential counselling service, ChildLine. In a study of children's telephone calls to ChildLine Scotland about parental and significant carer health and wellbeing, parental alcohol misuse was the most frequently reported concern (Ogilvie-Whyte, 2005). The starting point for this doctoral study was a concern that the needs of children living in families where there was a problem with alcohol may be overshadowed by growing political interest in parental drug use. Furthermore, children's own views, experience and knowledge about their lives were largely absent from these debates.

Figure 1: Overview of fieldwork

Key points

- Alcohol use is legal and socially acceptable, compared to illegal drug use, which has meant the needs of children affected by parental alcohol problems are often overlooked
- Children and young people want to be listened to, respected and 'not judged' when living with parental alcohol problems
- Many children and young people spoke about their love for their family and loyalty to their parents
- Many children and young people had considerable knowledge about parental alcohol problems including how much parents drank, when and where they drank and the reasons why they drank
- Children and young people were often very worried about a parent's drinking and reported feeling anxious, frightened, upset, angry and sad
- Choosing to share any knowledge about parental alcohol use often involved careful deliberations and trust was a deciding factor
- Friends and wider family were a source of support, however, this could easily be disrupted by factors often outside children's control
- Children and young people have a right to access support services regardless of parental engagement in treatment services



The study

This qualitative study explored children and young people's experiences when affected by parental (or significant carer) alcohol problems and support needs. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, two groups of children and young people already accessing support services for parental alcohol problems participated in a 'Good ideas' research group programme to inform and develop the research design¹. In total, 30 children and young people aged from nine to 20 years old participated in individual, pair or small group interviews or a group work programme via eight voluntary support services across Scotland. Interviews included a choice of different activities to create many different opportunities for children and young people to communicate about the impact of alcohol on their lives. The sample included 16 females (53%) and 14 males (43%) and all participants were of white Scottish ethnicity. The study received ethical approval from The University of Edinburgh and adhered to Barnardo's Statement of Ethical Practice for researchers. All names are self-chosen pseudonyms.

Research findings

Choosing to share what we know

Children and young people had extensive knowledge about alcohol and the impact on family lives. They spoke about the types of alcohol beverages parents drank, the quantities drunk and patterns of drinking, how they behaved when drinking and their perceptions of why parents drank. There was a particular awareness of the impact on the health and behaviour of a parent and the consequences for those around them. There was also knowledge about historical patterns of use and parents' engagement with treatment services. In talking directly about their parents, most participants were keen to emphasise that parental alcohol use was historical; for example, Homer told me 'my mum use to have an alcohol problem' and Rob explained that 'my ma's stopped now. She's on tablets...she cannae drink at all'. Paige explains that in the past her mum drank two bottles of vodka a day and minimises mum's current drinking,

...she has cut down to one bottle a day and it's not even a bottle a day, it's half a bottle, maybe not even that, a couple of glasses out of it which is really, really good.

Children and young people who perceived parental alcohol use as historical often gave the greatest detail about parental alcohol use and the impact on their lives. They commented that while their parents had been able to reduce or stop alcohol use at different stages in their

childhood, they were aware of the challenges parents faced in achieving a long-term change. They did all share their parents' optimism that they would be able to stop drinking in the future.

Emotional times

The emotional impact of living with a parent who had an alcohol problem was frequently described as the most challenging part of children and young people's lives. Feeling anxious, frightened, upset, angry and sad were all part of a plethora of emotions they experienced. Children spoke about the worry they felt for their parents in the everyday and for the future. During school time, children were often worrying about the safety of their parent at home. For example, Bart described coming home from school to check that his mum was asleep on the couch before going out to play with his friends. Some children explained that they struggled to concentrate whilst at school. Some children were periodically absent from school to be able to look after a parent or younger siblings.

Many children shared incredible levels of understanding and empathy with parents and were positive about their engagement with treatment services. The 'emotional rollercoaster' some children experienced is visually apparent in a drawing produced by Rosie and Taz (Figure 2). These emotions are not simply how they felt about parental alcohol use at one given time; rather, they interweaved their own emotions with perceptions of parental emotions at different stages as well as expressing feelings about the past, present and future.

Support

Talking about parental alcohol problems was incredibly difficult for the majority of children and young people and there was considerable concern about sharing any knowledge outside of the family. The stigma associated with problematic alcohol use often meant careful decisions were made when seeking any form of informal or formal support. Many children shared experiences or fears about bullying if alcohol problems were known. Furthermore, some children were worried that the involvement of professional adults (e.g. teachers) may lead to the family no longer being able to live together. Seeking support required a trusting relationship whether this involved families, friends, teachers, social workers or service practitioners. An ability to listen was essential; Luke described how his grandad and auntie help him:

They just listen, like and they never interrupt and say what's going on, just like sat down and listened and spoke to me about it and all that.

Policy/research implications

- Children affected by parental alcohol problems can remain hidden yet the impacts on their lives can be very challenging
- Policy and practice should recognise the diversity of children and young people's experiences when living with parental (or carer) alcohol problems
- Working with the whole family allows opportunities to build on a family's strengths and can create opportunities for open communication
- Provision of confidential safe spaces for children and young people to be able to share their worries and concerns is essential
- Involving children and young people in a group work programme to explore 'how to' conduct research on this sensitive topic greatly enhanced this study

In accessing voluntary support services, young people spoke about the importance of feeling respected, valued and 'not judged'. Having time to develop a relationship and continuity of support were also raised as important factors. For some young people, having an opportunity to have time away from home in a safe, fun environment with other young people was highly valued.

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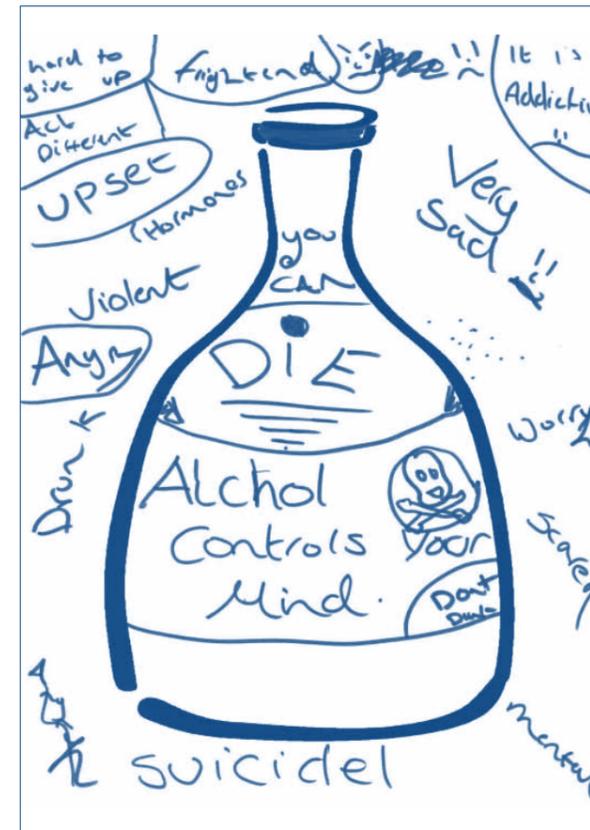


Figure 2: Rosie and Taz's alcohol bottle

¹The young people preferred to use the term, 'alcohol problem' to highlight the problem alcohol caused for the individual and the family.