



# The Impact of Substance Use on Parenting



In 2023, there were over **546,000** reported cases of child abuse and neglect across the U.S. That same year, approximately **2,000** children died from abuse and neglect - **a 9.6% rise in child fatalities from 2019.**<sup>1</sup>

The lifetime economic cost of child maltreatment was estimated at **\$218 billion** in 2018, which is higher than chronic illnesses like heart disease and diabetes.<sup>2</sup>

Child abuse and neglect involve any mistreatment by a parent, caregiver, or another person in a custodial role that causes harm, risk of harm, or the threat of harm. This can include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect.<sup>2,3</sup>

- **Physical abuse** is the deliberate use of physical force that injures a child, such as hitting or shaking.<sup>2,3</sup>
- **Emotional abuse** involves actions that damage a child's self-esteem or emotional health, like shaming, name-calling, or withholding affection.<sup>2,3</sup>
- **Sexual abuse** refers to any attempted or completed sexual act or contact with a child by a caregiver, such as penetration, fondling, or exposing the child to sexual activity.<sup>2,3</sup>
- **Neglect** is the failure to provide for a child's basic emotional, medical, and physical needs, like housing, food, and clothing.<sup>2,3</sup>

## How do I know if a child is being abused/neglected?

Recognizing the signs of child abuse and neglect are essential for ensuring a child's safety and well-being. Signs and symptoms that are present in the child can include:

- Sudden changes in behavior – such as anger, hostility, constant exhaustion, or hyperactivity – or changes in academic performance.<sup>3,4,5</sup>
- A child who exhibits poor hygiene, severe body odor, or consistently wearing soiled clothing or clothing that is significantly too large, too small or in need of repair.<sup>3,5,6</sup>
- Frequently lacking necessary medical care or treatment, such as prescribed medications, assistive devices or other essential health interventions.<sup>5</sup>
- Food hoarding and lack of adequate nutrition.<sup>3</sup>
- Unexplained injuries and may be accompanied by a child providing contradictory, questionable, or inconsistent explanations.<sup>3,4</sup>
- Untreated physical or medical issues that parents are aware of.<sup>3,4</sup>
- Struggles with learning or concentration without a clear physical or psychological cause.<sup>4</sup>
- Appears constantly alert, expecting something bad to happen.<sup>4</sup>
- Arrives early, leaves late, or reluctant to go home.<sup>4</sup>
- Lacking adequate adult supervision, which may lead to children taking on inappropriate responsibilities for their age.<sup>3,4</sup>
- Hesitation to be near a specific individual.<sup>4</sup>



Signs and symptoms that parents can exhibit:

- Denies or blames the child for their issues at school or home.<sup>3</sup>
- Requests teachers or caregivers to use physical punishment for misbehavior.<sup>4</sup>
- Views the child as completely bad, worthless or a burden.<sup>4</sup>
- Expects the child to meet unattainable physical and academic standards.<sup>3,4</sup>
- Relies on the child to fulfill the parent's emotional needs.<sup>4</sup>
- Shows minimal concern for the child's well-being, such as constantly missing or canceling appointments.<sup>3,4</sup>



## Parental Substance Use

Parental substance misuse can lead to child abuse, neglect, and an increased likelihood of children witnessing intimate partner violence (IPV).<sup>7,8</sup> It disrupts secure parent-child attachment, diminishes the parent's ability to nurture, and creates unsafe home environments, increasing the risk of maltreatment for the child.<sup>8,9,10</sup>

From 2015 to 2019, on average, over **21 million** children in the United States lived with a parent who misused substances and more than **2 million** lived with a parent with a substance use disorder (SUD). Marijuana was the most used substance.<sup>9</sup>

Parental substance misuse was a leading factor in children entering foster care nationwide, accounting for **33%** of all cases in 2022.<sup>11</sup> Parental opioid misuse was associated with over **200,000** reports of child abuse and neglect, over **95,000** children entering foster care, and almost **\$3 billion** in child welfare system costs between 2011 and 2016.<sup>12</sup>

In 2022, nearly **18%** of child deaths in Florida (43 out of 237) were attributed to maltreatment, with **60.5%** resulting from neglect and **39.5%** from abuse. Among cases where caregiver impairment was documented, **31.2%** of caregivers were found to be impaired.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, in 2021, most caregivers of children who died had a history of substance misuse, with **67.4%** reporting a history of marijuana use.<sup>14</sup>



Parental marijuana use is associated with increased risk of marijuana, tobacco use, as well as opioid misuse, among both adolescents and young adult children, and is also associated with higher alcohol use among adolescent children.<sup>15</sup>

Parental substance misuse can have a lasting effect on a child's health, resulting in a higher risk of injuries, infectious diseases, hyperactivity, anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal behavior, and substance use in adolescence.<sup>8,16</sup>

Children of parents with an alcohol use disorder are **nine times more likely** to have poor school performance and **twice as likely** to repeat a grade. They are also more likely to need special classes, referrals to school psychologists, and report higher absenteeism, which in turn impacts school performance.<sup>16</sup>

Engaging parents in appropriate evidence-based treatment can improve their quality of life, reduce negative health outcomes, and decrease child welfare involvement.<sup>9,17</sup>

# Barriers to Treatment

Barriers to engaging in treatment services and recovery include waitlists, delays in appointment scheduling, mental health comorbidities, unemployment, economic challenges, homelessness, lack of childcare, and transportation.<sup>17</sup>

- Access to treatment is particularly difficult for parents, especially mothers, due to limited childcare options and strict program requirements, such as time-sensitive screenings and mandatory attendance. These barriers, along with penalties for missed appointments, can complicate their recovery process.<sup>19</sup>
- The financial burden of childcare further restricts access to treatment, as parents may be unable to afford both recovery services and the cost of childcare.<sup>17,19</sup>
- Mothers often face stigma and fear judgement or custody loss if they seek treatment for substance use disorders.<sup>10,18,19</sup> This stigma, especially prevalent in the healthcare system, discourages many from seeking prenatal or postnatal care, further exacerbating health issues for both mother and child.<sup>19</sup>
- Healthcare providers' negative perceptions of individuals with SUD often leads to discrimination.<sup>19</sup> This stigma results in people being labeled as "untrustworthy" or "irresponsible," contributing to fewer treatment-seeking behaviors and long-term negative outcomes for both parents and children.<sup>19</sup>



To determine the most effective treatment, it is crucial to assess the underlying factors contributing to their substance use, such as coping with stress, trauma, or underlying mental health conditions. By identifying these factors and fostering a safe space for open dialogue, parents can be empowered to address both substance and mental health challenges, ultimately improving their well-being and family outcomes.

For more information related to the impacts of substance use during pregnancy and parenting, visit:  
<https://www.marijuanaknowthetruth.org/marijuana-and-pregnancy>

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## References

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