

Drug Abuse: Its effect on child abuse and neglect

Families in trouble are typically beset by poverty and lack of parenting skills, but it is drug abuse that may send them over the edge. Addicted parents can also be the hardest to serve, and their children among the most seriously harmed.

Children's Services strives to repair the damage by providing counseling, therapy, treatment and other services.

Drug abuse undermines child protection

Substance abuse is a public health problem that affects all social, economic and racial groups. The children most severely affected are those from families without the cushion of financial and emotional resources. Chemical dependency affects about half of the parents whose children are placed outside of their homes by Children's Services.

Families troubled by hard-core substance abuse can become highly dysfunctional, with grade school-aged children scratching up meals and taking nearly full-time care of younger siblings. The home can become a way station for drug dealers, addicts and other undesirables who sometimes beat or sexually molest the children.

Crack abuse turns families upside down

Children's Services attributes a dramatic rise in child abuse during the first half of the 1990s to epidemic use of crack cocaine. While other drugs leave addicts able to function, crack lays families to waste. Crack-abusing parents often leave children with neighbors, friends – or even alone – and don't return for days. Relatives often become fed up and abandon the family. Addicts may support their habit by prostitution, theft and selling all they own. Case-workers say they can always tell when they've entered the home of a crack user

because there is no food and the place is bare except for a mattress on the floor.

Although crack use has diminished somewhat, it is still a major factor in child abuse and neglect because it is so devastating. The child protection system must cope with infants born to women who used drugs during pregnancy. Children's Services is also dealing with many deeply troubled children who spent their early, formative years with drug addicts.

Children's services fights back with many services

Through IMPACT (Interagency Managed Provision of Alcohol Chemical-Dependency Treatment), a unique coalition of public and private entities, the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services has created an innovative managed care system to better serve families troubled by substance abuse. IMPACT makes it easier for parents and children to enter more appropriate and cost-effective treatment programs. They do not have to wait for available spaces in treatment programs, as this could increase the likelihood they will follow through.

Services are provided by 13 substance abuse treatment providers. Services include assessment and intervention, residential and outpatient treatment and support groups.

In addition, Children's Services pays for urine screenings. These tests, required as evidence in court, let the agency know if a parent is following through with drug treatment.

Finally, Children's Services trains foster and adoptive parents in how to care for children affected by drugs and contracts with private agencies that provide therapeutic foster care for children with special needs.