

Effects of alcoholic parents on a child's long-term development



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Introduction

One of the leading causes of death related to personal lifestyle in the United States is Alcohol abuse. Alcoholics make multiple trips to the hospital each year and, as a result, can cause severe amounts of stress on their families. Children of alcoholics, in particular, are greatly affected by their parent's misuse of alcohol. Children, in the early stages of development, are vulnerable and are at a higher risk of developing psychological disorders as a result of their parent's lack of warmth and support. Many children exhibit negative outcomes in adulthood like antisocial behavior, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse (Park & Schepp, 2014). As a result, several researchers aim to find out how a child's development is impaired by their alcoholic parent's and ways to prevent those developmental issues. Studies show that psychological and psychosocial development are the most impaired when dealing with one or more alcoholic parents (Hussong et al., 2008). Social competence, behavior, life stressors, and family dynamics can be impacted when a child is raised by one or more alcoholic parents, which can negatively affect the child's long-term psychological development.

Impact on Social Competence

The quality of peer friendships, and the behavior in the company of those peers, is how social competence is determined in young children. According to a number of long-term studies, children who do not form healthy social relationships with their peers early on end up with underdeveloped social skills in their teen and adult years. When looking at mental illness and crime in adolescents and adults, social competence is thought to be the best

predictor of why these behaviors occur (Eiden, Colder, Edwards, & Leonard, 2009). In addition, children with high quality peer relationships are at a decreased risk for loneliness and aggression and have a higher academic success rate (Hussong, Zucker, Wong, Fitzgerald, & Puttler, 2005).

One peer group that may have a high risk for developing social problems later on is children of alcoholics (Hussong et al., 2005). One link between low social competence in children is poor parenting, especially in the early years of development. According to social learning theory, the presence of antisocial behavior and depression in parents could have a direct influence on inappropriate social behaviors in children when modeling occurs. As a result, alcoholic parents exhibiting these behaviors could very well have a direct negative influence on the social competence of their children.

Alcoholic fathers are at a higher risk for poor parenting early in their child's life and display lower warmth and increased negative affect according to recent studies on the subject. In addition, infants and toddlers are shown lower warmth and sensitivity from their mother, when the mother has an alcoholic partner (Eiden et al., 2009).

In a study done by Hussong et al. (2005), the researchers found some evidence that children with alcoholic parents may develop social competence slower than their classmates. COAs (children of alcoholics) were seen to have less social competence than their peers in both the self-reported and the teacher reported categories. However, gender had a huge role in the researcher's findings. The results showed that girls were found to have a higher risk for social competence deficits in the documented reports.

Since boys were found to have a greater risk in past studies, the researchers <https://assignbuster.com/effects-of-alcoholic-parents-on-a-childs-long-term-development/>

hypothesized that girls were judged more harshly because society expects females to be more social in general as stated by gender socialization theory. The results also showed that not all COAs were at risk for deficits. COAs with alcoholic fathers and COAs with two alcoholic parents demonstrated a higher risk. Having an alcoholic father or having two alcoholic parents could contribute to increasing stress levels in the household. The stress could affect many factors of a child's development, including social competence.

The results of a study done by Eiden et. al. (2009) also show that alcoholic fathers are linked to lower social competence in their children. One important factor that facilitates the link between children of alcoholic fathers and social competence is actually their mother. The results of the study indicate that partners of alcoholics were less loving and warm towards their children during playtime. Since lower maternal warmth and lower social competence have a significant link, it is safe to hypothesize that alcoholic fathers contribute to lower social competence by causing significant stress to their partner.

Impact on Behavior

The results of multiple studies support the claim that there is a significant link between behavioral problems and alcoholic parents. Some of these behavioral abnormalities include a higher risk for psychopathology, antisocial behavior, aggression, impulsivity, and future substance abuse. Most children who display these behaviors have issues staying out of trouble and are at risk for criminal behavior and alcoholism. Because of this, many researchers

are interested in finding the link between negative behavioral development and alcoholic parents (Edwards, Eiden, Coler, & Leonard, 2006).

In a study done by Edwards et al. (2006), the researchers aim to examine how children of alcoholics display aggression early on in their development and how that aggression can manifest into more severe problems later on. In this study, the participants were split into two groups: the nonalcoholic group and the group consisting of families with alcoholic fathers. The results of the study show that the children followed the normal curve for aggressive behavior with increases until the age of 3 and then a decrease after 4 years of age. All of the participants seemed to be developing normally, but after examining the groups, the researchers found that the children of non-alcoholics had the lowest levels of aggression when compared to the COAs. In addition, the results indicated that girls with alcoholic fathers either had a steady rate or a slow decrease in aggression as opposed to their male counterparts that had increases in aggression.

Fitzgerald et al. (1993) conducted a study to determine if children of alcoholics exhibited more impulsive behaviors and had more conduct issues than children of non-alcoholics. In this study, the researchers made sure that all the participants came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds and had similar family sizes and educations so there would be less factors that could contribute to the conduct and impulsivity issues. In this particular study, the researchers were expecting COAs to exhibit a significant amount of behavioral problems as opposed to their peers. However, the results did not confirm that hypothesis. The results did show that children of alcoholics displayed higher levels of impulsivity.

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Externalizing Behavior Problems

Many researchers have studied externalizing symptoms within a child's behavior. One common hypothesis regarding externalizing behavioral issues is that there is a significant link between alcoholic parents and these behaviors. When researchers describe externalizing symptoms, they refer to a child who has problems managing their emotions and impulse control while also exhibiting some antisocial behavior. These children have trouble controlling their impulses and do not develop in the same way as their peers (Eiden, Edwards, & Leonard, 2007). As a result, multiple researchers have conducted studies to investigate the correlation between behavioral issues in children and their alcoholic parents.

In one study relating to behavioral problems of COAs, the researchers tested who has the highest risk for developing externalizing behaviors and if the risk occurs while the parent is presenting symptoms. In general, the results supported the claim that children of alcoholics have a higher risk for developing externalizing symptoms than children of non-alcoholics. The researchers also found evidence to support that children had increased externalizing symptoms when their parents were displaying symptoms related to alcohol abuse. In addition, the results did not vary for gender; girls and boys both exhibited symptoms as a result of their parents especially when their parents were currently displaying symptoms (Hussong, Huang, Curran, Chassin, & Zucker, 2010).

In another study, the researchers were interested in how a lack of parental warmth in alcoholics could promote behavior problems in their children. The

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study aimed to monitor how the alcoholic parent's antisocial and depressive behavior can translate into a lack of warmth toward their children, and how that lack of warmth can affect a child's self-regulation and eventually contribute to their externalizing behavior problems. One of the main points of this particular study is how a lack of self-regulation can lead to externalizing behavior problems later on in development. Self-regulation is the ability to interpret a situation and respond with appropriate emotions or behaviors. There are two aspects of self-regulation that are particularly important in the early stages of development: effortful control and internalized control. Effortful control is the ability to respond appropriately in social situations and suppress inappropriate behavior. Effortful control is extremely important after the first two years of life and can be a predictor of behavior issues. Internalized control is defined as the ability to display socially acceptable behavior even when there is not anyone there to witness the behavior. Multiple have highlighted the association between these skills and parenting. Children with parents that give them loving attention are more likely to regulate their behaviors and develop self-regulation at a normal rate. Since alcoholism interferes a parent's ability to stay consistently supportive, it is safe to hypothesis that parental alcoholism can delay the development of self-regulation and encourage the development of externalizing behavioral problems (Eiden, Edwards, & Leonard, 2007).

Contribution to Life Stressors

Stressors are defined as conditions within an individual's environment that challenge their biological or psychological abilities. Stressors are known to greatly affect development and require psychological and social adaptation <https://assignbuster.com/effects-of-alcoholic-parents-on-a-childs-long-term-development/>

from the individual. In order to successfully study stressors, it is important to understand how individuals can be affected by stressors in different ways (King, Molina, & Chassin, 2008). For example, children of alcoholics overall have more stressors in their life and are at a higher risk to respond negatively to those stressors. As a result, the children of alcoholic have a rate of psychopathology that is significantly higher than their peers. According to multiple studies, COAs may also be at risk for increased stress severity. Stress severity refers to how an individual rates how stressful a particular life event can be. Overall, COAs tend to rate their experiences as more stressful than their non-COA peers, even if the experiences are similar (Hussong et al., 2008).

In a study done by Hussong et al. (2008), COAs were found to display risk for family-related stressors far more than non-COAs. The researchers hypothesized that this may be because the participants were college aged which is an age where family stressors are emphasized. In addition, other studies have found that alcoholic parents tend to affect their children into college years and even into adulthood, meaning that COAs experience stress from their parent long after they stop living with them.

Another stressor that COAs face is the impact of their parent's impairment. Examples of alcohol specific stressors include their parent's incarceration, acting inappropriately in front of the child's friends, and antisocial behavior in general. These events could also trigger more stressors within the household like divorce, new stepparents, and moving to different cities/states. All of these stressors, in combination with each other, can lead

a COA to substance abuse or cause them to develop certain mental disorders like anxiety or depression (Hussong et al., 2008).

Impact on Resilience

When an individual is resilient they are able to turn the negative experience of living in a high-stress environment and turn it into a positive outcome (Haverfield & Theiss, 2014). Resilience is an extremely important characteristic to develop because it provides children with ways to cope with stressful life events. The ways that parents interact with their children can make a huge difference in the development of the child's emotional competence. One factor that may contribute to high levels of resilience is parental responsiveness. Parental responsiveness is defined as non-verbal cues such as eye contact, touch, and warm vocal tone that are consistent and supportive. These non-verbal cues demonstrate effective examples of emotion and encourage supportive interactions. In addition, when parents provide support and are responsive to their toddler's needs, the toddler displays a greater ability to pay attention and demonstrate self-control. Since alcoholism effects a parent's ability to display all of these important actions to their children, many COAs don't exhibit the characteristic of resilience. The lack of this important characteristic is another reason many COAs are at a higher risk for negative outcomes (Haverfield & Theiss, 2016).

Even though most children of alcoholics are at a high risk for stressors and stress severity, some COAs are surprisingly resilient when facing stressors associated with their parents. Resilient COAs are able to manage the stress by taking on more responsibility and become more socially competent as a

result of their high-stress environment, despite being at a very high risk for negative outcomes. However, it remains unclear why certain COAs are able to cope with their environment better than most children of alcoholics (Haverfield & Theiss, 2014).

In one study conducted by Park and Schepp (2014), the researchers aimed to study the risk and protective factors associated with stressors of COAs and find ways to make COAs more resilient to their life stressors. This particular study focused more on programs and interventions for COAs to help them become more resilient. Currently, there aren't many help programs available for children of alcoholics; most programs are involved with preventing negative outcomes, teaching the COAs positive coping strategies, or reducing stress. Instead, the programs should work to promote factors that protect COAs or try to reduce their risk factors. For example, interventions should advise the COAs to form positive attachments with non-alcoholic caregivers like teachers or grandparents. In addition, programs created to help with self-esteem would be beneficial since COAs do not receive a lot of support and assurance from their parents. All of these types of interventions would facilitate the development of resilience in COAs and help reduce the negative outcomes associated with alcoholic parents.

Impact on Family Dynamics

Alcoholism is often thought of as a familial disease since all the members living with the alcoholic are affected in one way or another. Alcohol is usually valued above family members, friends, and work in the eyes of an alcoholic. As a result, the alcoholic will retreat into themselves, experience financial

distress, and become both physically and verbally abusive. Alcoholics are also emotionally inconsistent with their children, displaying warmth and affection at some times and becoming emotionally unavailable at others. Seeing these characteristics in parental figures produces an unhealthy example of relationships for COAs. Children of alcoholics are at risk for copying their parent's behavior and displaying angry, forceful, and avoidant behavior towards their classmates. In addition, many alcoholic behaviors put a strain on marital relationships which can also create an unhealthy model of romantic relationships for COAs (Haverfield & Theiss, 2014).

According to Tinnfält, Fröding, Larsson, and Dalal (2018), most studies have focused on toddlers, preschoolers, and adolescents, but there isn't much research on children around the ages of 7-9. Since this age is so important for development, the researchers decided to conduct a study to add to small amount of already existing literature. During this stage development, familial relationships starts to become very important to the child. If any part of the family dynamic is altered, the child's development can be disrupted. In addition, children of alcoholics' report, at this age, that one big fear they have is not being able to continue living with their parent because of divorce or incarceration (Tinnfält et al., 2018).

One huge factor that alcoholism has on the family dynamic is martial conflict and dissatisfaction. Since one of the main symptoms of heavy alcohol abuse is aggression, many male alcoholics will either abuse their spouse or at the very least cause frequent arguments. In families of recovering alcoholics, less domestic abuse and arguments are found, showing that the alcohol is the probable cause of the abuse. Marital abuse can be very stressful for <https://assignbuster.com/effects-of-alcoholic-parents-on-a-childs-long-term-development/>

COAs and those who experience it within their family are at a high risk for adjustment issues. In addition, families that experience marital abuse have an increased risk for child-parent abuse which can cause negative outcomes in COAs like aggression, anxiety, and future substance abuse. The negative outcomes associated with marital and child-parent abuse support the sensitization hypothesis. The hypothesis states that frequent conflict, that is destructive in nature, within the family unit sensitizes children to continued conflict and results in intense distress. The distress the COAs feel when experiencing familial conflict might be associated with other stressful situations and lead to adjustment issues later on in development (El-Sheikh & Flanagan, 2001).

One common theme that is consistent in the feelings of adult COAs is the realization that they have missed out on their childhood. Since COAs had a parent that was physically and emotionally unavailable for most of their childhood and adolescence, many COAs had to take care of themselves, their parent, and, possibly, multiple siblings. These feelings are consistent across the current literature, as many COAs have reported feeling more like a caregiver and have experienced parentification. Parentification is when a child acts as a parent or caregiver to their father or mother. As a result, many COAs feel the need to act more submissive and child-like in their relationships since they have never been given the opportunity to experience that role (Haverfield & Theiss, 2014).

Communication Within the Family

Communication is the main family dynamic that is impaired as a result of alcoholism. Without sufficient communication, a family cannot function normally and the children suffer developmentally as a result. Throughout all the literature on COAs, a lack of emotional expression is one of the most common developmental impairment seen in COAs. One of the ways that a parent can affect emotional development is through their communication style. One communication style, emotional-dismissing, involves criticism or dismissive behavior directed at the COA during emotional expression. The second communication style is emotional-coaching which is when a parent uses a child's emotions as a way of teaching how to properly regulate their emotional expression. Children of alcoholics are likely to receive emotional-dismissing communication and are, as a result, prone to avoiding all discussion on alcoholism and problems at home. In addition, children who receive emotional-dismissing communication are at risk for health problems, behavioral issues, and worse academic scores (Haverfield & Theiss, 2014).

Marital dissatisfaction also causes communication issues within the family of alcoholics. When a child observes their parents communicating poorly within their marriage, the child will then model the behavior and have negative effects in future relationships (El-Sheikh & Flanagan, 2001). According to Rothenberg, Hussong, & Chassin (2016), social learning theory and family systems theory link marital conflict and communication issues together. Family systems states that when parents are unable to communicate effectively, tension from marital dissatisfaction is redirected towards the children. As a result, the tension can place a COA at risk for certain negative behaviors such as poor communication skills or lack of warmth in future

relationships. Social learning theory, in regards to communication and marital dissatisfaction, states that children could view their parents' communicative behaviors and model them when they are upset with certain situations or relationships. COAs will then emulate the communication skills of an alcoholic in future relationships and social situations which will affect their ability to maintain healthy relationships in the future.

One study surveying ACOA (adult children of alcoholics) found that many adults expressed their lack of communication skills, specifically in regard to their relationships. Hostile and non-existent communication were the most common types of communication reported by ACOAs and many of the participants reported that their own communication skills reflect their parent's. One ACOA reported that they lose their temper very easily and have trouble standing up for herself. Another problem the participants noted was a difficulty expressing how they feel to others. Since children of alcoholics were told not to communicate their issues in childhood, they have trouble expressing their problems in healthy relationships as an adult. Lastly, the ACOAs expressed regretting not speaking up about the alcoholism either to their parent or a trusted adult. The participants realized as adults that staying quiet prolonged the problem and caused their parent's alcoholism to worsen (Haverfield & Theiss, 2014).

Discussion

Social competence, behavior, life stressors, and family dynamics can all be heavily affected by the developmental issues associated with an alcoholic parent. Overall, the main components that negatively affect development

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are the poor communication skills of the parent and the lack of emotional support and warmth shown to the child (Haverfield & Theiss, 2014). In order to prevent and correct these developmental abnormalities, certain interventions and programs need to be enacted. The most beneficial types of interventions for COAs are programs that provide emotional support and increase self-esteem. In addition, advising COAs to form positive attachments with caring adults like teachers or non-alcoholic family members would provide increased protection against risk factors associated with having an alcoholic parent (Park & Schepp, 2014). Overall, the findings in the current literature support the claim that having an alcoholic parent negatively effects development and certain protections need to be implemented to help those children.

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