

# Brattleboro Reformer

## The impact of substance abuse on child development

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POSTED: 11/07/2014

The "heroin problem" has been identified as the source of many societal challenges in Vermont. Governor Shumlin's annual state address was dedicated to the issue. Other than heroin, the use of opiates such as Oxycodone, a prescription pill, make up a large portion of the population being treated for addiction. However, alcohol remains the substance most frequently abused. More importantly, substance use disorders (SUDs), no matter what the substance, are not good for children.

The negative side effects of substance use disorders range from physical and mental discomfort (from both use and withdrawal) to criminal activity to death. People with SUDs are more at risk for losing gainful employment, being homeless, and being unable to take care of their children. Children born having been exposed to drugs (including alcohol and cigarettes) prenatally are often premature, have a low birth weight or are medically fragile. Sometimes they are even born addicted and have to go through withdrawal. Clearly optimal development is harder to achieve for these children. While people with SUDs are also more at risk lines. Even if a parent who has a SUD is able to provide a home and food for their child, other effects of the disorder will continue to have an impact.

Children need a predictable, consistent environment and a positive relationship with their caregiver in order to develop optimally.

Parents and caregivers who abuse substances are more likely to neglect the physical and emotional needs of their children as activities related to substance obtainment, use and recovering from the physical side effects of use are primary. This is not just the parent who is so lost in drug-induced haze that their baby dies unattended in a crib. It is also the parent who is slow to recognize and respond to a baby's cues to the point that the baby stops providing cues. This could lead to a lack of attachment and bonding, which in turn can severely limit a child's social emotional development. In turn, there can be far-reaching consequences for many aspects in the child's life, from school achievement to healthy

relationships to developing a substance use disorder. This will not happen to every child who has a parent or caregiver with a substance use disorder, but the increased risk is real. Sadly, over 26 percent of children between birth and 5 live with at least one parent who abused or was dependent on alcohol or an illicit drug.

What can we do in this crisis? One of the major barriers that can interfere with parents seeking treatment is a lack of health care coverage or the financial resources to pay for treatment. Others include a lack of appropriate services or long waiting lists for existing services, a fear of change, concerns about what others may think, and difficulties accessing treatment such as transportation, lack of child care, and the need to maintain a job. It is not just accessing treatment that is important, however. The fabric of family life is impacted in multiple ways and an integrated approach is required to make a difference. We need to better understand the complexity of dynamics that can impact child and family development, and help support families to identify and access what they need to be the best that they can. Children thrive when the adults around them have an understanding of the broad context and systems, and can bridge between them to offer seamless support and care.

Ultimately if a family is unable to address a substance use disorder and the safety of a child is compromised we must act to protect children. It is not always a clear line, and there are developmental risks associated with children being removed from their primary caregiver, no matter how inappropriate that caregiver may be. The foster care system is rife with its own challenges. Notably in this region there are not enough foster families to go around -- Brattleboro has one of the highest rates of children currently in state's custody. We need to address the web of supports for children in a systemic way in order to successfully address our most complicated problems.

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