

Resource Article

Growing Up in an Alcoholic Home

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Children of alcoholics have deep wounds. Alcoholic parents may love their children, but their addiction destroys their ability to parent responsibly. The child rarely comes first. His past is filled with broken promises, and he may have suffered severe neglect and abuse.

Trust is key when dealing with children of alcoholics. Be careful what you promise. Do not say, "We will have your favorite food for dinner tomorrow." Instead say, "I hope we will be able to have your favorite food for dinner tomorrow, but if we cannot, we will plan for another day."

You can help to build trust by striving to meet each hope. Introduce "promises" gradually. At first, make a promise that can be met immediately. For example, with a child, you can hold your hands behind your back and say, "I promise there is a surprise for you in my hands." Then give the child the surprise. Gradually increase the time between the promise and the reward.

Truth Is Difficult

Truth is difficult for children of alcoholics. Their chaotic world teaches them to lie. For example, a teen whose father was out late drinking may tell others that her father is sick, not that he is suffering from a hangover. A child may tell others that his bruises are from a fall, not that his alcoholic mother beat him.

This habit of lying often transfers into other areas of life as well. A child may say that she did not do her homework because she had a headache, not because she lost the book. The child or teen may have learned to be a chronic liar, but you can help her to discover the truth and deal with the consequences. For example, you might help the child find her lost book and then help her to complete her homework.

The Burden of Blame

Blame is a burden for children of alcoholics. They feel that everything is their fault. The failures of his parents are because he is a bad child. She received a poor grade in school because she is stupid. No matter what goes wrong, these children and teens will blame themselves.

You can help them to put blame in perspective. If a child says he is bad, show him where he is good. If a teen says she is stupid, show her how intelligent she is. Go beyond just telling them that what they are saying is not true. Instead, give them examples of why it is not true. For example, if a child says, "I am stupid," do not say, "No, you are not!" Instead, say, "It was smart of you to organize your notebook" or "Not many students your age can do fractions."

Life Is Serious Business

For the child of an alcoholic, life is very serious business. Much of her time is spent just surviving. The burden of responsibility for her parents and siblings intrudes on any free time she has and uses up all of her energy. Even after she is in a safe place, she may have difficulty enjoying herself and relaxing.

You can help by creating fun activities. The child or teen needs to learn to relax and relate to others in enjoyable situations. (For more information about teaching children to play, read “Stages of Play” and “The Importance of Play” in this handbook.)

You can help children and teens heal from the trauma of alcoholic homes through your loving, consistent presence. Affirm their progress, and encourage their efforts. Each step they take in the light of God’s love is another step away from the evil they have endured. For many, healing will be a lifetime struggle.