



Grandparents

You are not alone!

Talking to Grandchildren about their Parent's Use of Alcohol or Drugs

Children see, hear and wonder about everything – including their parent's alcohol and drug use. Talking to your grandchildren about their parent's use of alcohol or drugs is not always an easy conversation. You may feel powerless over your ability to make things better when their parents are unable to parent their children safely. It's important for you to realize that it is not your fault. Many families are impacted by substance abuse and children need to know they are not alone. You can help your grandchildren understand why mom or dad is unable to take care of themselves. Addiction is a disease that is based in the body and brain.

Give the basics, keep it simple and be honest.

Children need to be given honest information about what is happening with their parents and their family. How they understand what is happening is based on their age and developmental stage. Whatever the age of the child, they need to hear that:

1. Your parent has an illness.
2. It is not their fault.
3. The adults in your life are trying to help Mom/Dad with this problem.
4. You will be safe and taken care of until Mom/Dad is better.

Be non-judgmental about their parent

It can be upsetting to see how your grandchildren have been impacted by their parent's alcohol or drug use. These feelings can come across in your tone of voice, your choice of words or general demeanor when talking to your

grandchildren about their parent's use of alcohol or drugs. Before talking with your grandchildren, it might be useful to check how you are feeling towards the parent. You may find it helpful to process your feelings with another adult to allow for more compassion and prepare you for your conversation with your grandchildren.

Help your grandchildren identify their feelings.

Encourage your grandchildren to express their feelings – about missing a visit with a parent, experiencing fighting in their home, seeing their parent under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Younger children can be encouraged to draw a picture and tell a story based on the picture. They can talk about their feelings and be reassured that it is okay to have those feelings. With older children, use simple language and solicit their concerns, questions and feelings. Reassure them that they are safe and that the adults are working to make things better. Ask what might help them right now.

Teach the Seven Cs

According to the National Association for Children of Alcoholics:
<http://www.nacoa.org/index.htm>, children need to know the "Seven Cs of Addiction":

1. I didn't **C**ause it
2. I can't **C**ure it
3. I can't **C**ontrol it
4. I can **C**are for myself by **C**ommunicating my feelings, making healthy **C**hoices, and by **C**elebrating myself

Keep the door open for questions and revisit the conversation

Children need to know that they can ask questions about their parents and the alcohol/drug use. Whatever the question is, always affirm that they are asking good questions and answer it as truthfully as possible – keeping in mind the child's age and understanding.

- "I wonder what questions you'd like to ask about Mom/Dad."
- "I wonder how talking about this makes you feel."

Children may not share their thoughts and feelings so it's helpful for the adult to revisit the conversation multiple times.

- "I was thinking about what we talked about yesterday when Mom didn't visit. What do you think happened? How do you feel about it? I wonder what questions you might have about this."

Take care of yourself

Discussing this topic is hard – ask for help. Support groups, friends, clergy, social workers or your own counselor can all be helpful. Taking care of yourself is also important.

Resources:

Talking to Children

COASA, Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps
<http://www.rfkchildren.org/>

- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
<https://ncadd.org/for-parents-overview/talking-with-children>

Self Help Groups and Resources

- Alanon/Alateen: <http://www.ma-al-anon-alateen.org/>
- Learn to Cope: <http://www.learn2cope.org/>

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*1 Section 1 of chapter 176, the acts of 2008 M.G.L. chapter 3, section 69.

*2 All of the feedback, full report, documentation and charts can be found on our website at www.massgrg.com