

Substance abuse and families

Families Australia's policy

Vision

People do not need recourse to substance abuse to manage their daily lives

Introduction

Families Australia is Australia's national peak, independent, not-for-profit organisation which promotes the interests of families. Families Australia undertakes research and consults families and family and community service organisations on current family-related issues. The outcomes are disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders. This policy statement concerns the impact of substance abuse on families.

Why a policy on substance abuse?

- The lives of multitudes of Australians and their families have been, and are today, being ruined by illicit and licit substance abuse.
- The exact costs of the problems are unquantifiable but are undoubtedly massive in personal, social and economic terms. The costs of drug use are spread across all levels of society. Drug use can occur in every type of family irrespective of factors such as income, education and social status.
- Substance abuse represents something fundamentally amiss in society as well as in the lives of many individuals and families. It is the "canary in the mine" - an indication that many people experience a deep lack of meaning and purpose.
- Families bear enormous cost and pain as a result of substance abuse by one or more of their members. Family members often feel alienated and stigmatised and in need of support. Feelings of alienation can cause disengagement with the drug user with the result that families can be, and often are, torn apart.
- The effects of drug use on, and the costs to, the family have received scant attention in Australia. Family has not always been perceived as a central player in efforts to combat drug use.
- In general, the marginalisation of families from treatment services and broader community consciousness has accentuated the feelings of isolation, guilt, blame, shame, depression, anxiety and helplessness that many families experience as they cope with a loved one misusing drugs and alcohol.
- Children with substance dependent parents have often been overlooked by policy makers and service providers. They are impacted by parental and family drug use in a range of ways. Pre-natal substance abuse is, for example, associated with higher rates of occurrence than for non-substance abusing mothers in a range of areas, such as low birth weight and obstetric complications.
- Of great concern are the high rates of child abuse and neglect found in families with substance abuse problems. Substance misuse is often accompanied by mental

health problems, severe financial stress and domestic violence, amongst other problems. Parental alcohol and other drugs problems are found in approximately half of all substantiated cases of child abuse or neglect.

- Many grandparents bear particular burdens as a result of substance abuse by a family member. In 2003, there were 22,500 grandparent families with 31,100 children aged 0-17 years in Australia, representing around one percent of all families with children aged 0-17 years. The number of grandparent-headed households appears to be growing. Many of these grandparents take on the primary caring role as a result of their own children's drug problems, which often co-occur with factors such as mental illness and gambling.

Families Australia's policies

- National substance abuse strategies need to take into account the impacts of both licit and illicit drugs on individuals and families.
- Further research is required to understand the dimensions of the problem, especially as it affects children, and how integrated family support and drug treatment programs work at the service delivery level.
- Greater coherence between national strategies (such as the National Mental Health Strategy and the National Drug Strategy) is required.
- More emphasis and funding are needed for effective whole-of-society programs based on early intervention that tackle co-occurring problems in an integrated and long-term manner.
- National frameworks for child protection and family wellbeing are urgently required.
- Drug treatment services require additional assistance to run family-centred support programs which take into account the differing needs and requirements of families.
- Kinship carers, including grandparents who provide primary care for grandchildren, require further support.
- Greater efforts are required to recruit, train and retain foster carers to provide a stable home environment for affected children.
- Mutually reinforcing and evidence-based education and media programs are needed to increase community awareness.

Priorities for Action

Strengthening families - policy level

- A national family wellbeing framework should be developed as a collaborative undertaking between governments, community organisations, researchers, business and families to guide family policy, research and funding allocations.
- A National Child Protection Strategy should be developed and adopted by Australian, State and Territory governments as a matter of urgency, based on the work of the 2006 National Child Protection Forum.
- Governments through the Council of Australian Governments should enhance the overall coherence and connectivity between strategies dealing with co-occurring issues such as mental health, substance abuse and child abuse and neglect; they should also recognise the need for long-term program interventions through multi-year (longer than three year) funding cycles.
- Greater emphasis should be given in policy and program design and delivery to implementing models of family support and involvement which are integrated with

drug treatment approaches (such as local family support groups) and which take into account the differing needs and requirements of families.

Strengthening families - services and delivery

- The capacities of service providing organisations to provide family support in drug treatment programs should be greatly strengthened, for example, by disseminating information about 'good' and 'best' practice in drug and family support services, especially where there are co-occurring issues.
- Additional resources should be devoted to public education and media campaigns which are mutually reinforcing, evidence-based and comprehensive.
- In relation to grandparents providing primary care, governments should provide additional assistance, including in the following areas: a national information service (such as a 24-hour telephone line and/or a website); further consideration by State and Territory governments of the payment of the foster carer allowance to grandparents who are providing primary care outside, as well as inside, the statutory system; and further consideration by State and Territory governments of the adequacy of financial support for grandparents to meet the needs of grandchildren in their care who are not under formal care and protection orders.

Costs and impacts

- Research should be undertaken into early intervention strategies aimed at families, children and young people to guide whole-of-society and whole-of-community approaches for building family wellbeing and resilience and reducing the incidence of substance abuse and correlated problems, including child abuse and neglect.

Harm minimisation

- Harm minimisation should be reiterated and supported as the central guiding principle for all national drug policies and programs. Greater effort should be made by governments to promote public understanding of the meaning of 'harm minimisation'.

Families Australia's activities in relation to substance abuse

In March 2007, Families Australia made a submission to the Inquiry by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services on the impact of illicit drugs on families. The submission made 11 major recommendations based on evidence obtained through an Expert Forum held in March 2007 involving more than 30 national-level professionals, focus groups comprising professionals working in the field of drug treatment and family support and families whose member/s have been or are affected by drugs, and other research. Families Australia's submission is available at www.familiesaustralia.org.au.

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