

Children from Families with Chemical Dependency

Family Rules

In families with chemical dependency, there are unspoken rules that are followed by all family members...

~ Don't Talk ~ Don't Trust ~ Don't Feel ~

Don't Talk Within the family, the chemical dependency is not acknowledged – Think of the “The elephant in the living room.”

Don't Trust Trusting someone from outside the family with the “family secret” is not allowed, and why trust someone else after you have been let down by your own family.

Don't Feel Think about the feelings that are associated with having an addicted family member – not feelings you would want to connect with.

Five Crucial Messages

There are five crucial messages to give to children who come from families with chemical dependency. Ideally these are given at the end of a complete alcohol & other drug education unit, thus impacting students even if they have not identified themselves.

1) **You are not alone**

Chemical dependency is so stigmatized that neither children nor adults tell their closest friends about it even during the hardest of times. As a result, most children think theirs is the only family that behaves as it does. It is an enormous relief to know that many other people have the same problem.

2) **The substance use is not your fault**

Children blame themselves for a parent's substance use, sometimes because the chemically dependent parent or even the non-using parent explicitly blames them. Obviously this guilt is a burden which has a tremendous impact on the child's personality.

3) **Chemical dependency is an illness – it is not the chemically dependent person's fault either**

The child feels unloved, angry, rejected and thinks the chemically dependent parent chooses to live as s/he does. The child can begin to love the parent again if s/he can separate the illness from the person who has it and can't control it.

4) **Chemically dependent persons can recover – there is hope**

There must be a reason to seek help, something to look forward to. Most young people look for help for their parent, and in so doing find help for themselves.

5) **You need and should get help for yourself**

The object of school-based assistance is to help the children of chemically dependent parents regardless of whether or not their parents get help. That means encouraging the appropriate expression of emotions, teaching coping skills, and providing resources and support.

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How Can I Help???

1) Reassurance

- You are not to blame
- You didn't cause it
- You can't cure it
- You can cope

2) Provide

- Non-judgmental ear
- Warmth
- Security
- Consistency

3) Role Model

- Openness to feelings
- Asking for help
- Trusting others
- Hope
- Coping/problem-solving skills

4) Do Open-Ended Discussions

- Give permission to talk
- Test their reality
- Creates understanding

5) Teach Problem-Solving

6) Build Self-Esteem

7) Know Community Resources

8) Individual Help

- Clarify
- Validate experience / perceptions
- Problem solve
- Assess safety
- Connect support systems
- Educate if time
- Weave feelings throughout
- Fill the gaps
- Foster independence