

Putting the children first

*Helping families to deal with the effects of
a parent's heavy drinking on family life*



“It is hard to ask for help even when you realise you need it because your self-confidence is at rock bottom and it’s difficult to believe that you do actually deserve help.”

Patricia

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The National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI) is an independent charity set up to enhance the value and quality of family life. We are working to support parents in bringing up their children, to promote the well-being of families and to make society more family-friendly.

Alcohol Concern is the national agency on alcohol aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm and improving services for problem drinkers and their families.

All details were checked at the time of printing, but changes can occur. Please visit the NFPI website at www.e-parents.org or the Alcohol Concern website at www.alcoholconcern.org.uk for up-to-date addresses, phone numbers, website and e-mail contacts.

Written by Anne Page, June 2001

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Thanks also to Penguin Books for permission to reproduce the extract from ‘Letter to Daniel’ by Fergal Keane. Some names have been changed.

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Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is for

- parents who have ever wondered whether they drink too much
- parents who are worried about the effect their drinking has on family life.
- parents who drink heavily and may be dependent on alcohol

Often drink is part of social life. It can be a pleasant source of relaxation for many parents.

Some parents may wonder whether regularly drinking a bottle of wine at the end of the day to unwind after the children have gone to bed is too much; or whether going to the pub every day after work means missing out on spending time with the children.

Some parents will know that their drinking is over the top – maybe half a bottle of spirits or a couple of bottles of wine a day or more – but don't know where to go for help to do something about it.

This booklet does not expect parents to give up drinking altogether, although that may be the only way for people who are dependent on alcohol. What it does do is explain how to protect your children and help them enjoy family life.

If you are not sure about how far your drinking affects you and your family, ask yourself these questions:

- Have you ever missed taking the children to nursery or school because you slept late after drinking the night before?
- Have you ever thought the children were missing out because you were under the weather after the previous night's drinking?
- Have you ever felt embarrassed about being drunk in front of the children?
- Have you ever said hurtful things to your children or hit them when you've had too much to drink?
- Have the children ever had to go without because the money has been spent on drink?
- Have you ever cried in front of your children when you've had too much to drink?
- Have you ever worried that you would not have been able to deal with an emergency because you've had too much to drink?

If you want to get help with your drinking, go to the information section at the end of the booklet for helpline numbers and information about how to contact your local alcohol service.

Living with a parent who drinks too much

- Living in a family where someone has a drink problem is stressful – it's like living with and caring for someone with an illness. It puts pressure on marriages, on friendships, on financial resources and on social life.
- Children of parents who have a drink problem often want to keep it a secret and don't feel they can invite other children home – this affects their ability to make friends and have a social life. They see other families having fun together and notice that their own family is different.
- Home life is tense and unpredictable. Often children don't know what to expect when they return from school or when their parent comes home after a drinking session.
- Childhood memories are of birthdays and Christmas spoiled by a parent who gets drunk and behaves badly.
- Many children become carers, taking responsibility for younger brothers or sisters and running the household.
- Some children become very anti-social, always in trouble at school or playing truant. Some become withdrawn, anxious and depressed.
- Some children lose confidence in themselves and live in fear that their parent will show them up in front of friends or in public.

"My daughter would come home from school and if she saw any bottles on the table she would just walk straight out again."

Carol

"I did cut down on my drinking when my first child was born, but it was hard to stay OK without professional help. I looked after my daughter until she was two years old while my wife went out to work. I used to go with my wife to hospital appointments and to parents' evening at the school. I encouraged my children when they were young."

Martin

What helps?

Parents who are drinking heavily to cope with a lot of stress in their lives – separation or divorce, a death in the family or lots of changes at work – may be just about holding things together but the quality of family life suffers.

Some people can cut down their drinking and be OK. Others find it very difficult to cut down. Some people drink way over the safe limits to the point where their health is in danger – 15 cans of lager or a bottle of spirits a day. For these people, it may be all or nothing where drink is concerned.

It is possible to keep family life together with the right kind of support and by talking about what is going on.

- If someone else is around – maybe a grandparent – to keep a regular routine going – mealtimes, homework, going to the doctors or the dentists, managing finances – then the children in the family are more likely to be cushioned from the effects of a parent's heavy drinking.
- Try to talk with friends and relatives so that children have another place to go or someone to phone if they are worried.
- Try to talk to your children about your drinking (when you are sober) and about how it makes them feel – children often think it is their own fault if their parents drink too much.
- Children often find it helpful when parents say sorry – but dislike too much emotion.
- Other members of the family may need a break sometimes – a day out or a weekend away – and someone to talk to outside the family who won't judge or blame.

Recent studies have found that often children who grow up with a parent who drank too much go on to lead well-adjusted lives. When researchers studied what helps children survive in such families, they discovered that any disadvantages children start out with can be lessened in later life given the right set of circumstances, including if parents cut down their drinking or decide to stop altogether.

What is too much to drink?



1 unit of alcohol = half a pint of beer, lager or cider OR one small glass of wine OR a single pub measure of spirits.

Half a pint of strong lager counts as more than one unit.

Recommended safe drinking levels are

- 2 or 3 small glasses of wine (2-3 units) for women a day.
- 2 pints of beer or lager (3-4 units) for men a day.

Drinking regularly above these levels is harmful to health. Binge drinking – drinking large amounts every now and again – can cause difficulties within the family and increase the risk of violence and accidents.

Dangerous drinking levels are

- 4 pints of beer or 8 pub measures of spirits a night every night of the week or the equivalent for men.
- a bottle of wine or 5 pub measures of spirits every night of the week or the equivalent for women.

- *Six million men and three and a half million women drink over the safe limits each week.*
- *1.7 million men and over half a million women drink at dangerous levels each week.*

Letter to my father

Cork, December 1995

Eamon Patrick Keane died on 5 January 1990

Behind the bedroom door you are sleeping. I can hear your snores rattling down the stairs to our ruined sitting-room. Here among the broken chairs, the overturned Christmas tree, we are preparing to leave you. We are breaking away from you, Da.

Last night you crashed through the silence, dead drunk and spinning in your own wild orbit into another year of dreams. This would be the year of the big break – of Hollywood, you said. Oh, my actor father, time was, time was we swallowed those lines, but no longer.

Before leaving I look into the bedroom to where your hand droops out from under the covers, below it the small empty Powers' bottle and I say goodbye. And at seven o'clock on New Year's Day we push the old Ford Anglia down the driveway, my mother, brother and I. We push because the engine might wake you, and none of us can face a farewell scene. I don't know what the neighbours think, if anything, when they see a woman and two small boys stealing away in the grey morning, but I don't care, we're heading south with everything we own.

The day I turned 12, which was four days later, you called to say happy birthday. You were, as I remember, halfway sober, but you didn't say much else, except to ask for my mother who would not come to the phone.

In the background I could hear glasses clinking, voices raised, and you said: "Tell her I love her", and then the change ran out, and I began to understand what made love the saddest word in any language.

Christmas that year you had access to the children. We met in Cork station. I remember your new suit, your embarrassed embrace, the money you pressed into our hands, and the smell of whiskey. We found a taxi and the driver stared at us, throwing his eyes to heaven and shaking his head.

What I see now are many such faces: the waitress at the Old Bridge Café where drinks were spilled; the couple who asked for an autograph and watched your shaking hand struggle to

write, before they beat a mortified retreat. And on through pubs and bookmakers' shops to one last café where Elvis was crooning 'Love Me Tender, Love Me Sweet' on an ancient radio. By now, nobody was able to speak.

There was a taxi ride home, we children in the back, you in the front, and what lives with me still, always, is the moment of leave-taking, Christmas 1972. Because, as the car drove you away from our lives, I saw through the steamed up windows that your eyes had become waterfalls.

I was too young to understand what you knew – that we were lost to you, broken away. Down the years we struggled to find one another but I was growing up and away, and you were drifting closer to darkness. And at the end I gave up writing, gave up calling. I gave up. Until one night my cousin called to say you were gone. It was a few days into the New Year, and your heart simply gave up in a small room in the town in north Kerry where you were born. I remember that you sent me the collected stories of Raymond Carver for Christmas. I had sent you nothing, not even a card. Now I would send you a thousand, but I have no address.

From 'Letter To Daniel: Despatches from the Heart'
by Fergal Keane (Penguin Books, 1996).

Copyright© Fergal Keane, 1996.

ISBN 0140 262 89X, priced £6.99.

'Letter to Daniel' is a collection of writings by distinguished foreign correspondent Fergal Keane and originally broadcast by the BBC.

Fergal Keane had a difficult childhood. His father was dependent on alcohol and did not live with the family.

What parents say

Parents who have received help from alcohol counselling services look back.

"I started to drink more when my husband left. I would drink about a quarter bottle of whisky every night. I was very irritable and I shouted at my daughter a lot. Now I feel awful when I remember some of the things I said."

Janet

"I used to go to the pub every night. Whereas most people would have a few pints and go home, I just used to stay there. We argued at home all the time. I went to stay with my sister for a couple of nights after one big row and she said to me 'Look at you. You're a shadow of your former self. Where's the brother I know gone? I want him back.' That really made me think."

Robert

Did you know?

- Alcohol is involved in one-third of child abuse cases and 40% of domestic violence incidents.
- Twice as many marriages where there are problems with alcohol end in divorce than marriages where there are no alcohol problems.
- One in five of all hospital beds are occupied by people with health problems linked to drinking too much alcohol too often.
- One in six people who go to casualty have had accidents after drinking too much.
- Around two-thirds of suicide attempts are linked to drinking too much.
- Young people are drinking more and having their first drink at a younger age.
- Official statistics show that people are binge drinking or appearing drunk in public places more often.
- Women are drinking more and being diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver at a younger age.
- Heavy drinking increases the chances of suffering from heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, mental health problems, some cancers and accidents.



What children say

Recently the children's helpline ChildLine published a report about alcohol misuse and its impact on children. The report aimed to make more public the effect on children of drunken parenting so that better ways of helping could be found to alleviate the distress of children and families living with a parent who drinks too much. These extracts are taken from the report, which includes children's own accounts of their day to day experience.

"Mum is fond of drink and doesn't notice things – like I'm changing. I think I'm going to get my periods soon. Mum gets grumpy and shouts a lot which makes Dad angry. I think they might get separated and I don't think they want me."

Helen age 10 described how her mummy went out drinking almost every night. If her mummy was drunk she usually got hit. She had to look after her younger brothers and sisters because... *"Mummy's often in bed all morning."*

"I've been involved with drinking, drugs, fighting. I'm desperate to change. I don't want to be like Dad."

"Mum works at night. Dad comes home drunk and beats me up. I dread the nights."

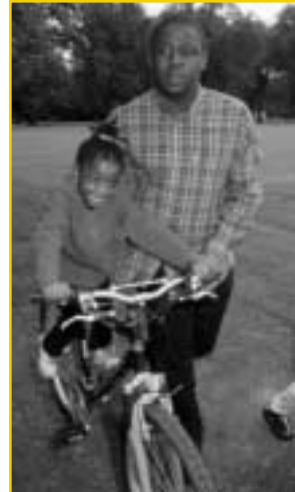
Dad spends all his social security, and the money Mum gives him, on drink and Billy doesn't get fed properly. However, he doesn't want to go into care – he'd rather be with Dad as bad as it is. Billy can't bear hearing his dad saying he is sorry later. *"He thinks it's OK."*

**From 'Beyond the Limit: children who live with parental alcohol misuse'
A ChildLine study**

Putting the children first

Even if you are drinking too much, there are still ways you can make sure your children are protected.

- Celebrate birthdays and festivals. Adults who break the pattern of heavy drinking in their own lives often come from families where the tradition of getting together regularly had been carried on by someone else in the family.
- Don't drive if you have had too much to drink.
- If you sleep late in the morning after drinking the night before, try to make sure that there is someone else in the house able to get up early and look after the children.
- Easier said than done, but try to avoid getting into arguments – instead look for other safety valves to let out the aggro rather than shout or lash out.
- If you want to find other ways to unwind after work, health and lifestyle magazines include plenty of articles about how to get rid of stress. Although self-help tips can give you ideas about different ways to relax, watching a favourite comedy video, listening to music or going for a long walk can be just as effective.
- Children can cope better with a parent who drinks heavily if:
 - arguments are kept to a minimum
 - another adult sets clear limits and gives lots of hugs and praise
 - life follows a regular routine
 - the parent who drinks owns up to having a problem
 - the parent who drinks does not blame the children for difficulties
 - the parent who drinks gets help with changing drinking habits.
- You can get help with your drinking by contacting an alcohol service (look in the Yellow Pages under Counselling Services) or by talking to your doctor, practice nurse or health visitor.
- Relatives living with someone with a drink problem can contact alcohol services for help and advice.



"I get on with my children much better now. I'm not an embarrassment to them any more and they can ask their friends around."

Carol

“I was on a downwards spiral and unable to help myself. I knew for some time that changes had to happen. I still drink but not for the same reasons – by trial and error, and with help, I’ve managed to eliminate some of the obstacles that meant the difference between social drinking and alcohol abuse.”

Chris

How to get help with a drinking problem

If you want to talk to someone immediately about a drink problem, the best thing you can do is to phone a helpline number where you can talk confidentially.

Drinkline on **0800 917 8282** is a free helpline for anyone concerned about their drinking or about someone else’s drinking – they will give you the number of an alcohol counselling service near you.

If you want to talk to someone face to face, look in the Yellow Pages under **Counselling Services** or go to the Alcohol Concern website where you can find a national directory of services. Specialist alcohol services are geared up to be able to help right from the start. There are over 500 services in England and Wales that provide specialist help and support for people with a drink problem. Some are residential and some provide a service for minority groups, with interpreters if

needed. If you contact a specialist alcohol service for advice about a drinking problem, you won’t necessarily have to stop drinking.

How to cut down your drinking

Even if you need help to cut down on your drinking, these ideas are intended as a handy reminder of ways that you can help yourself too.

- **Find something else to do while you drink – eat, chat, play skittles, pool or darts, listen to music.**
- **Drink slowly and put your glass down between sips.**
- **Have a soft drink in between alcoholic drinks.**
- **Have days where you don’t drink at all.**
- **Cut down on drinking at home.**
- **Avoid getting involved in buying rounds of drinks.**
- **Try exercise and relaxation as alternative ways to unwind.**
- **Cut down gradually so that your body can adjust.**

Alcohol advice, information and counselling services

Alcohol counselling services are often the point of first contact for people concerned about their own or another's drinking.

Members of the public can phone for information or advice. Some offer a drop-in service where you can just walk in off the street; others prefer you to make an appointment. Alcohol counselling services will talk to people who are worried about someone else's drinking and people who want to change their own drinking habits. They offer counselling on a regular basis by appointment for an agreed length of time. They will see people at the centre, at a health centre or at home if getting out is difficult. Some centres organise a playgroup for the children if you have to take them with you. Usually these services aim to meet the needs of people asking for help; they believe that individuals can change their circumstances given the right support.

What to expect if you contact a service for help

Usually alcohol services are welcoming places and you might be offered a cup of coffee. Alcohol services offer a confidential service, just like your GP. Each service will explain what they offer in detail to each person who visits. Any

exceptions to confidentiality should be made clear in the service's confidentiality policy that is often on display.

Some services offer relaxation or aromatherapy massage.

Sometimes a service might suggest that a different kind of help would suit you better and put you in touch with the right people.

NHS alcohol Services

Teams of doctors, nurses and social workers offer counselling, group support and detoxification programmes to in-patients and out-patients. GPs and alcohol counselling services can refer individuals, or you can refer yourself.

Self-help groups

Alcoholics Anonymous is the best known self-help network in the UK. It is open to all who want to stop drinking. AA groups offer support and friendship outside of the times when the group meets. Al-Anon and Alateen are similar groups for families and teenagers affected by a parent who drinks heavily.

Residential and non-residential programmes

These are available for people needing a lot of support and help. Referrals can be made through alcohol counselling services, social services or your GP.

Helplines

NHS Direct 0845 4647

free NHS helpline www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222

free helpline for parents

CRUSE Bereavement Care 0870 167 1677

NSPCC Helpline 0800 800 500

24/7 helpline for people concerned about a child's safety

ChildLine 0800 1111

free children's helpline

Alcoholics Anonymous 0845 769 7555

free helpline – 10am-10pm

Al-Anon & Alateen 020 7403 0888

helpline for families and friends of problem drinkers

www.hexnet.co.uk/alanon

The National Association for Children of Alcoholics 0800 358 3456

free helpline www.nacoa.org.uk

Women's Aid National Domestic Violence Helpline 08457 023 468

Samaritans 08457 909090

24/7 helpline for people feeling suicidal or e-mail jo@samaritans.org

More places to go for help

These services cannot help directly with drinking problems, but they can offer more general information, advice and support to parents and families.

Family mediation services are impartial advisers who help separated or divorced couples settle their affairs fairly. Contact

National Family Mediation on 020 7383

5993 for details of mediators in your area or visit www.nfm.u-net.com/

Home-Start – 0116 233 9955 – over 300 local groups around the country offer support, friendship and practical help to families through a network of volunteers.

Employee assistance programmes provide confidential counselling and practical help in some workplaces like the health service, the prison service and the bigger High Street stores. Your personnel or human resources department can provide details.

National Debtline – 0808 808 4000 – gives advice which assists people to combat mortgage or rent arrears and other debts. They give expert advice over the telephone on their helpline and send callers in debt a free self-help pack.

Parents Together is a new project set up by the BBC with One Plus One and the National Family and Parenting Institute. A booklet is available from The National Family and Parenting Institute (send an A4 sae for 81p to NFPI, 430 Highgate Studios, 53-79 Highgate Road, London NW5 1TL). Parents Together encourages families to get together for mutual support.

Putting the children first is for parents and families who are worried about the effect that drinking has on family life. It looks at what can help and includes a list of useful phone numbers and sources of help.



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