

# Children of Alcoholics

## Core Competencies For Organizations That Work With Children In Early Childhood

### Some Quick Facts:

- Approximately one in five children is exposed to family alcoholism or addiction, or alcohol abuse before the age of 18.
  - Children of alcoholics are at a greater risk for having emotional problems than children whose parents are not addicts.
  - Alcoholism runs in families, and children of alcoholics are four times more likely than other children to become alcoholics themselves.
1. Be able to articulate a **working definition of alcoholism & other drug dependencies** without trying to diagnose this condition in others.
  2. Be aware of the **behavioral signs** presented by children in families affected by alcohol or other drug abuse. For example:
    - a. Take into account children who exhibit periods of excessive or constant fatigue or strain, frequent headaches or stomachaches, high levels of confusion or anxiety, fluctuating moods throughout the week, or being compulsively responsible.
    - b. Recurrent symptoms may reveal a pattern – for example, if an alcoholic parent is a chronic weekend drinker, every Monday the child may be listless or fall asleep. On Tuesdays through Thursdays the child may appear to be somewhat energetic, & on Friday s/he may exhibit high levels of tension, possibly dreading the coming weekend.
  3. **Be aware of the potential benefit** to both the *child* & their *family* of timely & early intervention
  4. Be familiar with **community resources** available for children & adolescents in families with substance abuse. (Please visit [www.preventionlane.org](http://www.preventionlane.org) for a list of resources)
    - a. If the child's school has educational support groups for children from troubled families, assist the school staff responsible for the program in referring the child to a group
    - b. Discuss the value of group participation with the child's parent when appropriate.
    - c. Encourage the parent to refer the child or speak to an appropriate professional.

5. **Be able to recognize when to seek the advice of a supervisor** when a child from a family with substance abuse has a need beyond your level of expertise.
  - a. Don't get in over your head – unless you are a certified psychologist, social worker, counselor or healthcare professional, you are not prepared to take responsibility for the many difficult issues that may arise in a counseling situation.
6. **Be able to communicate** an appropriate level of concern in sensitive situations & offer an appropriate level of support.
  - a. Do be aware that children of alcoholics may be threatened by displays of affection, especially physical contact.
  - b. Do be sensitive to cultural differences. If the child comes to you from a different culture, it may be useful to explore the child's culture to understand how family structure, values, customs, & beliefs may affect the child's situation at home.
  - c. Don't act embarrassed or uncomfortable when the child asks you for help. It may be discouraging for the child, & may increase his/her sense of isolation & hopelessness.
  - d. Don't criticize the child's alcoholic parent or be overly sympathetic. The child may gain the greatest benefit just by having you listen.
  - e. Don't disclose your personal information to a child, even if you think it will help. This can be overwhelming to a child & is not appropriate.
  - f. Don't make plans with the child if you can't follow through – stability & consistency in relationships are necessary if the child is to develop trust.
7. **Be able to notice & build upon** the child's strengths. Be aware of your routine behaviors that can assist the child through modeling, consistency & the setting of safe boundaries.
  - a. Never forget the strengths & potential for resilience that are characteristics of children.
  - b. Notice their acts of kindness & helpfulness to the other children in your group.
  - c. Smile when their humor puts things in to perspective & makes the atmosphere of the day easier & lighter.
  - d. Give them opportunities to help the younger ones or to support an outcast child.
  - e. Identify & acknowledge the acts of generosity & caring they show to others.
8. **Be available to the child or adolescent**, as needed, for ongoing care & support.