

# Drug Exposed Children: What Caregivers Should Know



## What is a Drug Exposed Child?

A drug exposed child is one whose brain and/or body has been affected because his/her parents used drugs or alcohol during pregnancy, and/or who is living in a home where drugs are abused and/or are illegally made, sold, traded, or given away.

## Fast Facts

- Substance abuse contributes to 75% of incidents of child abuse and neglect of children in foster care<sup>1</sup>
- Nearly 80% of children in foster care have prenatal exposure to maternal substance abuse<sup>2</sup>
- 80% of the children in foster care have at least one long-term health problem<sup>2</sup>
- 25% of children in foster care have 3 or more long-term health problems, which is 3 to 7 times greater than the number of health problems found among other children living in poverty<sup>2</sup>

## Understanding the Child You Care For

Drug exposed children may experience the following emotional, behavioral or cognitive problems:

### Emotional:

- Worry a lot
- Seem sad or do not enjoy activities
- Feel bad about themselves
- Take on a lot of guilt and blame themselves for what goes wrong
- Feel like they have nothing to look forward to
- Feel their life will always be bad
- Attach to strangers too easily but have difficulty trusting caregivers

### Behavioral:

- Like to be alone
- Eat too much or not enough
- Have a hard time paying attention
- Find any change difficult
- Don't get along well with other people
- Don't seem to care about what happens to them
- More interested in sex or know more about sex than most children their age
- Quickly change from being very active to being very tired-like

### Cognitive:

- Difficulty talking and listening
- Trouble reading – especially learning to move from left to right
- Difficulty remembering a list of things
- Difficulty remembering what they were just told
- Often do not learn from mistakes or experiences
- Do not pick up on cues
- Difficulty paying attention – they may seem like they are in a fog

## Helping the Child You Care For

Prenatal drug exposure can cause damage to the developing brain. The child's brain may be misfiring. What you think is odd or difficult behavior might be something the child cannot control. This is why getting professional help from someone that understands drug exposure (physical and mental health) is very important. (continued)

In the meantime, try to understand that the “behaviors” you see might be the only way that child can express their feelings. You can help them learn healthy ways to show their feelings, like talking, writing, and drawing pictures. Here are some other ways you can help:

- Do things the same way, every time, over and over again
- Keep things quiet and calm
- Use simple language and examples
- Use more than one way to help them learn
- Let them see it, touch it, taste it, feel it, or even act it out
- Be realistic about what you expect, and understand that drug exposed children may not act their age
- Give support and encouragement
- Help them feel safe
- Parent based on the child’s emotional age
- Teach with your actions, not just your words
- Help them separate the parent from the substance abuse
- Allow them periods of grief
- Teach empathy by showing understanding, sympathy and compassion

### Helping Yourself

- Obtain a thorough medical history of each child and knowledge of the child’s background
- Get support from other caregivers
- Get additional training
- Use local resources
- Rest

***Caregivers make a huge difference in the life of a child!***

### Resources

- National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children: [www.nationaldec.org](http://www.nationaldec.org)
- National Association for Children of Alcoholics: [www.nacoa.org](http://www.nacoa.org)
- Child Trauma Academy: [www.childtraumaacademy.com](http://www.childtraumaacademy.com)
- The National Foster Parents Association: [www.nfpainc.org](http://www.nfpainc.org)
- National Early Childhood Technical Assistant Center: [www.nectac.org](http://www.nectac.org)
- Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation: <http://www.hazeldenbettyford.org>

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>*No Safe Haven: Children of Substance-Abusing Parents*, National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University, January 1999

<sup>2</sup>Dicker, Sheryl & Gordon, Elysa, “Building a Pathway of Well-Being: The Story of the Healthy Development Checklist for Children in Foster Care,” *Zero To Three Journal*, Vol. 22 No. 5, April/May 2002, p. 28

**For more information on drug endangered children, visit our web site:  
[www.nationaldec.org](http://www.nationaldec.org)**

This project was supported by Grant Number 2010DBBXK046 & 2012ACBXK002, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice

This project was supported by Cooperative Agreement Number 2012CKWXK004, awarded by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice. The opinions contained herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the US Department of Justice. References to specific agencies, companies, products, or services should not be considered an endorsement by the author(s) or the US Department of Justice. Rather, references are illustrations to supplement discussion of the issues.