See me, not just the problem
Hiding, telling and coping with a difficult family life
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see me, not just the problem:
HIDING, TELLING AND COPING WITH A DIFFICULT FAMILY LIFE.
We think that there might be as many as 2 million children and young people in the UK who are affected by their parents’ drug or alcohol misuse. We know that for many of these young people daily life can be unpredictable and tough at times. We also know that there are young people who cope better if they can get support from people they trust. This booklet is based on research with young people, whose parents have problems with drugs or alcohol, to find out more about what it is like living in a family affected by parental substance misuse and what helps them cope.

This booklet has been written for the young people who took part in the study so that they, and other young people, can read about what we found out. It can also be used by people working with young people, parents and families so that they can better understand the experiences and concerns of young people affected by this issue.

We would like to thank the Department of Health for funding this research, the Family Life Project. We would also like to thank all the young people, parents, friends and service providers who took part. Thank you to all the services who worked with us to provide access and support to the families involved. These were:

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Our co-investigators were Dr Brynna Kroll, Dr Andy Taylor, Dr Chris Bonnell and Dr Nicki Thorogood.

The view expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Department of Health.
About the study

**DENA’S’ STORY**

A lot of people said that I’ve brought up my brother really because my mum would just sleep and she doesn’t – I felt like she wasn’t looking after us. Like she would never. She’d never wake me up in the morning or if I said I didn’t want to go to school, I wouldn’t need a reason, I would say ‘I don’t want to go.’ “Oh, okay”. Like she didn’t really care.....

I was also always walking on eggshells with her because when my mum’s had a drink, which she does, like everyday she used to wake me up in the morning and have a drink and the more drink that she’d have... the more angry she would get over little things. There was never a routine, so it was kind of like you don’t know what you’re doing.

[When] your mum takes drugs and alcohol... the biggest thing is talking, explaining what’s happened to someone without them having a completely shocked and humiliating face.

- Dena, age 17

All through Dena’s life her Mum has had problems with alcohol and at times with drugs as well. Her Dad also has a drug problem. Her parents aren’t together anymore. She has mainly lived with her Mum and her younger brother, David.

We met Dena through a specialist support service. She agreed to help us with our study by talking with a researcher for about an hour about what it’s like living in a family with a parent who has a problem with drugs or alcohol and what helps her to cope. When we first met, Dena and David had moved out of her Mum’s place to live with her friend because she was worried about David’s safety. We wanted to understand how she was coping, so 8 months later she met with the same researcher again for another interview. Since the first interview her Mum had stopped drinking and they had moved back in with her. But when we spoke with her, her Mum had started drinking again. Dena was worried about what to do next: to apply to go to university or stay to look after her brother David.

To better understand her situation we asked if we could speak with some important people in her life who could help tell her story. Dena nominated her Dad, her project worker and her best friend. Having spoken with these three ‘significant others’ we interviewed Dena one last time over a year since we had first met. She had moved in with her boyfriend and had had decided to apply to university close to home so she could still look out for her brother.

*All names have been changed and not the real names of the young people.*
This is one young person’s story. We interviewed 50 young people in total. We talked with 16 of these young people, like Dena, two or three more times. There were 30 girls and 20 boys aged 10-18 years old, from different parts of England. 24 of them were living with their parent who had, or used to have, a problem with drugs or alcohol; 14 of them were living with a non-using parent; 5 were living with their grandparents; 4 were living on their own; and 2 were in foster care. Everyone we spoke to had had some contact with support services. Some had lots of experience talking about parental substance use, whilst for others the interview was one of the first times they had talked about it openly with an adult.

We also spoke with:

- 11 of their ‘significant others’, who were their grandparents, parents, friends, teachers and key workers.
- 29 substance misusing parents - who were not connected with the young people.
- 17 people who worked in services providing help to families affected by drug use.

In all we conducted a total of 100 interviews!

This booklet talks about young people’s experiences of:

- Learning about their parents problems with drugs or alcohol
- The challenges in caring for their family (parents and siblings) AND themselves
- Talking to other people
Learning about parental substance misuse

Young people told us about the frustration of not knowing for sure what their parents were doing. But once they learnt more, they didn’t want to tell anyone else about it.

**WHAT’S GOING ON?**

All the parents that we spoke to who used drugs tried to keep it hidden and a secret from their children. This meant that for a lot of young people they might not see their parents actually using but they knew that “something was up”. So they might not know exactly what it is or what to call it, but they know it’s there by smelling it, sensing it and feeling that “something isn’t right”.

Dad always shut the door if he was using, but it was not something you could ever, I think, hide 100% when you’re living in the same house as someone because you just know, you just know.

-DENP, AGE 17

They know that whatever it is, that it has a big effect on their family life and it is frustrating not being able to know for certain what is happening. Understanding what was going on could be made more complicated by parents who, when asked by their children, denied that they were using drugs. He found that parents who had a problem with alcohol drank it more openly in front of their children, but also tended to deny that it was a problem at all.

Many young people looked for clues to try and understand what their parents were doing.

CAUSE MOST OF THE TIME THEY’RE USTAIRS – SOMETHES THEY’RE USTAIRS TOGETHER AND I DON’T KNOW WHAT THEY’RE DOING? (SO I) GO IN THERE AND PEEK AROUND THE CORNER...SOMETIMES MY DAD PUSHES ME OUT OF THE ROOM BUT I DON’T KNOW WHY.

-ABIGAIL, AGE 10

I’ve got a feeling it might be drugs but I’m not sure.

HOW COME YOU’VE GOT THIS FEELING?

I don’t know, it’s just like, ‘cause I keep checking my dad’s arms for marks, and then I look at his arms and he’s got a cut there, and he says it’s so and so. I don’t believe him, I think it’s drugs.

-EMILY, AGE 13

I don’t know, cause most of the time they’re upstairs – sometimes they’re upstairs together and I don’t know what they’re doing? (so I) go in there and peek around the corner...sometimes my dad pushes me out of the room but I don’t know why.

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Because parents tended to deny or hide their use of drugs or alcohol there was very often a silence around the issue in the home. Over time young people adapted to living around their parents’ use and this became “normal” for them. Most young people didn’t understand the seriousness of their parents’ use until much later. For Dena this came about by hanging out with her friend and seeing how things were different with her family.

I didn’t really know that my mum wasn’t normal until I met other people’s mums and they were, like, they had rules and things.

Yeah, so how old were you when you started to meet, like, your friends’ parents and found out that maybe your family was a bit different?

Well a lot of my friends at the time were my mum’s friends’ daughters and sons, and so obviously my mum’s friends, they were mainly drunk as well… so to me, that was normal until I met some – and it was when I was in year seven, so I was about 12 or 11, when I went round to her house and her Mum and Dad are together, and I’m not saying that that is normal because obviously single parents are normal as well, but it was weird how they had dinner at the same time every day, and they had to have a bath, ‘cause I stayed there, and they woke you up in the morning and it was just completely different and I really liked it… and I was just – it made me feel uncomfortable to go back to my mum’s… knowing what I was missing.

-Dena, age 17

Parents’ Silence & Denial

Like Dena, when Sally understood that her Mum’s behaviour wasn’t normal she didn’t want to tell anyone about it partly because she was worried what might happen to her Mum but also because she was embarrassed.

It’s embarrassing because all your friends have got normal parents and you haven’t… knowing that like, you’re not going to have a birthday party or you can’t invite your mate around for dinner because it’s just, it’s not appropriate and their parents won’t let them. It’s horrible, it really is.

-Sally, age 18

Both Sally and Ben were worried about what people would think of them and their parents if they knew. So they kept it a secret from their friends and their teachers at school because they thought they might be bullied because of it.

Even though I was having them problems at home I didn’t let it show in school. I’d still come in and do my work and act like a normal kid (…). I didn’t let it show at all and I didn’t say anything.

-Sally, age 18

No, they [mates] didn’t know ‘cause they were, like, wallies and they’d, like, wind me up about it… if I told my mates, my mates could then tell the bullies, and, like, they would say, like, “oh, is, like, mummy not looking after you properly?”

-Ben, age 12

Look at her Mum, you know, she’s probably going to turn out like that. So I was really worried about telling him.

-Anna, age 15
They have a sense of their parents’ substance misuse before they know what to call it or how to talk about it.

Parents tend to deny or remain silent about their drug or alcohol use even when their children try to confront them about it.

Knowing does not easily translate into telling. As young people realise that their parents’ problems with drugs or alcohol misuse is not normal.

They tend to hide it from others. They do not want to talk about it because they are embarrassed and worry they might be bullied.

Young people tell us that:

- Recognise that even by keeping the drugs and alcohol hidden, I still know that something is going on.
- Don’t just deny it or get angry when I ask them about their problems with drugs or alcohol, but instead try to talk to me about it.
- Realise that the denial and the hiding makes it more difficult for me to trust them, but also to trust other people.
- Understand that their use has a big effect on my life and that I worry about being bullied or feeling awkward and embarrassed because of it.

It would be good if those using substances in my family:

Was it quite nice when she sat down and explained it to you or?

Yeah, ‘cause then I knew what was going on.

-Mike, age 12

Like, I’d rather know than him hiding... with it, and all that.

-Alex, age 11
Young people told us about how complicated it was for them to look after themselves and their families.

DO YOU LOVE ME MUM AND DAD?

Our research showed that young people believe that being in a family involves parents and children loving each other. This love is expected to be unquestioned and unconditional. This meant that for some young people, like Zoe, whatever their parents had done they would still love them.

(…) My dad will always be my dad and I’ll always love him. No matter what he’s done… I’ve heard people say, “Yeah, but he’s done this”. I’ve said, “Cause I don’t care, he’s my dad”.

-Zoe, age 17

Young people became less confident of their parents’ love for them though when they were using drugs or alcohol. Sometimes it felt like

If you’ve got children then they should be first. They’re not first if you take drugs or drink. They’re always second after that and for me, I don’t know, it really makes me angry because it’s like if you love me you’d buy milk rather than that bottle of wine. Do you know what I mean?

-Dena, age 17

Understanding the situation

Most young people continued to believe that their parents did love them, but maybe, at times, due to the drugs and alcohol they didn’t care for them as the young people wanted. A few young people talked about trying to stop loving and caring for their parents. However this was very difficult to do, as most young people felt that despite the pain their parents caused them and because they really valued being in a family, they had to keep on loving them.

I don’t particularly like her very much but I have to love her. (…) The best thing in an ideal world would be to turn away from her and say, “You’re causing me too much hassle, too much pressure, too much hurt. I don’t want anything to do with you”. But at the end of the day, I only have one mum and even if I don’t like her very much, I have to love her.

-Yannah, age 15

Young people wanted to continue to love their parents and over time many of them found ways to do so. This involved understanding more about the nature of being addicted to a substance and that it wasn’t necessarily about choosing drugs or alcohol over them.

“Now I understand why they are how they are”

“The way I see it, my mum’s not very well”

With the help of support workers, it also involved accepting that they may not be able to change their parents’ behaviour.
CARING FOR YOURSELF

Kerry, like many young people we spoke with, had taken on the responsibility for caring for her Mum from an early age. But as she grew older it became more and more difficult to look after both her Mum and herself.

In our research young people, as they grew up, found many different ways to cope with this dilemma. Most of the strategies young people used involved continuing to love their parents but accepting the importance of looking after themselves.

Maria moved out of her Mum’s home to live with her Dad nearby. She decided that she would only visit her Mum rarely if her Mum let her down or turned up drunk she would not see her.

Kerry and Sally had accepted that it was not their responsibility to fix the problem on their own.

WE ALWAYS CAN’T BE HERE FOR HER TO SAY TO HER, “MUM, YOU CAN’T DO THIS. YOU CAN’T DO THAT.” WE ALL WANT TO LIVE OUR LIVES AND WE CAN’T BE THERE ALL THE TIME TO SAY TO HER, “NOW MUM DON’T HAVE A DRINK, COME HOME, AND HAVE A CUP OF TEA OR SOME JUICE OR SOMETHING.”

—Kerry, Age 16

(…) BEFORE I’D BE RIGHT ON IT. I’D WANT TO STOP IT. I’D WANT TO TRY AND DO EVERYTHING IN MY POWER TO TRY AND STOP IT BUT NOW I CAN’T. I’VE REALISED I CAN’T (…). SHE WILL FIND A WAY TO DO IT IF SHE WANTS TO DO IT.

—Sally, Age 18

WHAT ABOUT MY BROTHER OR SISTER?

But it isn’t just about a young person’s relationship and responsibility to their parent: young people’s caring responsibilities often also include looking after a sibling or someone else in the family.

Overall young people told us that having someone else to share their experiences with made it easier to cope and less lonely.

SO WE’VE JUST GOT THROUGH IT, LIKE, BETWEEN US. I MEAN, ME AND MY SISTER WAS, LIKE, WE WAS LIKE A COUPLE, WE WAS ALWAYS DOING THINGS TOGETHER. WE’D GET THROUGH IT TOGETHER.

—Nick, Age 18

Coping together

But going through it with a sibling, also made it difficult in some ways. Because of their different ages siblings can be at different stages in understanding the nature and causes of their parents’ problems. For example, Kerry may understand that her Mum’s addiction means that she is not very well, but her younger brother Chris may not yet understand this and instead is angry with his Mum. Another example is when Dena and David’s Mum went in for treatment David was really excited that she would get better. But David’s older sister Dena had seen this before and wasn’t hopeful that it would make any permanent difference. Dena was worried about how to protect David from the disappointment if their Mum didn’t recover.
Young people told us that as older brothers and sisters they often tried to protect their younger siblings from the worst of their parents’ problems with drugs or alcohol. Similar to the feelings of responsibility they had towards their parents, young people felt torn between looking after their parent and siblings or leaving their sibling on their own with their parent in order to better look after themselves. Young people decided to do different things. Some, like Lauren, left home to go to university or get a job elsewhere so that they could concentrate on their own lives.

I thought that maybe...that with Noah [younger brother] going with his Dad [removed by social services] that she [mum] would wake up and see that she needs to make a change...

—Lauren, age 17

Others decided to stay and carry on looking after their siblings. For everyone it was a difficult decision. Having help in making the decision and being confident that there was extra support in place for their siblings made it easier.

Young people expect that they and their parents will always love and care for each other.

Young people feel responsible for looking after their parents and for making them better. Accepting that this may not be possible is very hard.

Having a sibling to share the experience with can be helpful, but they may have different understandings and attitudes towards their parents’ situation.

Young people want to care for their parents and siblings, but they also need to care for themselves. Sometimes to really care for themselves it is not possible to continue to look after their parents and/or siblings and they must focus on their own needs.

I FEEL TORN: WHO SHOULD I CARE FOR?

Young People Tell us that:

» Young people expect that they and their parents will always love and care for each other.

» So it is hurtful when their parents don’t seem to love and care for them when they are using drugs or alcohol.

» Young people feel responsible for looking after their parents and for making them better. Accepting that this may not be possible is very hard.

» Having a sibling to share the experience with can be helpful, but they may have different understandings and attitudes towards their parents’ situation.

» Young people want to care for their parents and siblings, but they also need to care for themselves. Sometimes to really care for themselves it is not possible to continue to look after their parents and/or siblings and they must focus on their own needs.

It would be good if:

» My parents told me that they loved me and showed me that they cared for me by: asking how my day was; encouraging me to do my homework; and asking me to be home by a certain time.

» My parents and siblings understood that I loved them but needed to care for myself. People understood that I am affected by my family, but they do not define who I am. I am an individual. Don’t pre-judge me on the basis of others in my family.

» My family and other people helped me to understand that looking after myself is not being selfish.
Young people have told us that they are worried to talk about what’s going on at home and their parents’ problems with drugs and alcohol because of what might happen to their parents and also what might happen to them, such as being bullied. But some young people did talk to their friends, as long as their friends did certain things.

To talk to a friend they needed to be able to trust them. Knowing whether you could trust someone or not wasn’t easy, so some young people tended to tell their friend a little bit of what was going on and then wait to see if they kept it a secret. If the friend didn’t tell anyone else, then they tended to consider that they could trust them.

I told Rose and Jack something once and I’ve trusted them ever since ‘cause they never said nothing.

—Emily, Age 13

(... that’s how close a friend he is, he wouldn’t say anything to anybody.

—Zach, Age 10

It also mattered whether a friend understood the whole picture. Kerry’s friend understood what it was like in Kerry’s family because she spent time hanging out with her at her home. This meant that Kerry felt comfortable talking to her.

Friend more freely about her family life, without feeling like she was being disloyal to her Mum or that her friend would unfairly judge her Mum.

She knows everything I’ve been through and she’s met my Mum and she knows that my Mum’s not a bad person. Whereas with a proper outsider you think well, maybe, perhaps she thinks my Mum’s really bad, and she’s not.

—Kerry, Age 16

‘Cause, like, for people who don’t know my Mum, they don’t know what you’re going through.

—Jacob, Age 12

Once a friend understood the situation, they knew when they should give support.

What was it about her that made it okay to talk to her, do you think?

Well, I think she, kind of, knew what I was going through. And she, like, when she could see that, like, I was having a bad day, she came up to me and started talking to me and stuff.

—Sam, Age 11
Support could also be given silently: it doesn’t have to always involve talking about it.

As well as having a friend cheer them up and make them laugh, young people told us that they really appreciated it when their friends didn’t ask questions all the time, but instead allowed them to bring up the subject and to talk when they wanted to.

So it wasn’t something that you’d say directly you know… no. (…) yeah I’d just be like, just come and stay.

Yeah, would Deni know…?

She’d know deep down what I was saying, but she would, like, we know what we’re talking about without saying it…

—Natalie (Dena’s friend)

When I want to talk about it I’ll bring it up and she [friend] will listen and then tell me something so we’re kind of confiding together. She won’t ask questions but wait for me to tell her.

—Sarah, age 14

Nearly all young people said that at first they were worried about talking to adults, such as teachers, social workers or neighbours, about their parents’ substance misuse because they felt they were being disloyal to their parents and feared what might happen to them. Some young people also felt that even though an adult might know what was going on, they might not understand what this means and what the experience felt like.

Did the teachers understand the situation your mum was in or did they not know? They thought they did but they didn’t really know what was going on. Like they just knew that she was drinking but they never knew anything else so they thought they knew what was going on but really they were saying to me “I know what’s going on at home” but I was thinking, “but you don’t know nothing”. And trying to be all nice to me ‘cause they think they know but really they don’t know nothing, that used to wind me up as well.

—Aiden, age 14

As with their friends, young people really appreciated having the opportunity to get to trust someone before they had to talk to them. Lauren and Jamie liked talking to trusted adults on their own terms, by being given the choice to talk, what to tell them and at what pace.
The majority of young people told us that they liked being able to get to know an adult over time, so that they could learn to trust them.

Sometimes what young people wanted was a space to just be and talk, or not, with someone they trusted.

If I was having an off day, she’d (head teacher) let me sit in a corner on a beanbag and work in her office (...). She did it because she was generally a caring person who recognised a child needed help... and helped in the best way she thought was possible... which was giving her a safe environment to work in where she could just be on her own, just work... have a cup of tea and a biscuit and have someone to talk to that she trusts... and that’s all anyone needs. That’s all I still need.

In getting to trust someone and being comfortable telling them personal things Alex and Leslie liked being able to also talk about ‘everyday stuff’.

(…) We talk about sport, homework and all that. Like, you know, we don’t have to talk about stuff... like we can talk about school or people in my class and all that.

I don’t know, she [key worker] was always that person that you know, if I don’t want to talk, I’ll talk about general conversation. Ain’t like somebody being nosy, you know, ok... I mean, if we’d go somewhere if I didn’t want to leave the car, we could stay in the car.

Young people told us that they valued being able to see the same person over a long period of time. This was so that they had the time and space to get to trust them, but also so that they could be confident they could get back in touch with them if things got tough again.

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They generally need to be able to trust someone to feel comfortable talking to them.

Silence and not asking too many questions all the time can often be understood as a sign of trust.

Young people trusted people who made an effort to understand their family situation and allowed them to talk at their own pace, when and how they wanted to.

They really value the support of friends and adults who listen to them, but also are happy for them to talk about other things as well as their parents’ substance use.

Young people tell us that:

People supported me so that I wouldn’t have to worry about being bullied.

Teachers were clear in telling me that they knew what was going on, to avoid confusion and having to guess what they know.

Teachers received more information as to what situations like mine really feel like everyday.

Support services gave me time to get to trust my key worker and allowed me to get back in touch with them if things got hard again.

It would be good if: