

Substance abuse and child neglect: Intruders in the family¹

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Child neglect is the most common, complex, and severe of all the forms of reported child maltreatment. Drug or alcohol abuse by a parent, or worse, both parents, increases the seriousness of the situation and is a contributing factor in creating an environment harmful to children.

Almost half of the neglected children reported to Quebec child welfare authorities are affected by parental substance abuse.

Extent of the problem

The Quebec Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse, Neglect, Abandonment, and Serious Behavioural Problems (QIS)² looked the excessive use of alcohol or illegal drugs among parents investigated for child neglect in the fall of 1998.

- Parental drug or alcohol abuse is the second most important factor differentiating neglected children from other children reported to child welfare authorities (after the young age of neglected children).
- In substantiated cases of child neglect, 45% of the children live in families struggling with drug or alcohol abuse. Of these families, child neglect coexists:
 - with substance abuse and domestic violence in 41.7% of families

- with substance abuse and criminal activity in 32.2% of families
- with substance abuse and mental health problems in 31.3% of families.
- Researchers compared neglected children living in families where substance abuse has not been observed with neglected children in families where one or both parents abuse drugs or alcohol. Among families with substance abuse problems, their children:
 - were more likely to have been the subject of a previous child welfare investigation
 - were more likely to have been previously taken into child welfare care
 - had been in a situation of neglect for at least six months
 - were more often deemed by caseworkers to be delayed in their development
 - were more likely to be referred for placement out of the home.

Families struggling with adversity

The families with substantiated child neglect are struggling with adversity: poverty, domestic violence, isolation, crime, and mental health disorders. Drug or alcohol abuse is therefore not the direct cause of child neglect, but a contributing factor in that it impairs parents' ability to take care of their children.

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- 1 This information sheet is based on the peer-reviewed article, Mayer, M., Lavergne, C., Guyon, L., Gemme, E., Trocmé, N., & Girard, M. (In press). Toxicomanie parentale et négligence envers les enfants: les révélations de l'Étude d'incidence québécoise (ÉIQ). In L. Guyon, S. Brochu, & M. Landry (Eds.), *Jeunesse et toxicomanies: bilan des connaissances et des recherches québécoises sur l'usage et l'abus de substances chez les jeunes et leurs familles*. Quebec, QC, Canada: Presses de l'Université Laval.
 - 2 Tourigny, M., Mayer, M., Wright, J., Lavergne, C., Hélie, S., Trocmé, N., et al. (2002). Étude sur l'incidence et les caractéristiques des situations d'abus, de négligence, d'abandon et de troubles de comportement sérieux signalées à la direction de la protection de la jeunesse au Québec (ÉIQ). Montreal: Centre de liaison sur l'intervention et la prévention psychosociale. Available from the Centre jeunesse de Montréal, telephone (514) 896-3396 or download the order form from www.mtl.centresjeunesse.qc.ca/bibliotheque/pdf/bon_commande.pdf

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