Strengthening Support for Children of Substance Addicted Adults: Addressing the Most Vulnerable Victims of The Opioid Epidemic

Kyndall Miller

Executive Summary

The United States suffers from an opioid epidemic. On average, 178 people die every day from an opioid overdose (Eluna Network, n.d.). Over time, federal legislation has sought to decrease this number and help individuals struggling with addiction seek the help they need. However, not enough resources have been allocated to their children, arguably the most vulnerable victims, which has led to their needs being ignored. Children of individuals struggling with substance abuse and misuse face many hardships due to their parent or guardian’s addiction, including often physical, mental and emotional trauma. This trauma causes long-lasting developmental damage and socio-emotional issues that stay with them through adulthood if they do not receive the proper supports. However, the stigma around addiction and pressure from their own family oftentimes prevent children from reaching out to adults who can support them. Carrying this emotional burden for so long without being able to talk and receive support leads to the potential development of mental health issues that go untreated. For these reasons, it is essential for Congress to mandate the professional development of educators to recognize the signs of mental and physical abuse resulting from children living in homes with parents or guardians struggling with addiction. Since teachers are one of the closest links to youth, teaching them how to identify and help children of individuals struggling with substance abuse and misuse could save lives and provide better long-term outcomes for these children. Congress should also require a mental health professional be in every school. Having an easily accessible connection without a bias could make children of individuals struggling with substance abuse and misuse feel comfortable sharing the issues they face and receiving help.
Problem Statement

In today’s America, 25% of children live with a parent or guardian who misuse drugs or alcohol (American Addiction Centers, 2020). The issue of substance misuse is surrounded by a wide array of social stigmas that oftentimes prevents any proactive measures being taken to help the individual suffering from an addiction related disorder. However, this fact holds especially true when it comes to their children, the most vulnerable yet hidden victims of the drug epidemic in America. Federal legislation that increases the supports for children of substance addicted adults is integral to bettering the quality of life for thousands of children in America.

In a healthy parent-child relationship, a parent takes on the role of the caregiver, providing physical shelter, emotional support, and financial security for the child. However, in a household where substance abuse is involved, the roles are reversed, forcing the child to serve as a physically and emotionally supportive caregiver to the addicted adult. It is not uncommon for these children to take on responsibilities around the house like cooking and cleaning or getting a job to provide basic necessities for the household. These responsibilities may also involve a level of emotional intimacy that exceeds the boundaries of a healthy parent-child relationship, like canceling activities with friends in order to stay home with a parent who feels isolated because of their addiction, or feeling the need to rescue a parent who is experiencing severe depression or suicidal thoughts. The child is often asked to assume a level of maturity that they may not be ready for, taking care of an adult who was supposed to take care of them. The emotional and mental stress of having to care for themselves and for addicted parents is proven to harm a child’s brain development (Lancer, 2018).

Due to this hindrance in development, children of adults struggling from substance abuse and misuse face many hardships compared to their peers in healthy households. They are more likely to experience poor performance in school and are twice as likely to experiment with drugs or alcohol at a younger age. It is also very common that these children may be subjected to various kinds of abuse. Children of adults struggling with addiction are often discouraged through intimidation or emotional manipulation from talking with other adults about problems they’re experiencing.
Parents with substance abuse issues may become angry or abusive if they feel that a child is betraying them by exposing their secrets to other adults. This has led to parental substance abuse being one of the most common reasons that children run away from home or become homeless. 46% of runaways are reported to suffer from physical abuse, while 38% suffer from emotional abuse (McCann, n.d.).

The Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA) details prenatal substance exposure provisions, which are essential for providing care to infants who were developed while their parent was struggling with a substance misuse disorder. It requires that healthcare providers involved in the delivery or care of such infants to treat not only the addiction of the parent, but the child as well (NCSACW, n.d.). This legislation is a crucial first step to addressing the needs of children of substance addicted parents, however more support is needed as these children grow older, as they may face mental, physical, and emotional trauma if their parent or guardian does not recover from their addictive disorder.

CAPTA also requires that teachers be mandatory reporters of suspected child maltreatment. The circumstances under which a mandatory reporter must make a report vary from State to State. Typically, a report must be made when the reporter suspects or has reason to believe that a child has been abused or neglected (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). Another commonly used standard is the requirement to report when the reporter gains knowledge of, or observes a child being subjected to, conditions that would reasonably result in harm to the child. This is extremely important legislation, as it helps many children suffering from abuse get the help they need. However, children with addicted parents or guardians are unique, and may not show the typical signs of physical or mental abuse. Due to the stigma surrounding addiction, potentially helpful adults like teachers may be unsure how to help or approach students suffering with this issue.

More often or not, these children lack the confidence to reach out for help. Growing up in a home affected by substance abuse can damage a child’s self-esteem, making it even more difficult to approach a sober adult or the authorities for help. It is also very common for them to somehow feel as if it’s their own fault that their parent or guardian is abusing drugs (Lancer, 2018). This situation can lead to extreme anxiety,
fear, and an overwhelming sense of helplessness, preventing them from feeling confident enough to reach out. This is why it is so essential to provide resources to help them cope with the issues that come from having a parent with an addictive disorder. Existing legislation may indirectly help these children, but it does not address their very specific and unique needs.

**Policy Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1**

Congress should mandate the professional development of teachers so they know how to proactively react when presented with the information that a child’s parent or guardian suffers from a substance use disorder. Teachers are oftentimes the closest reliable link to children of substance misusers and are able to provide information and resources that may be crucial to an at-risk student in need. This information could include safe spaces in the neighborhood that a child could go to if they feel unsafe or uncomfortable, a list of phone numbers to call if they need assistance, or simple coping mechanisms to help them through the day. Having a reliable adult like a teacher understand the hardships that they face could make children of addicts feel more valuable and heard.

**Recommendation 2**

Congress should pass legislation that mandates mental health professionals in every school. Each school should be designated at least one trained professional that stays on the campus for the duration of the school day, scheduling appointments with at-risk students. During these appointments, students can receive an ‘outside’ point of view and learn the social-emotional skills that are essential to their academic and personal success. The confidentiality and accessibility that comes with having a mental health professional so close by would allow more students to get the help they so desperately need safely and comfortably.
Recommendation 3

Congress should pass legislation that requires that therapy for children with parents or guardians with an addiction disorder is fully covered across all mental health policies. Mental health is required to be covered for all healthcare programs, however, the amount of what is covered varies from program to program. Medicaid and CHIP requires that children enrolled in Medicaid receive a wide range of medically necessary services, including mental health services. However, this is not the same for many smaller, private insurance companies that may choose to not provide as many benefits. Ensuring that therapy is fully covered in all insurance policies for children with parents or guardians struggling with substance misuse would provide thousands of children with the support they need.
Endnotes


