

Understanding Screening and Assessment of Substance Use Disorders – Child Welfare Practice Tips



National Center on
Substance Abuse
and Child Welfare

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Know what to look for. When conducting child welfare assessments, know that specific drugs have specific physiological effects. Common signs in the home environment, and symptoms of substance use or misuse, may include:

Personal Appearance

- Slurred speech
- Nodding off
- Disorientation
- Tremors
- Cold or sweaty palms
- Dilated or constricted pupils
- Bloodshot or glazed-over eyes
- Needle marks
- Bruises
- Poor personal hygiene

Behavioral Signs

- Agitated behavior or mood
- Excessive talking
- Paranoia
- Depression
- Manic behavior
- Lack of motivation
- Criminal activity
- Financial challenges
- Missed appointments

Physical Environment

- Signs of drug paraphernalia (such as straws, rolling papers, razor blades, small mirrors, glass pipes, aluminum foil, lighters, needles, syringes, tourniquets, belts, shoelaces, spoons)
- Unusual smells
- Reluctance to allow home visits
- Unexplained visitors in and out of home

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Screen all families for substance use. The purpose of substance use disorder (SUD) screening is to determine the presence of substance use and identify the need for a further clinical SUD assessment. Gather information from a variety of sources, including review of corroborating reports, signs and symptoms, drug testing, and valid screening tools, such as the AUDIT, AUDIT-C, or ASSIST. The UNCOPE is another valid screening tool that asks the following six questions:

- U** – Have you continued to use alcohol or drugs longer than you intended?
- N** – Have you ever neglected some of your usual responsibilities because of your alcohol or drug use?
- C** – Have you ever wanted to cut down or stop using alcohol or drugs but could not?
- O** – Has your family, a friend, or anyone else ever told you they objected to your alcohol or drug use?
- P** – Have you ever found yourself preoccupied with wanting to use alcohol or drugs?
- E** – Have you ever used alcohol or drugs to relieve emotional discomfort, such as sadness, anger, or boredom?

Source: Norman G. Hoffmann, Ph.D., Evince Clinical Assessments. For more information about the UNCOPE tool and scoring, please visit: http://www.evinceassessment.com/UNCOPE_for_web.pdf

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Refer for a clinical SUD assessment. When an individual exhibits signs or symptoms of substance misuse or screens positive for a potential SUD, a clinical assessment by a SUD professional is warranted. Use your agency protocol to refer a parent for a clinical assessment as soon as possible, since a delay can affect client engagement and permanency for children.

Use SUD assessment results to tailor treatment and services to fit individual needs. A SUD assessment can provide a clinical diagnosis and recommendations for the intensity and setting of treatment needed (outpatient, intensive outpatient, or residential) and supportive services. The SUD assessment may also identify co-occurring mental disorders and areas of life functioning affected, such as family relationships, employment, housing, or criminal justice involvement. Each of these areas may require a specific service or referrals to other agencies. When possible, refer the individual to a treatment provider who understands the child welfare system and its mandates.

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TO LEARN MORE

The **National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare** has many technical assistance resources including publications, webinars, and tools that child welfare workers, court professionals, and communities can use to better serve families affected by SUDs. These are available at: <https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov>

Understanding Substance Abuse and Facilitating Recovery: A Guide for Child Welfare Workers helps child welfare workers understand SUDs and how to support and facilitate treatment and recovery. To access this guide, please visit: <https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/files/Understanding-Substance-Abuse.pdf>

Understanding Substance Use Disorders, Treatment, and Family Recovery: Guide for Child Welfare Professionals is a self-paced and free tutorial that provides specific information about SUDs, engagement strategies and the treatment and recovery process for families affected by SUDs. Continuing Education Units are available upon completion. To take the tutorial, go to: <https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/tutorials/tutorialDesc.aspx?id=27>

The **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** and the **National Institute on Drug Abuse** websites offer comprehensive information about treatment for SUDs. To learn more, visit:

<https://www.samhsa.gov/treatment/substance-use-disorders>

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/treatment-approaches-drug-addiction>



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Visit: <https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov>

Email: ncsacw@cffutures.org

Call: 1-866-493-2758