

# Understanding Substance Use Disorders – What Child Welfare Staff Need to Know



National Center on  
Substance Abuse  
and Child Welfare



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**Substance use disorders (SUDs) are complex, progressive, and treatable diseases of the brain that profoundly affect how people act, think, and feel.** SUDs affect an individual's social, emotional, and family life, resulting in emotional, psychological, and sometimes physiological dependence.

**Be aware of common misperceptions and myths.** Many people incorrectly believe that a parent with a SUD can stop using alcohol and/or illicit drugs with willpower alone or that if the parent loved their children they would be able to just stop using the drug.

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**Relapse rates for SUDs are similar to other chronic medical conditions such as diabetes or hypertension.** Because SUDs are a chronic brain disease, a return to use or relapse, especially in early recovery, is possible. Therefore, SUDs should be treated like any other chronic illness. A recurrence or return to use is an opportunity to examine a parent's current treatment and recovery support needs, and adjust them as needed.

**SUDs can be successfully treated and managed.** Like other diseases, SUDs can be effectively treated. Successful substance use treatment is individualized and generally includes psychosocial therapies, recovery supports and, when clinically indicated, medications.

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**SUDs can affect each member of the family, relationships, and parenting.** SUDs can contribute to a chaotic and unpredictable home life, inconsistent parenting, and lack of appropriate care for children. Treatment and recovery support must not focus solely on the parent's substance use, but take a more family-centered approach that addresses the needs of each affected family member.

**Recognize co-occurrence of trauma.** For many people, trauma is a common experience associated with their SUD. Substance use might be an individual's way to cope with their trauma experience. An effective practice integrates a trauma-informed approach that realizes the widespread impact of trauma, recognizes the signs and symptoms, and avoids causing further harm and retraumatization.

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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: A 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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