

# Talking to your children about addiction

Information for patients undergoing treatment at the Department of Substance Abuse and Addiction Treatment (ARA) who have children under the age of 18.

Children under the age of 18 whose parents are undergoing substance abuse/addiction treatment are considered «next of kin». This applies not only to biological children, but also stepchildren and foster children.

Healthcare professionals in Norway are required to provide adequate information and necessary follow-up for children as next of kin, as stated in Section 10a of the Health Personnel Act.

When someone in the family is struggling with substance abuse or addiction, children and adolescents can feel it, perhaps without necessarily understanding what it is, why someone is misusing drugs/alcohol or struggling with addiction.

Most parents who struggle with substance abuse and/or mental health problems want to get out of the difficult situation they are in, but find that it is not always easy. Most people who receive treatment at ARA have sobriety as a goal, and perhaps you are already working to achieve this goal.



## Children notice more than you think

Most family members care and worry about each other. This is especially true when someone in the family is struggling with substance abuse and/or addiction. Such families are often governed by «rules» which make it very difficult for children to have normal, functional relationships with the adult caregivers in the family. These «rules» can be silence, isolation, denial or changing roles within the family structure, to name a few. For parents who struggle with substance abuse/addiction, it can be painful and difficult to feel that they are not the parent they hoped they would be for their children.

By talking openly about things that are difficult, it can make it easier to understand each other and show that you love one another. It may also lead the family to become closer.

Many children and adolescents may think that it is their fault that someone in the family is misusing drugs or alcohol, but it is not. The addiction is to blame, and it is important to explain this to the children and adolescents in your family.

“My mom uses drugs. I haven’t told anyone about her because she would be so angry.”

*Quote from the booklet «Voksne for barn» Skriv for livet*

*This brochure was created by Akershus University Hospital (Ahus) and the municipal healthcare communities cooperation.*

## How do I talk to my children about substance abuse and addiction?

We encourage everyone to talk about substance abuse and addiction with their children, but it can be difficult. Gaining knowledge about substance abuse and addiction can make it easier to talk about.

*Substance abuse and addiction affects the psyche, as well as behavior*

### What is the psyche?

The term «psyche» refers to the thoughts and feelings that reside in our brain. Your psyche is unique, and it influences the way you express your thoughts and feelings. Knowing more about mental health and well-being is important, so that you can help yourself and others take good care of it.

Good mental health means that you enjoy everyday life, that you feel a sense of belonging and meaning in life, and that you cope with difficult challenges that may arise. Your mental health can change from day to day, and over time. Most people find that their mental health varies throughout their lives.

### Substance abuse and addiction is a diagnosis

Some people are addicted to alcohol, some to pills, others to illegal drugs, and some use a combination of these. Some people can also struggle with a gambling addiction.

What different substance abuse and addiction problems have in common, is that they affect and can change the way you think, feel and act. When you have an addiction disorder, it can affect your ability to complete tasks and take care of your responsibilities within the family. Or it can strain and disrupt the emotional bonds between family members.

Then it is apparent that there is a substance abuse/addiction problem in the family.

Substance abuse and addiction disorders can be difficult to understand, especially for the person who is struggling. It is not always easy to describe what is happening to oneself.

### Substance abuse and addiction disorders can lead to:

- Life feeling more difficult to live because the addiction leads one to prioritize the substance over their own children/family
- Feeling more tired, getting angry with oneself or others easier, or becoming more sad and blue
- Negative thoughts about oneself and others
- Not being able to see their children's need for emotional support and care, so they are left alone and become responsible for their own parents



## We know that children and teenagers notice that their parents are under the influence of drugs or alcohol when they:

- Change the way they behave
- Change their way of speaking
- Ask the same questions over and over again, more than they normally would
- Can't bear to get up in the morning
- Aren't able to pack a lunch for the kids or keep the house clean
- Look exhausted and lie on the couch a lot
- Can't bear to go to work
- Lie more often in order to hide the addiction
- Have rapid or greater mood swings than before. This can manifest as being much more angry or sad, for example
- Lose interest in things that used to make them happy

### Talk to your children

It is not always easy for children and adolescents to understand that mom or dad's behavior is due to a substance abuse/addiction disorder, and we adults may not always realize that children worry when someone in the family is struggling.

Children and adolescents may worry about how their parent will react if they say something, and therefore keep their feelings or thoughts to themselves.

It is also common for parents to think that their children don't notice anything, or that they are protecting them by not saying anything.

Children and adolescents notice much more than we adults realize. We also know that even though they can think that it is difficult to hear about substance abuse and addiction, children and adolescents themselves say that it can be a relief for them to develop an understanding of what is happening.

An open conversation can give children and adolescents the opportunity ask questions

and talk about things they are wondering about.

When mom or dad have changed and are not the same as they were before, children and adolescents may wonder if they have done something wrong.

They may also feel:

- That it is scary or embarrassing when mom/dad change because they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- That it is difficult when mom or dad deny that they have been under the influence

When children and adolescents understand what is happening, their everyday life feels safer and more predictable. Openness can make it easier for the whole family to find good ways to spend time together and use the good days to do nice things together. A mutual understanding and a plan for tackling the tough days is healthy for the whole family.

On the next page, you'll find tips about what you can say to your kids.

## What can you say to your children?

When you talk openly about substance abuse and addiction, you can begin by sharing what you know about the situation. Then you can ask questions that start with how your children have felt about the situation. For example, you can say:

“I am struggling with addiction and this has unfortunately led me to prioritize substance use over participating in other activities with you, but now I am going to the Department of Substance Abuse and Addiction Treatment (ARA) to get help. I am wondering how you are doing, if you have noticed that I have been under the influence of drugs or alcohol, how you think it changes me, and if you are wondering about the treatment I am getting now?”

Then invite your children to talk about the situation from their point of view. Listen to your kids and acknowledge what they say. Children feel safe when adults confirm what they say by giving them small nods or friendly glances.

Remember that there is no “wrong way” to experience a situation. Let your children talk freely about what they are experiencing and avoid correcting what they say. Put away your phone and take the time to listen and answer any questions they might have.

When you talk, remember to use words that your children understand.

A good chat can lead to good solutions you hadn't thought of before you had the chance to talk about it.

“I get scared when I don't understand my mom's behavior.”

*12 year old boy (from the booklet «Voksne for barn, Skriv for livet»)*



## What does the Department of Substance Abuse and Addiction Treatment (ARA) do?

At ARA, adults over the age of 18 can receive help for their substance abuse/addiction disorder. ARA is also concerned with how the patient's children and family members are doing.

At ARA, people who are struggling can talk with a physician, therapist or a support person. Individual treatment or group therapy are the most common working methods at ARA. Sometimes being admitted to the inpatient department is necessary.

### Treatment

Treatment will start with an assessment of your substance abuse and how you function in various areas of your life, as well as challenges related to your mental and/or physical health. ARA will also assess you and your familie's resources. Further treatment will be based on your situation and the goals you hope to achieve. Treatment is interdisciplinary, which means that several professional groups participate and collaborate: for example, a doctor, psychologist and social worker.

Treatment will consist of coping techniques which are aimed at increasing your motivation to quit substance use altogether or control usage. All substance abuse treatment is about helping to prevent relapse and follow-up possible social, psychological or medical challenges.

### Conversation

ARA also offers the opportunity for both parents and children to talk with the ARA staff, either with the person undergoing treatment, or alone.

During a conversation with the closest family members ("familiesamtale"), we talk about what ARA can help with, how the family can get more information and where they can ask questions. When your family understands more, it is easier to help one another.

### Filling out the municipal/district forms

ARA and the municipalities work together to ensure that children and adolescents as next of kin are well taken care of. Patients treated at ARA are asked if they have children under the age of 18 with whom they live. If the answer is yes, the therapist will ask for your consent for ARA to notify the district or municipality you live in.

To consent means that the parents and therapist agree on what information is written and shared with the municipality or district, so that children as next of kin can get the help they need.

Among other things, children are offered the chance to talk to a contact person or public health nurse about how they are doing.



## Services for children and adolescents

The municipalities and districts offer many different services to children and adolescents as next of kin, including public health clinics and school health services

### Public health clinic for small children (“helsestasjon”)

Parents are eligible for services from public health clinics that follow-up with small children from 0-6 years of age. Parents can contact their nearest public health clinic whenever they need to, even apart from regular follow-up appointments that are offered. At the public health clinic, parents can get advice, help and answers to questions about child health and development. All these services are free of charge.

### School health services

School-age children from 6-20 (24\*) years of age have access to health services through their school. Health clinics for adolescents serve youth from 12-20 (24\*) years of age.

The school health service offers children and adolescents help from a public health nurse and in some cases, also a school doctor, physical therapist and psychologist. Children feel seen and heard, and through various activities, they can learn more about living with substance abuse/addiction challenges in the family. They can also talk about what commonly happens when a family member is struggling with addiction or has other health problems.

Children and youth can contact the public health clinic for adolescents (“Helsestasjon for ungdom”) directly by drop-in, meaning that they do not need an appointment to talk to a public health nurse or other healthcare professional. Public health nurses can answer questions and talk about anything children or adolescents are wondering about. Talking to a trustworthy and caring professional often helps.

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The public health nurse or contact person can help by giving advice on topics such as body and health, friends and family, difficult thoughts, feelings and concerns. If the child or adolescent needs more help, school health services can contact their general practitioner, dentist, physical therapist or psychologist, for example.

The contact person or public health nurse also has an overview of various activities that the municipality or district offers children and adolescents as next of kin that may be suitable for your child. They also have an overview of various classes and groups for parents.

### Confidentiality

Those who work at the helsestasjon and school health services are bound by confidentiality. Confidentiality means that healthcare personnel cannot tell anyone why a child or adolescent has been in contact with them, or what they have talked about.

