



Science, Kids, and Alcohol

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One in Four U.S. Children Is Exposed to Alcohol Abuse and Dependence in the Family Environment

Bridget F. Grant, PhD
Chief of Biometry
Division of Biometry and Epidemiology
National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
Bethesda, Maryland

The harmful effects of alcoholism extend far beyond those experienced by alcoholics themselves. For example, children in families affected by alcohol often live in environments that are stressful, chaotic, and frightening. Frequently they are neglected or abused and face economic hardship and social isolation as well. Studies show that children of alcoholics are vulnerable to mental illness and medical problems and are more likely than others to become alcoholic themselves.

In 1992, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism conducted the largest national survey on alcohol use ever performed in the U.S. or elsewhere. This research revealed that almost 14 million U.S. adults meet the criteria for a diagnosis of alcoholism or alcohol abuse. Given the magnitude of alcohol disorders among U.S. adults and the potential risk they pose for the children in their families, epidemiologists sought to determine how many U.S. residents aged 17 or younger are exposed to alcoholism or alcohol abuse by a family member.

Using data from the 1992 survey, epidemiologists recently estimated that more than 28 million U.S.

children under 18 (almost 43 percent) lived in households with 1 or more adults who had been alcoholics or alcohol abusers at some time in their lives. About 10 million of those children (approximately 15 percent) lived in households with an adult diagnosed with alcoholism or alcohol abuse in the past year. Based on these two figures, it is estimated that 1 in 4 U.S. children (19 million children), before the age of 18, lives in a family with a member who is an alcoholic or abuses alcohol.

- One in four youth, or 19 million kids, is exposed to family alcoholism or alcohol abuse some time before the age of 18.
- Children in families affected by alcohol often live in environments that are stressful, chaotic, and frightening.
- Children of alcoholics are vulnerable to mental illness and medical problems and are more likely than others to become alcoholic themselves.

Social and health services for children of alcoholics are fragmented and often fail to address the far-reaching effects of familial alcohol exposure. The findings described here illustrate the urgent need to establish a comprehensive strategy for children at risk.

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