

# CARING FOR A CHILD

WHO HAS BEEN IMPACTED BY  
SUBSTANCE ABUSE



## WHERE CAN CAREGIVERS FIND HELP?

Caregivers may need guidance and support as they respond to the attachment needs of vulnerable children. Help for family or foster caregivers can include counseling, emotional support, education, emergency assistance, and access to legal services. Additionally, support services such as help with child care or other responsibilities, and transportation to appointments can be helpful.

Children's previous experiences in relationships often make it difficult for them to communicate their needs to a caregiver. Children can be supported through individual and group counseling, therapeutic early intervention services and developmental services. Types of treatment include residential, day treatment, outpatient and in-home services.

There are currently two programs in Connecticut that have been developed to specifically address the needs of infants and children affected by substance abuse: the Yale Coordinated Intervention for Women and Infants (CIWI) and the PROkids Plus program.

**The Yale Coordinated Intervention for Women and Infants** program is an intensive, in-home, wraparound service for substance abusing women and their infants. The intervention team includes a social worker, psychologist or nurse, and a family support worker, who is often a person in recovery. The intervention is structured in three phases (1) engagement and relationship building, (2) intensive intervention and referral, and (3) stabilization and maintenance.

If you live in the New Haven area, you can find more information about this program by calling Family Support Services at 203.785.6862 or by contacting your local Department of Children and Families (DCF) representative.

**PROkids Plus** is a center and home-based intervention program for infants and children who were exposed to substance abuse before they were born. Its goal is to promote resilience and development through improving the caregiving environment after a child is born. The program includes enhanced primary medical care in which the number and duration of medical visits are increased, home visitation and family development, developmental assessment, collaboration with community agencies, and advocacy. The team consists of professionals and paraprofessionals who receive training in motivational enhancement therapy, trauma sensitive care, and attachment. The intervention begins with newborns and follows them through five years of age.

If you live in the Hartford area, you can find more information about the PROkids Plus program by calling 860.545.9250, or by contacting your local DCF representative.

## MOST IMPORTANTLY...

**All children need to be attached to someone who considers them to be very special and who is committed to providing for their ongoing care. The bond between a child and a consistent caregiver is the cornerstone of healthy development.**

Caregivers of children impacted by substance abuse – whether a biological parent, family member or foster parent, play an important role in helping children overcome challenges, develop cognitively, emotionally and socially, and gain a sense of their own identity and self-worth. It is crucial that caregivers and children get the support they need to help them on their journey of healing and growth.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you are looking for help, call **211 Infoline** by dialing 2-1-1 from anywhere in Connecticut. This easy, three-digit number connects a caller to a statewide, help-by-telephone service that provides information, community referrals and crisis intervention. It's a simple way to get help 24 hours a day, at no cost. You can also visit their website at [www.infoline.org](http://www.infoline.org)



## HOW DOES SUBSTANCE ABUSE IMPACT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES?

Children and families are affected by substance abuse in many ways. These include physical issues, such as an unborn infant's exposure to drugs, and social and emotional issues, like the separation of children from their parents and disruptions in mother-child bonds.

Other factors, including poverty, lack of permanent housing, mental illness, child abuse and inadequate parenting skills, can also have an impact on the home environment and the parent-child relationship in families affected by substance abuse.

## A MOTHER AND HER CHILD

A mother's relationship with her child is the most important support for the child's development. Children need their mother to keep them safe, to help them learn to regulate their emotions, and to help them explore the world. They can't do any of these things without their mother's help.

Exposure to substances can hurt children in a variety of ways. If infants are exposed before birth, the substances can change the way their brains develop and make it more difficult for them to learn and to function in the world as they grow. How infants develop depends on what and how much they were exposed to and how well they are cared for after they are born. The most common long-term effects are on the children's ability to pay attention and to regulate their moods. Responsive, sensitive parenting is critical in helping infants and young children overcome effects of early drug exposure.

If mothers use substances after their infants are born, it changes the way the mothers interact with them, and makes them less able to notice and respond to what the children need. This is part of the process of "attachment" and can become an important concern for infants of substance-abusing mothers.

If you are a mother with a substance abuse problem, your relationship with your child is a powerful motivator for change because you want to be the best mother you can be. Remind the people who are supporting you with your recovery that they need to make space for you to think about your child, to spend time with your child, and to learn how to be a good parent. Help them remember that you are likely to stay longer in programs that involve you as a parent, and that you are likely to gain more from those programs and to be stronger in your ability to resist and recover from relapse.

## WHAT IS ATTACHMENT?

Attachment is the emotional bond that forms between children and their primary caregivers, usually their parents. When children are secure in their attachment, they feel confident that their "attachment figure" will protect them from physical and emotional harm. Typically, children develop an attachment to at least one caregiver in their first year. Whether or not that attachment is healthy and secure depends on the caregiver's ability to provide a safe environment, and the quality of children's relationships with their caregivers. The quality of the children's attachment to their caregivers is determined by the way the caregivers respond to their bids for attention, help, and protection.



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Warm, comforting, consistent caregiver-child contact helps children develop a secure attachment. These experiences help them learn how others will respond when they are upset and need help. Secure attachment has a positive influence on children's cognitive development, social skills and their ability to interact with others. Secure children show fewer behavior problems, and are less likely to suffer from emotional problems.

## A SECURE ATTACHMENT HELPS CHILDREN TO:

- Control impulses and emotions
- Develop positive social values and empathy
- Develop positive self-esteem
- Develop and maintain emotional relationships

## WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT WAYS CHILDREN BECOME ATTACHED?

- **Securely attached:** actively seek out contact with their caregiver
- **Avoidant:** demonstrate a clear avoidance of contact with their caregiver
- **Resistant:** may initially seek contact with their caregiver, but then push the caregiver away or turn away from him or her
- **Disorganized/disoriented:** seem to have no clear strategy for responding to their caregiver; may at times avoid or resist the caregiver's approaches; may also seem confused or frightened by the caregiver, or freeze or still their movements when the caregiver approaches

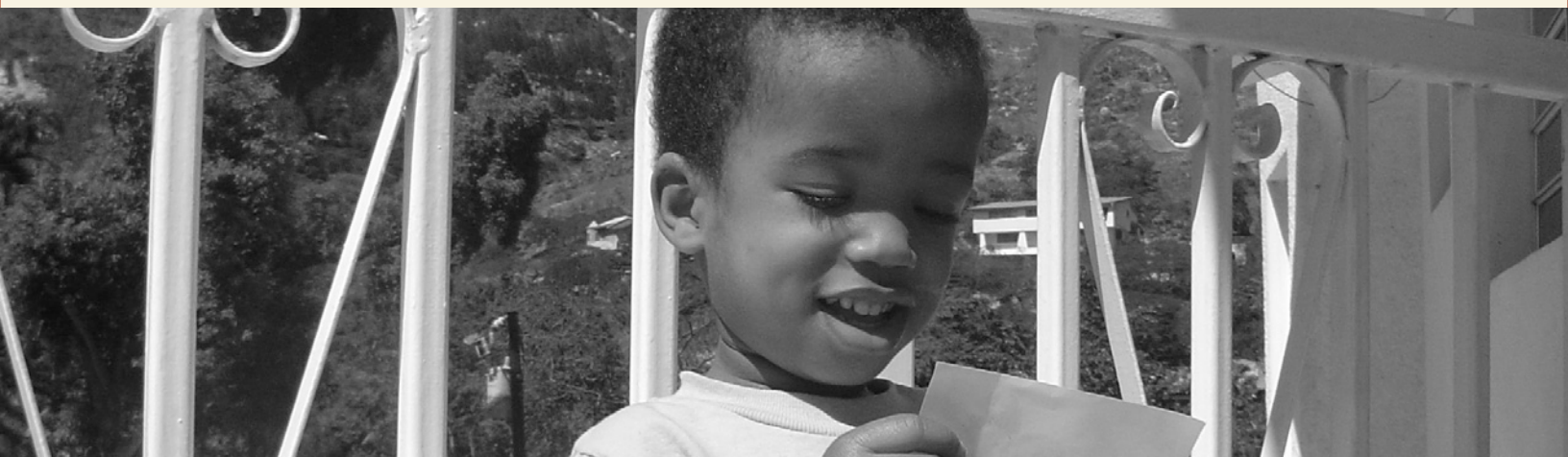
## HOW DOES SUBSTANCE ABUSE AFFECT ATTACHMENT?

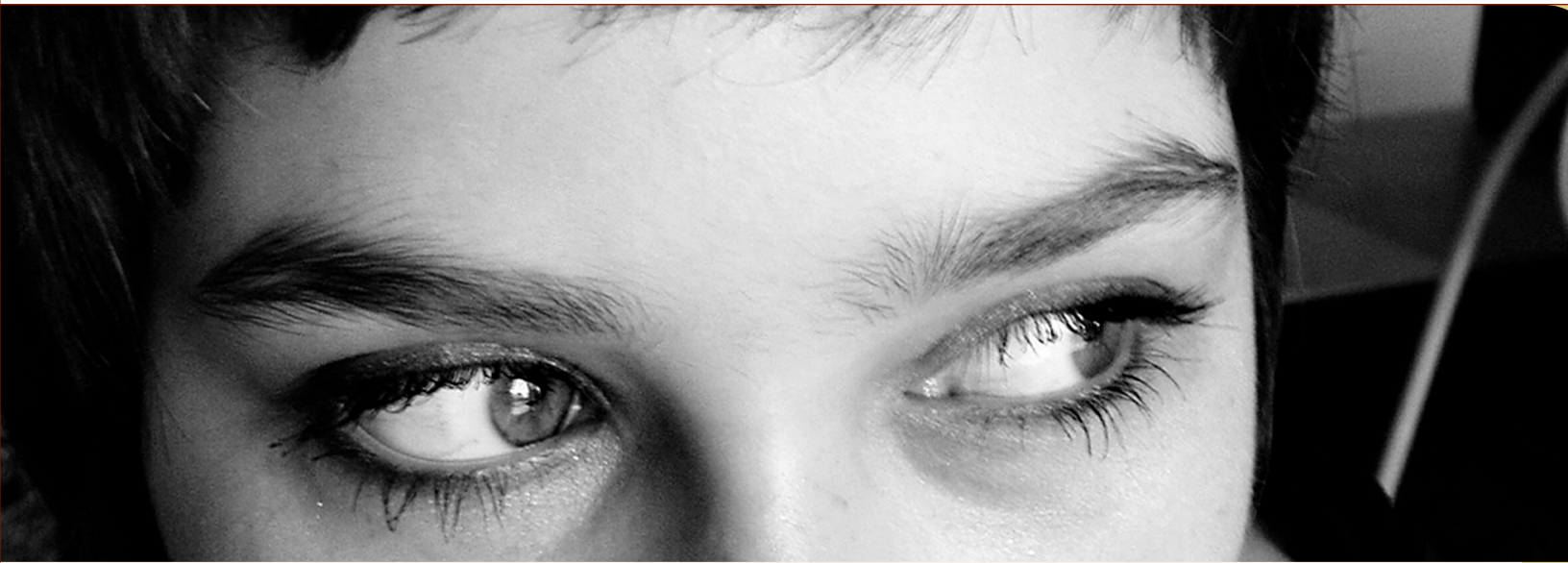
Children affected by substance abuse can suffer from disorders of non-attachment. These disorders often appear in children who have not had the opportunity to attach to a single caregiver, and they fall into two major categories: the first involving emotional withdrawal and the second, emotional promiscuity or indiscriminate behavior.

Even though some studies show that insecure attachment styles can lead to emotional and behavioral difficulties, it is important to keep in mind that they are not mental disorders. Insecure attachment styles are strategies for protection seeking on the part of the infant or young child. In many cases, these strategies are the best way for the child to get his or her needs met under different circumstances.

## ATTACHMENT PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN FROM FAMILIES AFFECTED BY SUBSTANCE ABUSE:

- Emotional withdrawal and shutdown in children whose efforts to interact are consistently unmet
- Children quickly become overly attached with no boundaries to new and multiple adult figures in order get their nurturing needs met
- Mother-child relationship problems – mothers feeling disengaged from their children; children being less interactive with their mothers; mothers being less tuned in to their infants' signals
- Parents can have difficulty understanding and meeting their children's needs
- Disruptions in attachment relationships due to multiple placements





### WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP CHILDREN WITH ATTACHMENT ISSUES?

- Provide consistent, nurturing relationships with adults
- Create a stable, dependable relationship with the children's caregiver
- Provide a safe environment where children are able to satisfy their curiosity through safe exploration, learn to express themselves, fuel their imagination and creativity, and gain trust in their world
- Provide approval and encouragement as children approach new tasks and confront new developmental, cognitive, and physical challenges
- Provide the stable presence of an adult family figure from which children can safely separate

### CAREGIVERS

In their early years, children determine who they will view as their caregiver. While the bond between child and biological parent should be preserved and maintained whenever possible, children of a substance-abusing mother are often placed with out-of-home caregivers, including family members and foster parents. The quality of care provided in the family or foster placement will help determine the type of attachment relationship the child and caregiver develop.

**Multiple placements may be unavoidable. This may result in disruptions in caregiving, which can:**

- Produce feelings of loss and abandonment
- Deprive children of the consistent relationships that foster a sense of belonging
- Threaten their ability to develop age-appropriate skills

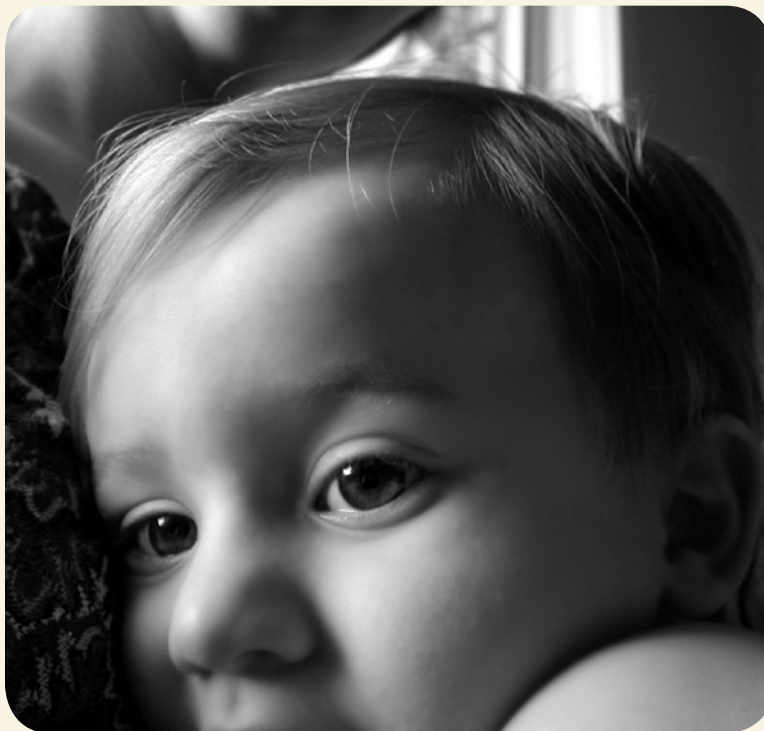
### Children who have had multiple placements may:

- Be less able, or unable, to form positive attachments to other adults
- Experience high levels of anxiety and guilt
- Engage in displays of socially-unacceptable behaviors
- Experience emotional distress

Some children may act in ways that are dangerous to themselves and others out of their belief that no one will care. Children whose basic needs are unmet, who go through multiple separations from their mothers, who spend hours worrying about her whereabouts or her safety, and who assume the role of protector and caretaker, can suffer developmentally and psychologically.

Regardless of the type of placement, the quality of daily care that infants and children receive is extremely important. For infants who remain with a substance-abusing mother, extremely close supervision to ensure the infant's safety is critical. Regardless of whether she is currently sober or not, mothers with a history of substance abuse often continue to need help developing parenting skills.

The quality of care also needs to be considered when putting an infant in a family placement. Family members of at-risk infants may face some of the same parenting challenges as the infant's biological parents. It is important to figure out how much support family members will need in order to provide sensitive, responsive care.



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The Connecticut Center for Effective Practice (CCEP), a subsidiary of the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut (CHDI), collaborates with state agencies, community-based providers, and academic institutions to identify best practices in children's mental health. The Center is dedicated to expanding community-based behavioral services and improving the mental health of children in Connecticut.