


 Project supported by the PHA


Safeguarding Children Experiencing Parental Substance Misuse (“Hidden Harm”)



 **Housekeeping**


- Microphones
- Breaks
- Internet connections
- Confidentiality
- Questions/comments




 **Course Objectives**

By the end of today, you will be able to:


- Identify how substance misuse impacts the individual, their children, and family
- Understand what hidden harm is and the impact it has locally
- Understand the concept of resilience and be aware of risk and protective factors



 **Course Objectives**

By the end of today, you will be able to:

- Identify signs to look out for and when to seek help
- Understand strategies and messages to reduce harm
- Identify local services available



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1 Introduction

Why do people use substances, and what is problematic use?

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Why do people use substances?
Think of some reasons why people might use alcohol or other drugs.

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Relieving tension/anxiety/form of escapism



Boredom

Dependency

Availability


Rituals

Rebellion

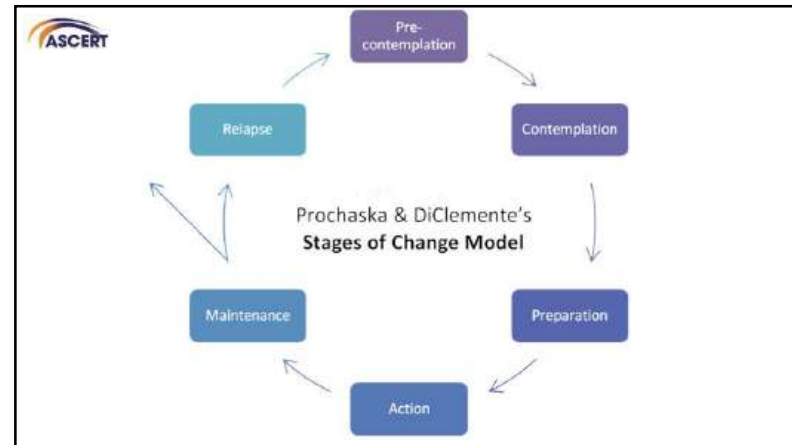
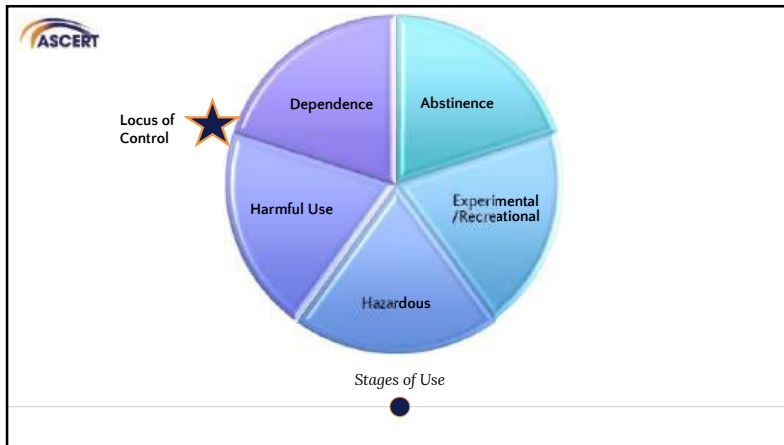
Self-medication

Social norms and/or peer pressure

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How much is too much?
How would you define "problematic use", and how does it differ from dependence?



2 **Parental Substance Misuse and Hidden Harm**

How might parental substance misuse affect a child?

Parental Substance Misuse

- Impact of PSM on children/young people may not be directly correlated to amount or frequency of the substance use
- Knowing about the amount of substances used can help us understand the impact on the parent as an individual
 - Shouldn't be taken as an indicator of harm without assessing parenting skills


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The term 'hidden harm' is commonly used to describe parental/carer substance misuse and its effect on children and other family members.

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Barnardo's Northern Ireland


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The image shows an iceberg floating in the ocean. The tip of the iceberg, which is visible above the water, represents the obvious or known aspects of a problem. The much larger part of the iceberg, which is submerged below the water, represents the hidden or underlying issues. Surrounding the iceberg are several small inset photographs showing people in various states of distress or conflict, including a woman looking down, a child with a shocked expression, a woman covering her face, a man in a dark setting, and a family scene.

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Hidden Harm




The photograph shows a family of four sitting at a table. A man and a woman are standing behind the table, looking towards the camera with serious expressions. Two children, a girl and a boy, are sitting at the table with their heads resting on the table, appearing sad or distressed.

- How much of an issue do you think this is in Northern Ireland?
- What substances are you seeing that you're the most worried about?

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Hidden Harm in Northern Ireland

- Limited information on the exact impact of problem parental drug use (PPDU)/parental alcohol misuse (PAM) in NI
- In 2010, the Public Health Agency reported that
 - An estimated 40,000 young people in NI are living with PAM
 - 40% of children on the Child Protection Register and 70% of Looked After Children are there due to PAM




The photograph shows a family of four standing together and smiling. A man, a woman, and two children are dressed in casual clothing.

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Hidden Harm in Northern Ireland

- In 2024, 12% of clients on the NI Substance Misuse Database said they lived with dependent children
 - SMD only looks at people who present to services (1) for the first time or (2) for the first time in 6 months
 - Approximately 477 households



Department of Health (2024)

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When Harm is **Hidden**

Fixers UK; https://youtu.be/zzRR_5_SNb8

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It Was My **Normal** (Part 1)

ASCERT; <https://youtu.be/U7eoXtcWtqE?si=xi4NFmEivQCFIajSd>


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What is the experience of hidden harm?

Listen to Laura's Story and pay attention to how she describes her experience of living in a household with parental alcohol misuse.

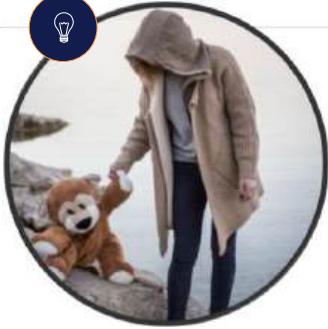
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Laura's Story


A small blue circle is positioned below the text 'Laura's Story'.


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What did you hear **Laura** say?

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 **Living with Hidden Harm:**
Laura's Story



- Ruined 5th/6th birthday party
- Does housework most of the time
- Relationship breakdown
- Difficulty with food/eating
- Happy in school but doesn't want teachers to know about the situation - "it's embarrassing"
- Missing school
- Money issues
- Self-harm

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What are the potential signs of PSM/hidden harm?
In small groups, think about signs/indicators you might notice in the children and parents you work with that may suggest they're living with parental substance misuse.

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Possible Emotional/Behavioural Effects of Hidden Harm

- Increased likelihood of emotional and behavioural disorders
- Shame, anxiety, guilt, anger
- Increased risk of engagement in criminality
- Increased risk of substance misuse
- Early initiation of sexual activity



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Possible Physical Effects of Hidden Harm




- Dealing with physical changes of puberty alone
- Physical consequences of stress
- Domestic violence/abuse and neglect
- Physical issues associated with own substance misuse
- STIs and pregnancy
- An unkempt appearance

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Possible Social Effects of Hidden Harm

- Isolation/trouble fitting in
- Bullying
- Decreased school attendance
- Lack of usual opportunities (e.g. work)
- Withdrawal from normally-trusted figures
- Negative interactions with police and other authority figures



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Possible Environmental Effects of Hidden Harm



- Having to take on the role of primary carer
- Poverty
- Lack of parental interaction, supervision, and appropriate discipline
- Unstable/chaotic household
- Frequent changes in housing arrangements (e.g. foster care; kinship care)

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3 Handling Cases of PSM/Hidden Harm

What do we do when we suspect parental substance misuse or hidden harm?

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What action(s) would you take?

In small groups, look at a case scenario and decide what action(s) you would take: do nothing; speak to a line manager/designated CPO, speak with Gateway Team for advice, and/or refer to Family Support Hub.

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Approaching Issues of PSM - Parents


- Convey a desire to understand the reasons behind the behaviour
- Resist judgement or trying to change their thoughts about substance use
- Discuss observable facts and substantiated concerns rather than assuming harms or jumping to conclusions
- Help the parent understand the impact their use has on their children



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Approaching Issues of PSM - Young People

- Express curiosity about how life is at home for the young person but do not judge or criticise their parent's behaviour
- Empathise and reassure
- Speak about other young people that may be similarly affected
- If a young person is not ready to talk about PSM, suggest they may in the future, or leave further information with them



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Messages Young People Need to Hear



- You are not alone
- You are not to blame
- You are not betraying anyone by talking about it
- Your opinion matters
- You can still have a good life despite your parent's continued substance use
- There are people who can help you

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4 Resilience and Risk/Protective Factors

How can resilience help a young person affected by hidden harm?

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Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress...it means 'bouncing back' from difficult experiences.

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Resilience: Risk and Protective Factors

Risk Factors

- Factors that add to the likelihood of a child experiencing significant harm; undermine resilience
- Example: social isolation

Protective Factors

- Factors that reduce or prevent the impact of a risk factor; support resilience
- Example: close relationship with a stable, sober adult


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What are some **risk and **protective** factors regarding substance use-related harm?**

In small groups, think about risk and protective factors within individuals, families, and communities.

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Examples of Protective Factors Supporting Resilience in Hidden Harm Situations

- Presence of a stable adult figure (esp. a non-using parent)
- Close positive bond with an adult in a caring role
- Wider positive support network (incl. with peers)
- Parenting style and positive family environment
- Individual temperament
- A good repertoire of coping responses
- Ability to cope with change
- Engagement in a range of activities
- Self-efficacy, self-esteem, confidence
- Problem solving skills
- Positive opportunities at times of transition

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5 Signposting

Who's available to help?

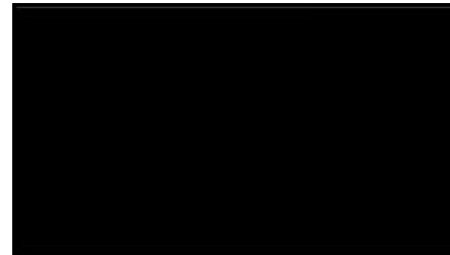
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Local Hidden Harm Services

STEPS **2** COPE
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- For young people 11 – 25 affected by a parent/carer's substance misuse and/or mental health difficulty
- One-to-one support
- All Trust areas
- stc@ascert.biz



It Was My **Normal** (Part 2)

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Local Hidden Harm Services

Barnardos START360

Pharos and VOICES

- For young people and families affected by family substance misuse
 - Therapeutic individual, group, and family work
- Referral typically comes from social services or addictions services
 - Pharos: Belfast, South Eastern, and Southern Trusts
 - VOICES: Northern and Western Trusts

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NIDACTS

Northern Ireland Drug and Alcohol Coordination Teams

drugsandalcoholni.info



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Family Support NI

familysupportni.gov.uk

A directory of various support services (e.g. mental health, finances) and registered childcare services in NI







 **Steps to Cope Online Intervention**

A self-guided, evidence-based intervention for young people living with hidden harm

stepstocope.co.uk







Thanks!

Any questions?

ASCERT
0800 2545 123
info@ascert.biz
www.ascert.biz