

FEELING SEEN

HOW CAN SECONDARY
SCHOOLS BETTER SUPPORT
YOUNG PEOPLE AFFECTED BY
A PARENT'S DRINKING?



This briefing has been created by young people from Sheffield Young Carers, in collaboration with Jo Tedstone, a Postgraduate Researcher at Lancaster University. The names of the young people have been changed to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality.



OVERVIEW



The Children's Society estimate that **200,000 children** in England live with a parent who is dependent on alcohol, and around **1 in 3 children** aged 10-17 experience negative consequences as a result of their parent's drinking.

Children and young people who live with a parent who drinks too much are all different and impacted in various ways – there isn't just one type of experience or behaviour. This means that the support that schools provide and the policies that underpin practice should see them as individuals with their own needs, not as one single group.

It can be hard for young people affected by a parent's drinking to talk about what's happening at home with friends or staff at school. This often means they remain hidden or overlooked. Young people may worry that staff and friends won't understand or listen properly, or that talking about it will cause changes that they're not ready for. They may also feel guilty, ashamed or scared about being judged.

Feeling Seen is a briefing created by young people who have experienced these challenges. It aims to shine a light on their real experiences and help schools understand how to better support those affected by a parent's drinking.





This artwork was created by Daniel, age 15.

It's important that young people who live with parental alcohol misuse are recognised as young carers.

They may not see themselves as young carers but may take on extra responsibilities at home, including looking after themselves. This can be stressful and young carers might feel worried, anxious or upset in school because of what is happening at home. It can also sometimes make it harder to focus at school, complete homework, or enjoy time with friends. It's important that schools understand this and give young carers the support and recognition they need. Schools should also ensure they record young carers on the spring census.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These 5 recommendations have been created by young people who have been affected by a parent's drinking. However, every young person that is impacted by parental alcohol misuse is different, and their experiences won't all be the same. That's why schools should take time to really get to know each young person, give them the right kind of help for their needs, and keep checking in to make sure the support is still working well.

1. Talk openly without judgement
2. Support mental health
3. Help staff to understand
4. Provide a trusted adult
5. Create space for fun



"I think the days would vary to be fair. Like sometimes it'd be hard, sometimes it'd be okay, sometimes it'd be nothing, or sometimes it'd be everything. It would just go from complete chaos to nothing at all."

- Zainab, aged 15

1

TALK OPENLY WITHOUT JUDGEMENT

Make sure your school is a safe space to talk and learn about alcohol and what to do if someone at home drinks. This should be done in a non-judgemental way and no one should feel embarrassed, judged, or guilty for talking about it.



WHY?

Young people are less likely to speak openly about a parent's drinking when they fear being judged or treated differently by their friends or staff at school. It's important to recognise that young people hear different and often very negative messages about alcohol use — on social media, TV, and from friends and family — so schools should create a safe space to talk about it openly, without adding to existing stigma.

At school, everyone should use kind and respectful language when talking about this topic. Avoiding judgmental or stigmatising words helps people feel understood and not blamed. Bullying related to family circumstances, including parental alcohol use, should not be tolerated. Any harmful language, stereotypes, or behaviour must be addressed promptly to ensure affected pupils feel safe, supported, and included.

Schools can make a big difference by talking about alcohol and its effects in lessons, small groups, or assemblies, and by making sure there are trusted adults that young people can speak to one-to-one. This helps make it normal to talk about difficult topics and reminds those affected that they are not alone.

“I was in fear of what was going to happen if they did find out. I did keep my mouth shut for quite a while.”

- Zainab, aged 15

“I think they should talk about it more and just normalise it. Treat it as a normal experience so more people can understand.”

- Daniel, aged 15

2

SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH

Make sure young people affected by a parent's drinking can access help for their mental health and feel understood, safe and cared for. If a young person loses a parent because of alcohol, they should also be able to get ongoing bereavement support to help them cope.

WHY?

Young people who are affected by a parent's drinking are at a greater risk of experiencing poor mental health and emotional or behavioural difficulties. All young people living with a parent who drinks too much should be able to get mental health support and guidance to help them cope and manage their emotions safely. Sadly, some young people may lose a parent because of alcohol. When this happens, they should receive ongoing care and bereavement support to help them through it. No one should have to face these things alone.



“Your emotions are going up and down, up and down, up and down. I used to get really upset when I went to school. I used to just go to the toilet and cry a bit because I used to think about what happens if this never got better.”

- Poppy, aged 11

“It's like when you'd be at school, it'd be like you're in constant fear of like what's gonna happen next. Like am I going to come home to them being drunk? I'd go to school and I'd be thinking about it the whole time.”

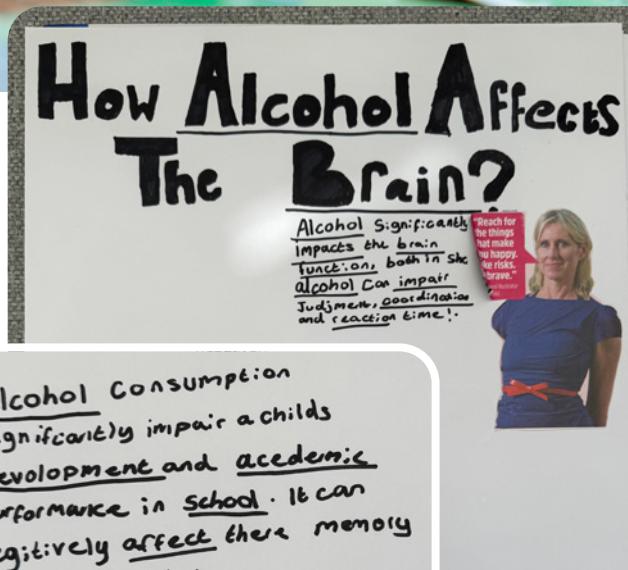
- Aoife, aged 12

3 HELP STAFF TO UNDERSTAND

Make sure all school staff know how a parent's drinking can affect how a young person feels and behaves at school. Staff should be supported to understand behaviour and respond with kindness and support.

WHY?

It's important that young people affected by a parent's drinking feel understood and supported by the adults around them. Not all staff in school will fully understand how a parent's drinking can affect a young person's emotions and behaviour. This can sometimes lead to young people being misunderstood. Staff should learn more about how a parent's drinking can impact a young person's life and be supported to listen and help if someone chooses to talk about it. When staff understand and show empathy, it creates a school environment that feels much safer and more supportive.



This artwork was created by Aoife, aged 12.

“I think they need to be understanding of how people's behaviour and how they may respond to other people can change due to alcohol misuse in the family.”

- Max, aged 14

“It's important that someone affected by alcohol misuse in their life can be surrounded by people who will be more understanding and kind about it so that they don't feel like strange or ostracised because of their experiences.”

- Daniel, aged 15

4

PROVIDE A TRUSTED ADULT

Make sure that every young person affected by a parent's drinking has at least one trusted adult in school who they can talk to when things are difficult at home. This adult can also help them think about and plan for their future.

WHY?

Having a trusted adult at school really matters, especially for young people who are affected by their parent's drinking. This should be someone who listens, understands, and never judges or makes assumptions. They can offer a safe and supportive space to talk about what's happening at home and give support when things feel hard. It's also important that they take a genuine interest in the young person's goals and aspirations, giving advice and encouragement when needed. With the right support, trusted adults can help young people feel heard, feel seen, feel valued and feel hopeful for the future.



"I would always go to her because I always knew that she would actually listen and talk to me. When you don't have the people who are there for you like that, you don't want to talk to anyone about it."

- Aoife, aged 12

5

CREATE SPACE FOR FUN

Make sure young people affected by a parent's drinking have opportunities to try new things, make friends and enjoy themselves in a safe space. Schools should also help them find groups and support networks outside of school where they can meet with others who understand what they are going through.



WHY?

It's important that young people affected by a parent's drinking have opportunities to have fun, make friends, and try new activities. Time away from what's happening at home provides a much-needed break and a chance to enjoy themselves whilst feeling supported. Schools should also help those affected access groups and organisations outside of school where they can meet other young people with similar experiences and receive additional support. It's important that every young person affected has a safe space to talk openly about a parent's drinking without fear of being judged.

“I think they should like, make an after-school club so the child is not always around it.”

- Poppy, aged 11

“It's good for people to have a distraction and like, have a safe place so if they're worrying about their parents, they can just have a distraction from that in a safe place and have fun and be happy.”

- Max, aged 14

FEELING SEEN

We invite all secondary schools to take these five recommendations forward and become places where young people affected by a parent's drinking feel seen, heard and supported. By understanding the hidden impact of parental alcohol misuse and committing to these recommendations, schools can become the trusted, nurturing environments young people need and deserve.



This artwork was created by Poppy, age 11.

This briefing is based on research carried out in Summer 2025 with five young people from Sheffield Young Carers who are impacted by parental alcohol misuse. The names of the young people have been changed to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality.

For further information about the research and the recommendations in this briefing, please contact: j.goodman@lancaster.ac.uk

For further information and staff training about how you can support young people affected by a parent's drinking:



A free workbook is also available to support young people impacted by family substance misuse:

FINDING MY WAY

sheffieldyoungcarers.org.uk



**SHEFFIELD
YOUNG
CARERS**



Please see a poster on the next page that can be displayed in your staffroom.

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01 *Talk openly without judgement*

02 *Support mental health*

03 *Help staff to understand*

04 *Provide a trusted adult*

05 *Create space for fun*



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