

Adult Child's Guide: When a Parent Has an Addiction

For adults carrying the impact of a parent's gambling, gaming or other compulsive behaviour

You may be an adult now, but having a parent whose addiction shaped family life can still affect trust, responsibility, money, relationships and the way you respond to uncertainty. You may also be dealing with an addiction that is happening now. This guide is for you — not as the person who has to fix your parent, but as somebody whose own experience deserves support.

You were affected too

Families often organise themselves around the person whose behaviour is most unpredictable. You may have learned to keep the peace, solve problems, hide what was happening or become unusually independent. Those survival roles can continue long after childhood.

You are not your parent's recovery plan

You can encourage help, share information and care deeply. You cannot make another adult stop gambling, gaming, spending or engaging in another compulsive behaviour. Their recovery remains their responsibility.

Untangling love from responsibility

Love can make saying no feel cruel. A useful question is: am I offering support, or am I taking over a consequence that belongs to my parent? Healthy support can include listening, transport to treatment or helping find services without giving unrestricted money or repeatedly repairing damage.

Money and practical boundaries

If addiction has affected finances, protect your accounts, credit, passwords and important documents. Do not lend money you cannot afford to lose. Where necessary, keep finances separate and seek specialist financial or legal advice.

The emotional legacy

Adult children may experience hypervigilance, guilt, anger, grief, difficulty trusting, people-pleasing or a strong need to control uncertainty. These responses can make sense in the context of what you lived through. Therapy can offer space to explore them without making your parent the centre of every conversation.

Relationships with your parent

You can choose the level of contact that is sustainable for you. Boundaries may involve when you answer calls, whether you discuss money, what behaviour ends a visit, or whether contact needs to reduce temporarily.

If grandchildren are involved

You are allowed to make decisions based on your children's safety and emotional wellbeing. Do not ask children to keep secrets, monitor an adult or manage unpredictable behaviour. Contact can be structured around safety.

Making room for your own life

Recovery for an affected adult child can mean rediscovering what you like, what you need and who you are when you are not managing somebody else's crisis.

My boundaries and support plan

This page is about your wellbeing — not managing your parent.

What I feel responsible for	
What is actually mine to manage	
Behaviour I will no longer accept	
My boundary around money	
My boundary around calls / visits	
People I can contact	
What I will do in a crisis	
Something I want for my own life	

Books that may help

Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents

Lindsay C. Gibson

Not specifically about addiction, but helpful for adults exploring difficult parent-child patterns and boundaries.

Beyond Addiction

Jeffrey Foote, Carrie Wilkens, Nicole Kosanke & Stephanie Higgs

Evidence-informed guidance for loved ones on encouraging change while protecting their own wellbeing.

Changing for Good

James O. Prochaska, John C. Norcross & Carlo C. DiClemente

Useful for understanding readiness to change and why change is often non-linear.

Help and information

Adfam	UK support for people affected by someone else's drinking, drug use or gambling.
SMART Family & Friends	Peer support and practical tools for family and friends affected by addictive behaviours.
GP / counselling	Support is appropriate for your own anxiety, sleep, mood, trauma responses or relationship difficulties — even if your parent refuses help.
Urgent safety	If addiction is linked with violence, exploitation, suicidal crisis or immediate danger, seek urgent professional help; call 999 when life is at risk.

You are allowed to build a life that is not organised around your parent's addiction.

Support Hub educational resource — not a replacement for individual medical, safeguarding, legal or emergency advice.