



Lessons from the Pompidou Group project to empower children with parents who use drugs

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Abstract: Children whose parents use drugs are an invisible population. Shame, stigma and the fear of separation from their family often prevent them from seeking help. Seemingly, parents who use drugs sometimes encounter difficulties in coping with addiction and parenthood at the same time.

When I was younger, it was difficult for me because I lived with my parents and they were both addicts and from the time I was six years old I took care of my sister: I made her dress to go to school, or I looked for food for her because we didn't have anything to eat. (Regina, 16, Mexico)

Children [impacted](#) by parental drug dependence can experience anxiety, depression, anger, guilt and shame. They often feel isolated and are afraid of speaking out and looking for help. Children often have to undertake adults' roles and duties, taking care of themselves and their siblings and, sometimes, of their

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parents too. They can witness or directly be victims of domestic violence, including sexual violence. Parental drug use is one of the nine Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and can predict negative outcomes for children in the future, including transgenerational drug dependence. Drug use is emphatically understood by these children as a struggle in which their parents are engaged, but, at the same time, these children are puzzled and sorrow that their parents' love for them is not enough to make drug use stop:

The one moment I hate her, the other one I love her, other times I feel that she is miserable and I feel sorry about her and her choices. She chooses drugs and not me. I love her because she gave birth to me. I feel sorry for her because she cannot take care of herself. I hate her because she destroyed my life. (Alexis, 14, Greece)

At the same time, people who are impacted by dependent or problematic drug use, often encounter difficulties taking care of themselves and their children while facing addiction. Social stigma and barriers to access treatment are particularly high in the case of women who use drugs and are mothers.

Alexis and Regina participated –together with a total of 110 women who use drugs and 34 children and young adults whose parents struggle with dependence from substances (alcohol, illicit drugs or prescription medicines)– in the 2022 phase of the [project](#) 'Children Whose Parents Use Drugs' of the [Pompidou Group](#), the Council of Europe (CoE) International Cooperation Group on Drugs and Addictions. This project responds to the group's mission of integrating human rights in drug policy. It started as a response to the CoE's invitation to contribute to its [Strategy](#) for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027).

Between November 2020 and December 2021, the Pompidou Group [developed](#) a dedicated webpage, two reports and an ISBN publication. The latter [publication](#) collects experiences and practices in eleven countries, thanks to the participation of people working in public services, NGOs and academia. It also identifies concrete issues and proposes operational recommendations. Children whose parents use drugs are recognised as part of a vulnerable population, which is explicitly named in the abovementioned CoE Strategy, stating the need to:

2.2.6 Mapping, analysing and providing guidance on the situation of children suffering from addictive behaviours and children of parents using drugs.

The inclusion of children whose parents use drugs in the CoE strategy and its implementation represent a major achievement. So far, at the international level, including in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC](#)), children have been only considered in terms of the risks that drug use represents for them or as potential victims of international trafficking organisations.

One of the key recommendations of the Pompidou Group regards the need to offer spaces of participation for children with parents who use drugs and for women affected by drug dependence, so that women and children's opinions are heard and taken into account and actually have an impact on the services addressing their needs directly or indirectly, in fulfilment of human rights standards and their inclusion in drug-related policies. As outlined in the CoE's [Handbook](#) 'Listen – Act – Change', participation is both a child's human right and an expression of democracy.

With this aim in mind, the project began a third phase in February 2022. It is based on the ongoing efforts of participating countries –Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Mexico, North Macedonia, Romania and Switzerland– to develop existing or new practices and programmes within social services, child protection agencies and drug treatment services.

At the same time, members of the academia, NGOs and public institutions have carried out semi-structured interviews or focus groups with both women who use drugs and children with parents affected by drug dependence. Both women and children interviewed have expressed the importance of being treated empathically by their families, services and society at large, also emphasising the role that peers play in giving support and creating trust.

The discussion group was also a place where we could talk and confide in each other, and I thought that was great because I realised that we were not the only ones to go through this, everyone had a slightly different experience, and that it was really a support and yes, a fairly strong group cohesion, benevolence and so on with other children (Natalie, 22, Switzerland).

Additionally, speaking up is deemed essential by both women and children in order to break the transgenerational cycle of alcohol and drug dependence:

Find that person that you can trust, whether it's a teacher or if you are in a youth club, someone... There is someone there to listen. I had many chances to do it and I regret not doing it. They are there and they know there is something going on and they can't do anything unless you use your voice, which I never did. My thing will be 'Use your voice'. (Mary, woman in treatment, Ireland).

Let children speak, let them not be afraid to speak, to say what they think, what they feel. (Andrea, 14, Mexico).

The right of children to be heard and for their opinion to be taken into account is one of the pillars of the international paradigm on children's rights (see [Article 12 CRC](#)). The Pompidou Group project and its impact on the CoE Strategy certainly represent a contribution to enhance children's participation and has triggered processes of reflection as well as actions at the national and local level among the countries, services and NGOs involved.

However, the lack of sufficient spaces and tools to guarantee children's participation, as well as the stigma that still surrounds people who use alcohol and other substances still function as intangible yet concrete barriers to develop family-centred services that work both on children's rights and empowerment, parents' needs and, in the case of women, gender-based violence.

Forging alliances between international bodies and organisations dedicated to children's rights, drug policies and women's rights to develop a stronger mutual understanding and cooperation is thus necessary and timely.