

**TURNING  
POINT**  
turning lives around



# **BOTTLING IT UP: THE NEXT GENERATION**

**The effects of parental alcohol misuse on children and families**

**“** *I was trying to be Superwoman and I was too stubborn to ask for help. I felt I had to be the best mother I could possibly be. I was having two bottles of white wine a night, then I switched to vodka because people wouldn't smell it on me. I'd only drink after I'd put George to bed so on the outside I appeared to be functioning. Every time I look at him [her son] I feel guilt- I wasn't there for him emotionally*

**Susan\*, 35, mother**

**”**

**“** *My daughter knows if I've gone on the binge she won't hear from me. I'll get a text saying 'Are you alright Dad?' We'll spend a couple of hours and a meal together, but that's not the father/daughter relationship I'd planned. I expected to be in the family home and she'd come in from school and we'd live our lives together. There's regret. I've got brothers and a sister and they've got stable relationships with their children. I'd imagined happy families. If I had my time again, I'd have changed things earlier before the slippery slope of dependency.*

**Peter\*, 51, father**

**”**

## 2.6 MILLION CHILDREN ARE LIVING IN THE UK WITH PARENTS WHO ARE DRINKING HAZARDOUSLY.

- Despite the fact that so many children are affected, it remains a hidden problem.
- Not given enough attention by successive governments, services for families need to become a priority.
- Alcohol misuse is frequently a family secret that remains undisclosed, and children's voices, all too often, go unheard.
- Turning Point wants policymakers to listen to the voices of children and families affected by alcohol misuse.

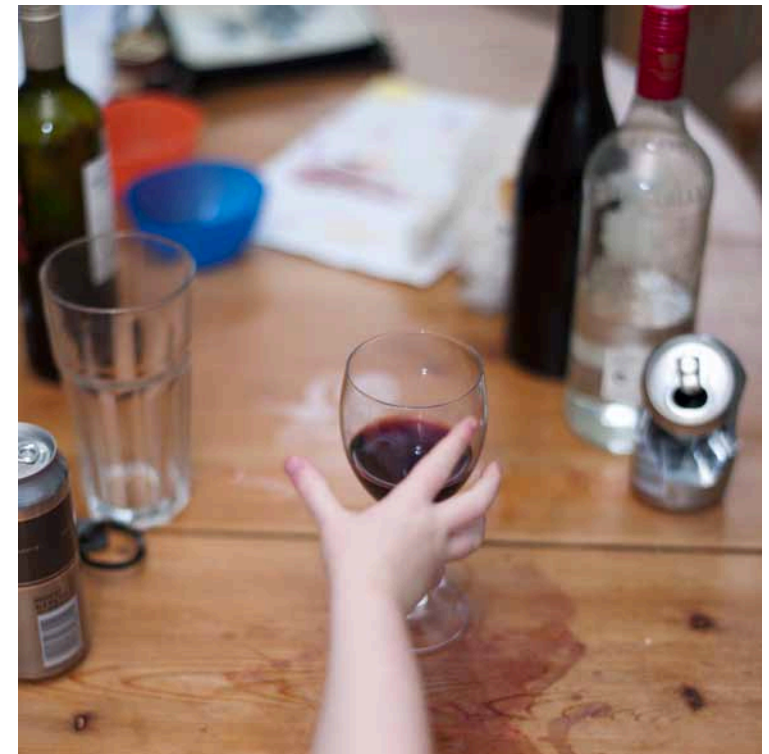
### KEY FINDINGS

In 2006, Turning Point published *Bottling it Up*, which analysed the views and perspectives of parents using our services, and of their children. The research found that parental alcohol misuse has a massive impact on families.

We have updated this work to see what has changed. We have found that some progress has been made since we first published *Bottling It Up*, but families are still not getting the support they need.

*Bottling it Up: The Next Generation* is based on the experiences of children and their parents. Turning Point analysed anonymous data relating to the thousands of people who used our alcohol treatment services in the last year.

We also surveyed 100 parents who currently access these services for alcohol-related issues, and spoke to other parents in more depth to gather their views on how they felt alcohol had affected their children. Turning Point conducted interviews with staff covering their experience of



“ *Children watch (people) much more than they listen. When you think what they've seen... there's nothing 'average' or 'normal.' The child of an alcoholic doesn't 'fit'- they don't know how to 'do life.' Their schoolwork may suffer especially if they have an alcoholic mother. If she's comatose on the sofa then schoolwork isn't going to get done. Family treatment is vital to prevent the next generation of addicts. It's very important for children to forgive or they end up blaming themselves.*

**Glenda Lee, Turning Point service manager**



working with families affected by alcohol misuse, and undertook a review of other research in this area.

### **The family as a whole**

Substance misuse is one of the areas we work in. Others include mental health, learning disability and employment. Between 2010 and 2011, 12,248 people used Turning Point's alcohol treatment services and nearly half (5,326) were parents. The average alcohol consumption of the parents we support was 30 units per day, 24 for mothers and 33 for

fathers. This is the equivalent of 15 glasses or three bottles of wine or up to 15 pints of beer.

This is well in excess (nearly ten times) of the limits recommended by the Department of Health. The recommended 'safe' daily limit for women is three units and no more than four for men.

A total of 3,395 children lived with Turning Point service users, and these children included their own and extended family members such as cousins or nephews. This highlights the issue that children at

risk include those who are part of the extended family.

According to our survey of 100 parents who access Turning Point's alcohol treatment services, 83% worried their drinking had impacted on their children.

Children of parents who drink heavily often feel confused about their role within the family, are isolated from their relatives or other family members and are seriously affected by family conflict, domestic violence, parental separation and divorce. They often miss out on key aspects of normal family life, such as birthday celebrations or family outings.

Many children say they find it difficult to make friends and are less likely to talk to friends about their problems. The family may also be affected by financial worries. Where

“ *Our lives were a mess. This woman called Suzan came along and helped us a lot. She helped mum and dad to improve in their drinking and bullying and to stop the loud music. She supported us all and helped dad to let out steam and talk to people. But she also got me and my brother this special person to take us out of class to talk to let out steam. (sic)*

**Allie\*, 11, child**





*I had a sticky divorce then was diagnosed with breast cancer- I went under. I hit the bottle and was drinking myself into oblivion. It's a forbidden thing for a mum to be like that. My son, he decided he was going to turn himself into a parent. My teenage daughter got through her exams but now she's suffering panic attacks and anxiety. She's been traumatised by the whole experience.*

**Sharon, 48, mother-of-three**



a significant amount of the family's finances are spent on alcohol, this often spirals seriously into rising debt, defaulting on the mortgage or rent, and fears about losing the family home. According to our research, 77% of parents accessing Turning Point's alcohol treatment services said their drinking had impacted on their finances.

### **Children's physical and mental health.**

A child's physical health can be affected by a mother drinking during pregnancy and through neglect in childhood. Mothers accounted for more than a third (1,925) of parents receiving alcohol treatment through Turning Point over the past year. In addition, 48 of the women who used our services were pregnant.

A key issue was that mothers

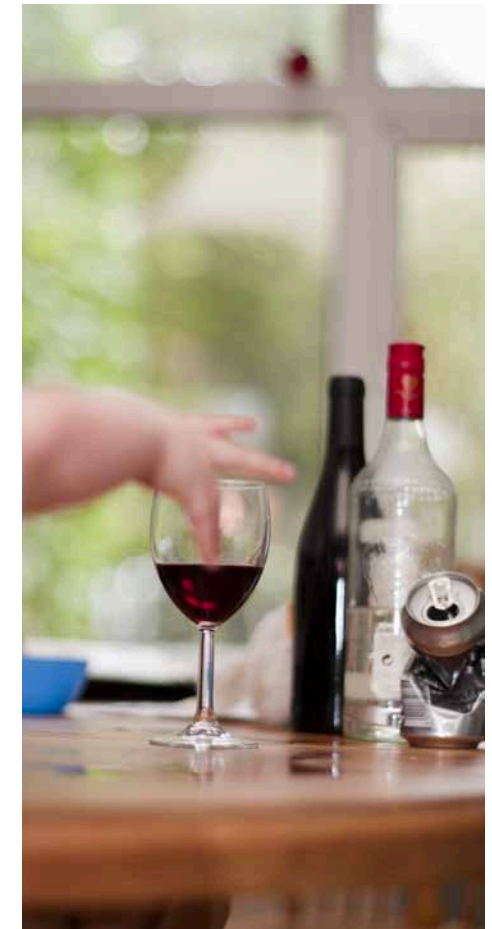
often felt under pressure to be 'perfect' and that alcohol was a way of coping with the demands of motherhood. Some said a lack of support from their partners was a trigger for their drinking. Others were drinking at least three nights a week and consuming more than 70 units - the equivalent of nearly eight bottles of wine. Their drinking was often in secret when their children had gone to bed.

We found that mothers often felt guilty of 'emotional' neglect towards

their children. Our staff found that mothers who have an alcohol problem also face far more stigma than fathers because society sees them as having the 'pivotal role' in caring for children.

Our staff reported that children's mental health can also be affected. Children sometimes end up developing eating disorders, depression and even psychosis in adulthood.

According to our survey of people



*My son was born with kidney failure and had to have a transplant. I love my children but I couldn't handle it and left him (his son) when he was three. I still have flashbacks to that day. My lovely daughter was there on the doorstep saying 'Don't go, don't go.' They were crying. They didn't deserve that. At my peak I was probably on 30 pints and a bottle of Scotch a day. There should be more counselling for the family. It (drinking) isn't a career move: I've lost good jobs. Alcohol breaks up families. It's cost me two marriages and I don't see the kids because I've hurt them so much.*

**Jake, 48, father-of-three**



accessing our alcohol services, over half of parents (55%) reported their children experienced high levels of stress and anxiety as a result of their drinking; 62% felt their children were concerned for the parent's safety, welfare and health. Such anxiety can include a preoccupation their parents might be harmed and worrying about the family 'secret' being revealed.

Some children blamed themselves for their parents' drinking and for not keeping the family together. Children are often concerned that they might have to leave their mum or dad. 32% of the parents we surveyed, thought that their child ended up taking on the role of carer.

### **Children's behaviour**

Children are affected by the unpredictable behaviour of their parents. More than a quarter of parents (27%) felt their drinking increased the risk of their children developing anti-social behaviour.

For some children, their reaction to their parents' drinking had led to them being caught up in the criminal justice system at an

early age. For others, violence and aggression is learned behaviour arising from living in a disruptive household where arguments and parental conflict are common.

Our staff found that these children



were more likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol at an earlier age, and more likely to progress to problematic use. For 28% of the parents we surveyed, their drinking

meant their children often either missed school or found it difficult to concentrate at school, and had poor experiences and low aspirations to succeed. Professionals may often assume that these children have

a high level of understanding of alcohol misuse, but in fact many children need more education on this issue.

Parental alcohol misuse can impact

negatively on a child's development and wellbeing, but children often also show significant levels of resilience. Many become more determined to build a positive future for themselves as a result of their negative experience.

### **A parent's ability to fulfil their role**

52% of parents we spoke to said they were unable to provide their children with adequate care and support because of their drinking. 47% said their focus was on alcohol at the expense of parenting. A total of 45% of the parents we surveyed said their alcohol misuse had led them to spend significant amounts of time away from their children.

Children can find themselves taken into care or looked after by relatives during this time. In Turning Point's alcohol services, 34% of the adults we surveyed have had their children taken away from them because of their drinking. Our staff found that women in particular fear their children will be taken into care, and this is a barrier to them seeking help.

Children may see any separation



as a punishment. They may also assume parental responsibility in the household, including carrying out household chores, caring for younger siblings and caring for the parents themselves. This puts an additional strain on children, affects their achievement at school and impacts on their ability to make friends.

Some parents may try to blame their children. 26% of those we surveyed said that at some point they have seen their children as the reason why they've needed to drink. Some focus on them as their reason to change. 43% of the parents we surveyed have been dealing with their alcohol problem because they want to give their children a better life.

### **What stops children and parents getting help?**

- The shortage of services. The number of services has increased but the level of provision remains inadequate. Services are often not available or are temporary.
- Services are usually not working together. Staff in adult services often feel ill-equipped to meet the needs of children of misusing parents. In children's services, many staff lack the knowledge, skills and confidence to address parents' alcohol problems, even when they affect children. Very few professionals are confident about addressing the needs of both children and parents.
- Parents are often reluctant to ask for help because of a fear of losing their children and being seen as a 'bad parent'; the stigma attached to alcohol misuse; a lack of information on what services are available; and underestimating the impact of their problem.

## KEY FACTS AND FIGURES

■ Children who see their parents drunk are twice as likely to get drunk themselves. (Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation MORI poll, 2011)

■ The number of hospital admissions related to alcohol reached 1.06 million in 2009-10 compared with 510,800 in 2002-03. (Source: The NHS Information Centre, 2011)

■ In 2009/2010, 30% or around 33,000 adults who were undergoing treatment also had parental responsibility. (Source: National Alcohol Treatment Monitoring Service, 2011)

■ Alcohol causes 8,664 deaths each year in the UK. This figure excludes cases where alcohol was an indirect cause of death. (Source: Office for National Statistics, 2009)

■ Alcohol or other parental substance misuse is evident in 57% of child protection cases involving either serious or fatal child abuse. (Source: Department for Children Schools and Families, 2008)

■ There are approximately 1.6 million people in England and Wales who are dependent on alcohol. That means they drink every day and struggle to control their drinking. (Source: Department of Health, 2010)

■ Offenders were under the influence of alcohol in 37% (more than 360,000) of all domestic violence cases. (Source: Home Office: British Crime Survey, 2009/10)

■ Up to 2.6 million children are living with parents who are drinking hazardously. 705,000 are living with dependent drinkers and 3.3 to 3.5m (30% of under 16s) are living with at least one binge drinking parent. (Source: Journal of Public Health, Victoria Manning et al, 2009)

## **BOTTLING IT UP: THE WAY FORWARD**

We know that provision of services for families affected by alcohol misuse is patchy. This needs to change. The key also lies in replicating services that have already proved effective.

### **Approaches that Turning Point has found successful include:**

#### **Family-focused substance misuse services**

There has already been a shift towards refocusing adult services so they address the needs of the whole family. For example, where funding is available, Turning Point's substance misuse services are able to arrange activity holidays for parents and their children. This has proved effective in helping parents and children rebuild their relationships and overcome their challenges.

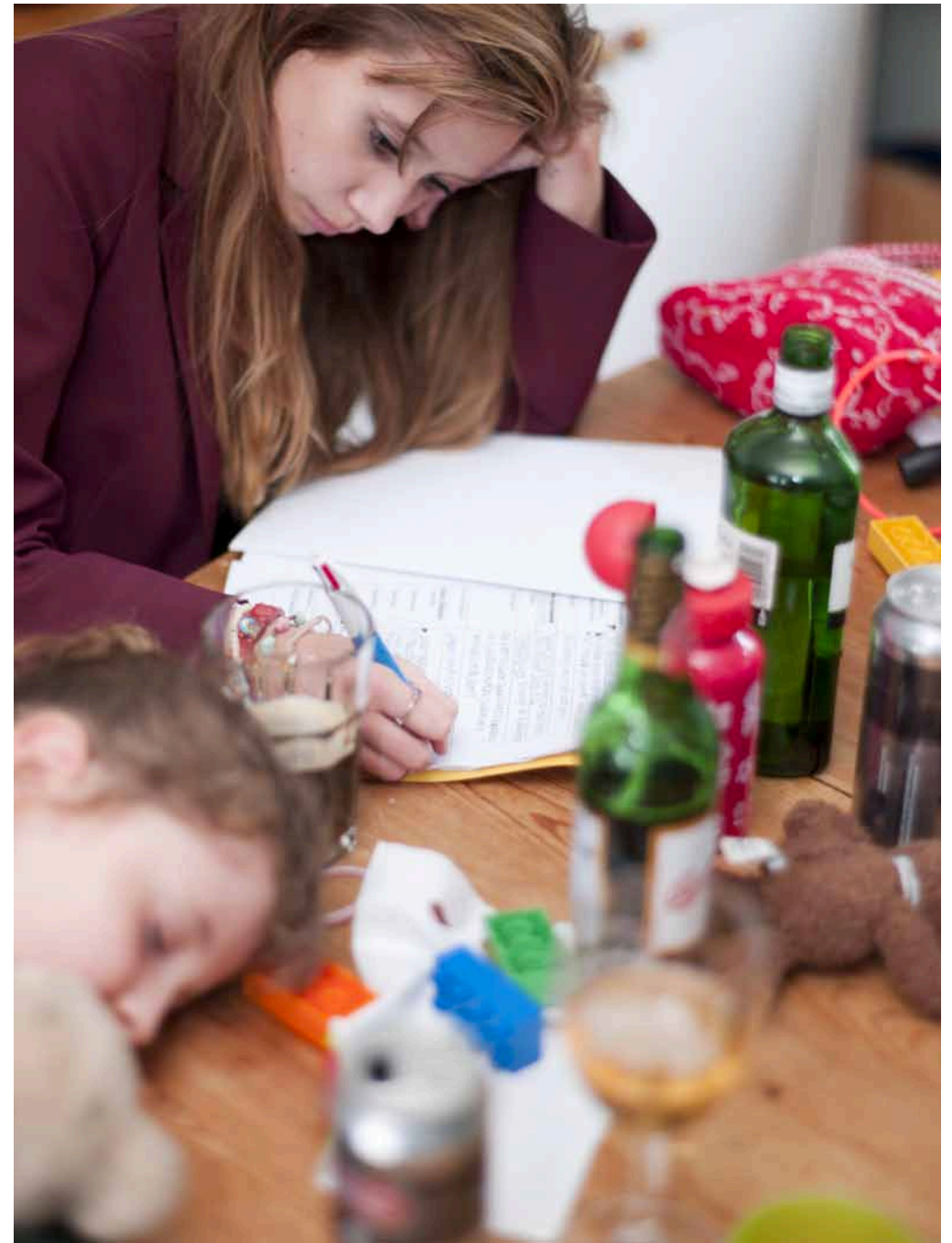
#### **Partnership working**

In Oldham, Turning Point works collaboratively with Action for Children's Anti-social Behaviour Family Intervention Project. The

families who attend the service have a range of complex needs and a Turning Point worker is employed to provide specific support for substance misuse. It is supported by Oldham's Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) and this joint working ensures families' whole needs are met.

#### **Home-based services for families**

Turning Point's Substance Using Family Support Services (SUFSS) in Tameside works with families affected by parental substance misuse. Mostly delivered within the family home, the service supports people to develop appropriate parenting skills, engage with substance misuse treatment services, maintain suitable housing and ensure children's well-being is safeguarded. The service is unique because it is jointly commissioned to work across children and adult services. This means that professionals are able to identify better each family's needs and risks, reducing the likelihood of issues within the family home escalating and harm being caused.



## What must be done for children, parents and families?

- More information directed at parents and children on the effects of problem drinking on families, and where to go for help.
- Screening and early identification of families who need support to prevent a new generation of children at risk.
- Support that addresses parenting difficulties including individual or group counselling and practical help in maintaining a home, establishing routine and boundaries, and developing support networks.
- Joined-up support that encourages discussion and problem solving within families, and includes diversionary activities and family therapy.
- Residential treatment and rehabilitation services which enable children to stay with parents in a supportive environment.

### Our recommendations:

- A cross-government strategy to tackle the impact of parental alcohol

use on children and families, backed up by sufficient resources.

- The needs of children of alcohol misusers to be prioritised as a specific group within the wider children's agenda.
- Prevention and early intervention support, including the extension of antenatal services.
- The Government and the Welsh Assembly to place a duty on local authorities to develop local strategies on alcohol-misusing parents and invest more heavily in specific services. This includes help in establishing routines to run a home.
- More information should be made available to help children of alcohol dependent parents.
- More research into the number of children affected and to inform the development of services to help these children and troubled families.

### The report also contains a number of recommendations for services:

- Integration of family and parenting specialists into existing

treatment services where resources are scarce.

- Adult services should ensure they have specific provision to support parents.
- Adult services should ensure they assess the potential impact of alcohol on clients' children. Children's services should have clear protocols to support the early identification of alcohol-misusing parents and their children.

- All professionals working with adult alcohol misusers should be trained in supporting people to develop parenting skills and supporting children living with parents that misuse alcohol.
- Parents and children must have a say in the planning and commissioning of services.
- Better liaison needed between adult and child services, and between different providers.

## CONCLUSION

**This report must act as the process for change. We need to understand the true scale of the problem. We need more services to meet the needs of parents to prevent a new generation of children at risk of poor mental health, drug and alcohol addictions, truancy and worse. We need better information for children, parents and services so that they can provide more support. There are far too many children affected by their parents' use of alcohol in this country. We cannot let them down. We cannot allow the voices of these families to remain unheard and forgotten.**

**For more information:**

**Turning Point**  
Standon House  
21 Mansell Street  
London  
E1 8AA

**Tel:** 020 7481 7600

**Email:** [info@turning-point.co.uk](mailto:info@turning-point.co.uk)

**[www.turning-point.co.uk](http://www.turning-point.co.uk)**



**Turning Point is a leading health and social care organisation. We provide services for people with complex needs, including those affected by drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems and those with a learning disability.**

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Registered office: Standon House, 21 Mansell Street, London E1 8AA