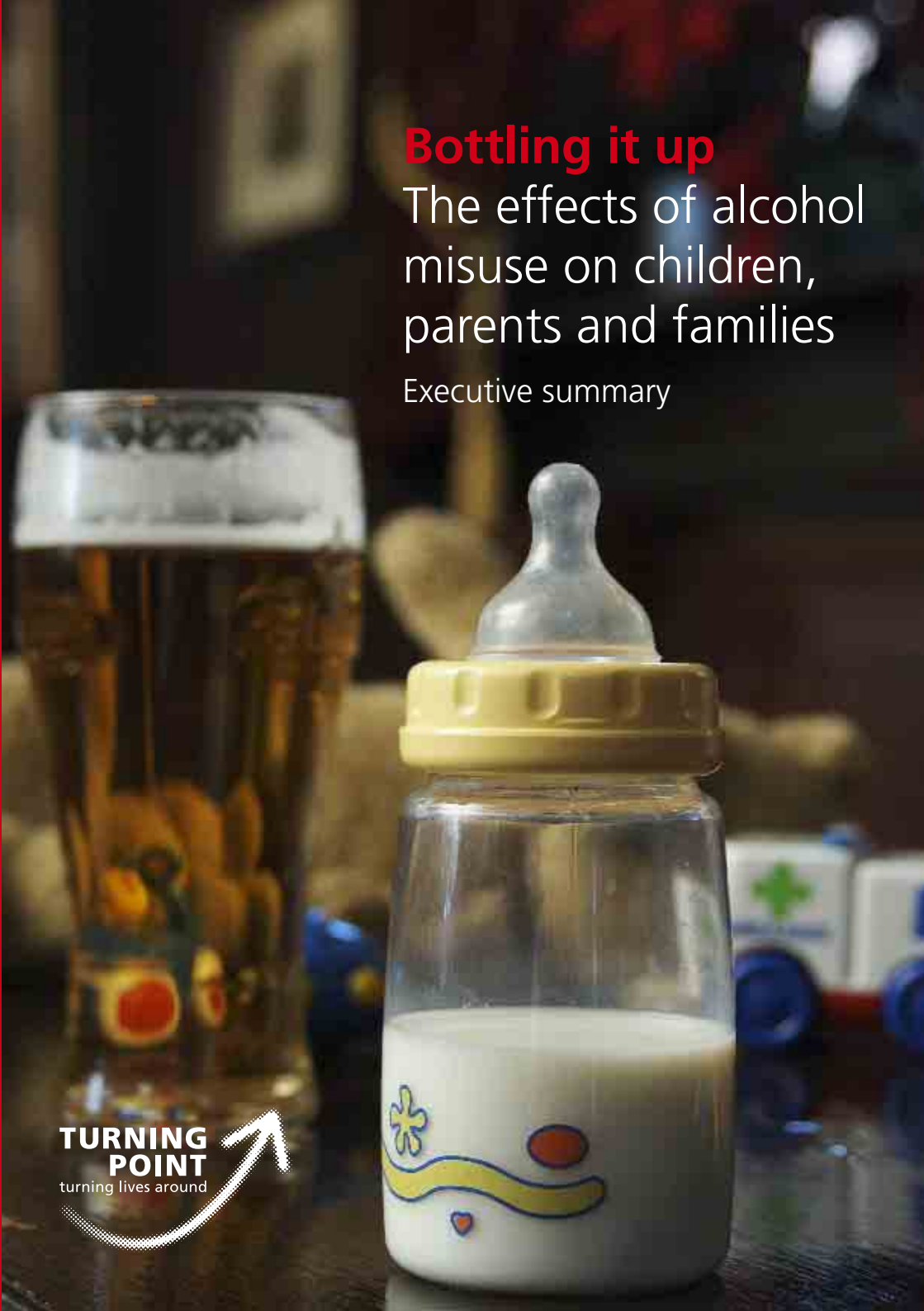


## **Bottling it up**

The effects of alcohol misuse on children, parents and families

Executive summary

**TURNING  
POINT**  
turning lives around



“While I was drinking they (the children) were frightened, really frightened, and I thought I was on my own. The help just wasn’t there, and when I was asking for it, for help, it wasn’t coming together – there was something missing out of the jigsaw, not everybody was helping me at the same time.”

**Lorna – parent**

“I didn’t really get anywhere at school, I missed loads ‘cause they (parents) didn’t bother telling me to go and then when I did go, I’d be worrying what was happening at home. When it came to exams, I never did any revision, you couldn’t in our house, there was always something going on. I remember one exam, I’d been up ‘til four in the morning ‘cause the police were round and then they were fighting. It’s no wonder I’m thick now.”

**Fiona, 17**

**There are up to 1.3 million or one in eleven children in the UK living with parents who misuse alcohol. Despite the fact that so many children are affected, it remains a hidden problem. Neglected by successive governments, services for children and families affected by alcohol misuse have not been widely developed. Alcohol misuse is frequently a family secret that remains undisclosed, and children’s voices, all too often, go unheard.**

**Turning Point is campaigning to make sure that policymakers listen to the voices of children affected by alcohol misuse. This document outlines the background to this campaign.**

## **Key findings**

The *Bottling it Up* report analyses the views and perspectives of parents and of children aged 12–18 in Turning Point services, told to us in a series of interviews and focus groups. The research found that parental alcohol misuse has a massive impact on the following areas.

### **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. Their mental health can also be affected. Children described themselves as feeling angry, frustrated and depressed. They experienced high levels of stress and anxiety from a range of sources including a preoccupation that some harm was going to happen to their parents; worrying about the family ‘secret’ being revealed; concerns that they might have to leave their mum

or dad; and the pressure of having to maintain the functioning of the household. Some children blamed themselves for their parents' drinking and for not keeping the family together.

### Children's behaviour

Children are affected by the unpredictable behaviour of their parents. For some, 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. The children interviewed were more likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol at an earlier age, and more likely to progress to problematic use. 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. In some cases parental alcohol misuse led to children developing a strong determination to build a positive future for themselves.

### The family as a whole

Children felt confused about their role within the family, were isolated from their relatives or other family members and were seriously affected by family conflict, domestic violence, parental separation and divorce. They often missed out on key aspects of normal family life, such as birthday celebrations or family outings. Many children said they found it difficult to make friends and were less likely to talk to friends about their problems. The family may also be affected by financial worries. Where 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.

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

Parents are often unable to provide their children with adequate care and support. Alcohol misuse can lead them to spend significant amounts of time away from their children, when drinking or recovering from a binge-drinking episode, or when attending treatment. Children can find themselves taken into care or looked after by relatives during this time. They may see this 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 or focus on them as their reason to change. These polarised and changing views can put additional pressure on children.

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

- The shortage of services. There are only 59 projects or initiatives in the UK aimed at supporting children and families affected by alcohol misuse. Whilst the number of services has increased, the level of provision remains inadequate. Services are often not available or are short lived.
- Services are 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; 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:**

- Up to 1.3 million children in the UK are affected by parental alcohol problems.
- Five times as many children could be affected by parental alcohol problems as by parental drug misuse.
- There are approximately 3.8 million people in England and Wales who are dependent on alcohol.
- Alcohol causes up to 22,000 deaths each year and 1,000 suicides.
- Around one third (360,000) of all domestic violence incidents are linked to alcohol misuse.
- Alcohol misuse by parents was identified as a factor in over 50 per cent of child protection cases.
- Marriages are twice as likely to end in divorce where there are alcohol problems.
- Between 2 and 30 per cent of women drinking more than 56 units of alcohol per week may have babies with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. This equates to between 240 and 1,190 such cases per year in the UK.

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

It is clear that there is currently not enough support for families affected by alcohol misuse. There needs to be specific provision for parents with alcohol problems, separate services for children, and services that bring both parents and children together. There is specific need for:

- More information directed at children, 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.
- Prevention and early intervention support, including the extension of antenatal services.
- 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.
- Dedicated services for children that provide a wide range of therapeutic, emotional and practical support, including individual and group counselling, helping children to develop coping strategies, providing opportunities to engage in social activities, and support to improve school attendance.

- 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.

## **Recommendations**

### **Turning Point is calling for:**

- The Government to hold a national inquiry into the needs of children whose parents misuse alcohol.
- A cross-government strategy to tackle the impact of parental alcohol use on children and families, backed up by the resources needed.
- Closer links between the Respect agenda and treatment, with government providing support for alcohol-misusing parents in bringing up their children and ensuring that children do not take up inappropriate caring roles in their families.
- Policy and practice guidance from the Department of Health, Home Office and Department for Education and Skills (and Welsh Assembly) for working with children and families affected by problem alcohol misuse.
- The needs of children of alcohol misusers to be prioritised as a specific group within the wider children's agenda.
- 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.
- More research into the number of children affected and to inform the development of services to help these children.

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

- Adult and children's services should be reorganised to provide a coordinated approach to meeting the needs of the whole family.
- All areas should ensure the availability of specialist services for children affected by parental alcohol misuse. Adult services should ensure they have specific provision to support parents.
- 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.
- Specialist services should have clear child protection procedures relating to this group.
- 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.
- Agencies should ensure that children can directly influence the planning and commissioning of services.
- There should be further pilots of respite and family residential services.

## Conclusion

This report must act as the process for change. We need to understand the true scale of the problem. We need new separate services that meet the needs of children and parents, and can rebuild families. We need better information for children and parents and for all services so that they can provide more support. We need a national debate about this issue and a national inquiry to develop some solutions. There are potentially over a million children affected by their parents' use of alcohol. We cannot let them down. We cannot allow the voices of these families to remain unheard and forgotten.

- i. Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (2004), *Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England* (Cabinet Office).
- ii. Turning Point (2003), *Waiting for Change*, based on Coulthard, M. et al. (2002), *Tobacco, Alcohol and Drug Use and Mental Health*. Report Based on the Analysis of the ONS Survey of Psychiatric Morbidity Among Adults in Great Britain (London: The Stationery Office).
- iii. (2004) AHRSE.
- iv. Department of Health, (2004), *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services*.
- v. Alcohol Concern (2003), *Children of Problem Drinking Parents*.
- vi. (2004) AHRSE.
- vii. Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (2003), *AHRSE Interim Analytical Report* (Cabinet Office).

We turn lives around every day, by putting the individual at the heart of what we do. Inspired by those we work with, together we help people build a better life.

Turning Point is the UK's leading 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.

Turning Point sees 20,000 young people through its services each year. We have over 20 services specifically aimed at working with young people throughout the country, including specific services for children affected by parental misuse of drugs or alcohol. Turning Point also delivers a range of adult services accessed by alcohol misusing parents.

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To keep up to date with the progress of this campaign please visit

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