



## CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS MARCH 2001

All too often alcoholism and other addictive problems become a family legacy. More than 50% of today's alcoholics are the children of alcoholics. Children need to be spared from unnecessary years of silence, shame, and suffering. People in schools can and do make a difference in these children's lives.

In an alcoholic or drug abusing home there is denial, delusion and adherence to a strict "no-talk" rule. Children often don't understand what is happening in their families and some believe it's their fault. The predominant feeling for many of these children is not sadness, anger or hurt; rather they feel overwhelming confusion. COAs (children of alcoholics) and COSAs (children of substance abusers) need accurate, age-appropriate information about alcohol, other drugs, and the disease of alcoholism and drug addiction.

Important messages for COAs and COSAs to hear include:

- o Alcoholism and drug addiction are sicknesses.
- o You can't make it better.
- o You deserve help for yourself.
- o You are not alone.
- o There are people and places that can help.
- o There is hope.

COAs and COSAs are at greater risk for many behavioral and emotional problems. Children faced with family violence, neglect, and other problems can learn a variety of coping and self-care strategies to stay safe. Children whose feelings build up inside until they are ready to explode or have frequent headaches and stomachaches can learn how to identify and express their feelings in healthy ways to safe people they can trust. Youngsters who lack confidence and self-esteem can learn to love and respect themselves through experiences where they have opportunities to succeed and thrive.

The development of resiliency and protective factors are key components in helping COAs and COSAs. Some traits these children can develop to deepen their strengths and resilience are:

- o Develop a strong social orientation and social skills.
- o Engage in acts of required helpfulness.
- o Develop coping strategies for day-to-day, unusual, and emotionally hazardous experiences they may face.
- o Perceive their experiences constructively, even if those experiences cause pain or suffering, and gain other people's positive attention.
- o Develop a close bond to maintain a positive vision of life.

Many prevention/early intervention programs (such as SCIP support groups) help youngsters to develop these tools and skills. Even if they go back to families with active addiction, COAs and COSAs who are assisted in these ways are better prepared to handle the various problems they may encounter.

One of the most important gifts children can receive is the bonding and attachment they attain in healthy relationships with others. Through the often-heard threats of abuse, broken promises and harsh words, children in many alcoholic families learn the "don't trust" philosophy too well. Silence and isolation become constant companions. Resilient COAs and COSAs often have a nurturing adult in their lives.

Building trust is a process that takes time. Simply caring about a child is all that it takes to start. Listening, regular time together, playing with, validating, respecting and empowering a youngster will build that positive connection.

(Source: The Anti-Drug, "To Walk with One Child" by Jerry Moe)

