The importance of family to health, development and welfare of children.

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ABSTRACT

Objectives. Recent investigations have shown that a number of families in Greenland have problems related to parents’ use of alcohol. One of the consequences is that children get more difficult conditions during childhood. Children suffer when their parents have alcohol-related problems. An alcoholic parent is generally not able to meet the needs of his or her child. Many children are very lonely and do not discuss their thoughts, their situation or their problems with anyone. Some children get serious psycho-social problems as grown-ups.

Results and conclusions. Professionals who work with children in health services, social services or within the school system are generally not adequately aware of the importance of family to the children’s reactions. This means that the children are at risk of being treated only for symptoms when the unity of child and family is not adequately taken into account. Prevention has to focus on the first steps. Children must be allowed to talk about their problems. The whole family should be included in the treatment.

Keywords: parental alcohol disorder, children of alcoholics, children at risk.

This presentation focuses on the children of alcoholics. The main purpose is to focus attention on the often forgotten fact that children suffer when their parents have alcohol problems. The presentation is based on Danish research on the children of alcoholics as well as on research on alcohol problems in Greenland and on Greenlanders with mental disorders.

A number of families in Greenland have problems related to parents’ use of alcohol (1), and a number of children have problems because of poor home conditions. What is not so often recognised are the correlations between the different problems. Some Greenland studies have focused on the children’s own drinking behaviour and have found a strong association between family structure and children’s difficulties to talk especially with their fathers (2). Others have focused on children placed outside the home as one example of children in need (3).

Living with an alcoholic parent

International research has shown serious consequences for the development of children of alcoholics (4). Co-instantaneous research has shown that the problems of the children are often invisible in the treatment (5-7).

Living with an alcoholic parent means a life that is in many aspects different from what most children experience. Instead of having a parent who takes care of the child and of the child’s development, the child may have a parent who expects the child to take care of the parent’s well-being in the sense of being attentive (and responsive) to the parent’s feelings, and acting to respond to the parents emotional needs (8).

Children of alcoholics may also suffer from physical neglect (9-11). The children may not get enough food (they may get irregular meals or insufficient food), they may be poorly dressed, they may lack appropriate medical care, or they
may live their lives without proper supervision from their parents.

Children who suffer from this kind of neglect often live in families where the parents have economical and social problems, but they may also live in families where alcohol is the main problem and social or economical problems do not exist.

**Common aspects of living with an alcoholic parent**

A common aspect of living with an alcoholic parent is the aspect of keeping the abuse a secret. The children support the parents in concealment by concealing their own knowledge of the abuse from the parents. As long as the children do not tell they know about the abuse, the parents may stick to their belief of the children not knowing (e.g. "because I only drink when the children are in bed").

One example of this is a seven-year-old boy who lives alone with his mother. The boy tells in an interview (12) how he has tried to conceal his mother's abuse. He tells how he only failed once. He describes this one time when he became very scared as he found his mother on the bed in a drunken coma, so he contacted the neighbour to get help. The neighbour got in touch with the social welfare authorities and with their assistance the mother was given medical help - and the boy was placed in a foster home for a short period of time. The mother was unhappy, ashamed and furious about what had happened. The boy concludes in the interview that it would have been better if he had managed to keep the abuse of alcohol a secret.

Another common aspect is a situation of living under a great amount of stress. Some children may have a general feeling of stress, due to practical reasons, because in some families the child has to shoulder the usual household responsibilities of the parent, and take care of younger siblings in particular.

Other stressors are more in the nature of emotional stress. The children are afraid the parent may die and thus leave the child alone. Or the children are afraid that their parent does not love them and that the alcohol abuse may be a reaction to having a "naughty" child (so they may tell when interviewed), thus the child feels guilty (13). Such feelings are often accompanied by feelings of loneliness.

Complementary to this emotional stress is the children’s feeling of responsibility in their daily lives. The children feel that they must help their parents. Even small children may explain that they have several actions they perform in order to make their parents quit drinking.

Older children may ask the parents not to drink. This wish may be seen not only as a manifestation of responsibility and care for their parent. It also includes a growing element of anger, powerlessness and grief, and involves a wish for the children themselves to be relieved of the responsibility they feel for trying to make their parents quit drinking.

In this way children are involved when their parents have alcohol-related problems, and if they are asked they can tell about it.

**A different life – a different person**

These experiences of a different daily life may also lead to a feeling of being different as a person. This reaction is important to observe. The children transform their understanding of the differences in the way the family lives to an inner feeling of being different as a person. The child may feel that she or he is so different from other people that it is safest to conceal the feeling. Children explain that they are afraid to be turned down as possible friends if other people get to know them well; "if they really knew me, they would not like me". Even as grown-ups they may have this feeling (13).

For children and young adults this is a heavy burden that makes them experience life as more difficult, more dangerous and more unpredictable than it could have been. As grown-ups it puts them at risk of developing lower self-esteem, more feelings of depression and more feelings of living in a world filled with enemies than what is commonly experienced by their
peers; a feeling that also puts them at risk of being socially marginalised or excluded even they do not have problems with alcohol. The Greenland Health Profile Study found that those children who had experienced frequent alcohol problems in their childhood home had a five-fold risk of serious suicidal thoughts compared to those without alcohol problems in their childhood home (1). A study of mental health among primary health care patients in Greenland found an even higher risk of mental disorder as a grown-up for those growing up with alcohol problems compared to those without such problems (14). In a cohort of first-time hospitalised psychiatric patients, the patients with personality disorders had significantly more often grown up with alcohol problems and lack of care than patients with other diagnoses (15). It seems evident that children of parents with alcohol-related problems experience a higher risk for different personality disorders as adults.

CONCLUSION
This leads to the conclusion that in the treatment of parents with alcohol-related problems it is very important to be aware of the fact that concealment, stress and too much responsibility may cause the children to feel that they are different from others, which may lead to development of serious mental problems.

Prevention has to focus on the first steps. This means that the children are allowed to talk about their problems. The preliminary condition is that grown-ups ask and dare to listen to them. As a consequence, adult patients must always be asked whether they have children, the focus must be on the life situation of the children, the children must be asked about their situation and their feelings, and solutions must be found to all the problems in the family. It is important that the children get to know that they are not the only troubled children, and in spite of living in a different life situation they are ordinary people who can be met and understood by other people.

Being together in a situation where the child has no responsibilities for other people may also reduce stress. An example of this are the Places to Be (Væresteder) found in some cities and villages in Greenland, where children and young people can meet when school is over for the day under supervision of competent grown-ups.

Finally, the children’s responsibilities will diminish if their parents are treated well and if the whole family is included in the treatment.

A childhood with one or two alcoholic parents puts the child at risk of facing more problems during childhood and adulthood than most children, but it does not determine the child’s future. Some children may manage well despite having had a very hard childhood (16) - you can never know the outcome in advance. But a childhood with one or two alcoholic parents is a burden for all children, and positive reactions and good treatment create better possibilities for further development and growth.

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