

Manitoba Addictions Awareness Week

Talking with Children about Addiction in the Family

Not talking about problems, especially "THE PROBLEM" is a very common behaviour in families with addictions.

Not telling children is often initially motivated by love and protectiveness but can get knotted up together with fear. Trying to protect child from information is misguided as children know when something is wrong. Giving it a name helps them understand what is happening in their lives and why.

Expected benefits

Talking about the addiction in the family and how you are working to change are important steps to building your relationship with your children.

When you deny the problem you isolate from your child. Acknowledging that one parent is struggling with addiction gives children hope and a sense of security. Children feel more secure when they have the knowledge that at least one of their parents is healthy, unafraid and can see their reality.

Sharing feelings is an important step toward developing emotional health. When you encourage your children to identify and talk about their feelings about difficult topics like a parent's addiction, you're helping them to understand that these feelings are normal.

Children and stress

Reach out to your children whether or not they ever ask any questions, whether they seem fine or are acting out their stress. It's hard to imagine a child growing up or visiting in a home with addiction and not being affected. Let's dispel the myth that some children don't need to know.

Some children react to stress by holding feelings inside while others will act out what they cannot express. Children that hold feelings in may try very hard to be good, working extra hard in school and making few demands on adults. This child may be a worrier, have low self-esteem, or be fearful, shy, or prone to cry easily. Physical symptoms like stomachaches, headaches or frequent illnesses are common in children who internalize stress. Children that act feelings out may lose their tempers easily, become demanding or destructive, or may tease or bully other children.

FINDING THE BALANCE ...

Sometimes parents are walking a tightrope between secrecy and openness where children are concerned. They need to weigh how much or how little information is healthy to share.

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What's too little information?

Consider which information is toxic to the parent/child relationship and needs to be shared. Anything that the child could interpret as an adult not caring for them should be given a reasonable explanation that clarifies the adult's feelings for the child.

Growing children who are struggling to make sense of confounding messages from their parents pay a big price as more and more of their energy and attention gets drawn into responding to mystery. When a mother or father shows intense but unexplained emotion, works hard to hide what she/he is feeling, or unaccountably withdraws, children experience distress. They may become detectives, create elaborate fantasies, blame themselves, or develop painful symptoms.

What's too much information?

Children can be informed that some matters are being worked out between adults (counselling, meetings). Children watch us carefully and when they see us taking care of business they return to their own lives. They do not need to know the adult content of these matters just that the adult is attending to their own needs. Any information that is shared should reflect healthy parent child boundaries and always take each child's age into consideration.

What to expect

Talking about addiction and recovery will be a process not an event. Children do not hear the way adults do. It may seem as if information did not matter but every child takes in new and potentially loaded information in his or her own unique way. It doesn't mean a child did not take it in or was not effected by information if they run off to play or don't ask any questions. Questions often come later unconnected to the initial telling

The doing...

Don't overwhelm children with everything you want them to know all at once. Be prepared to initiate revisiting the topic from time to time. They have learned not to talk about it so need modeling and encouragement to break old patterns.

Assess what they are ready to hear, what they need to know and how to best communicate with each child in language appropriate to their age.

Your children still love your spouse, even though they don't like his or her addictive behaviour. Help them to understand that this is okay. It's possible to love someone very much even though the way they are behaving makes you feel sad and disappointed.