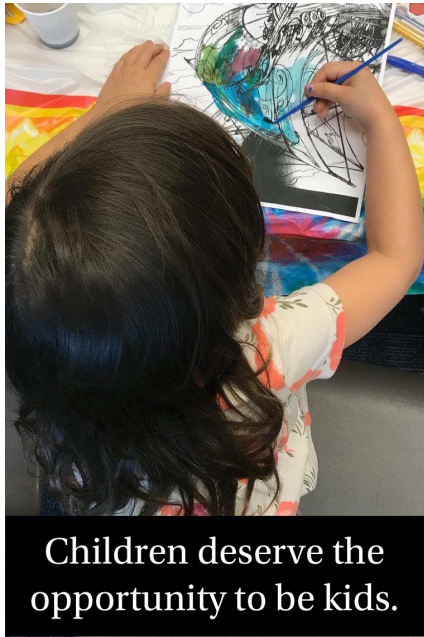


Recovery For Kids Means Making Fun an Intentional Part of a Child's Day.

Lauren Rencher, Riley Foundation's Program Director and mother in recovery.



Children deserve the opportunity to be kids.

1. Fun: Fun is the foundation of our workshop program and an integral part of our organization's mission.

For children from homes with addiction issues, making time for them to "just be kids" is one of the most therapeutic things you can do. Although all the objectives within the Seven C's Workshop series are worthwhile, our number one priority when working with kids is creating opportunities to have fun. Plain old fun. We hope caregivers consider the essential role play has for children who have a loved one with addiction issues. While other things are important too, including rules, routine and discipline, play should remain the highest of priority for these kiddos as well.

Why is fun so important? Because growing up around addiction is HARD.

The presence of any serious illness in the home, including addiction, will diminish the sense of fun, playfulness and curiosity in the home. A negative effect of parental substance misuse that is universally reported by adult children of addiction is a decrease in childhood joy.

Chronic medical issues create emotional, mental and financial hardships that take a toll on every member of the family. The insidiousness of addiction is how manipulative the disorder is. To a devastating degree, substance misuse hijacks the limbic system and creates multiple barriers to help, such as denial and shame. A brain that is clouded by addiction will struggle to recognize that there's a problem, even in cases where life has become very unmanageable. This low insight caused by addiction also impacts a parent's ability to see the effect the illness has on their environment and loved ones. When it comes to children in particular, there's a remarkable tendency for adults to minimize the adverse role addiction has had on their children's lives.



For parents and other caregivers, it's helpful to let go of the idea that a family needs to reach a "rock bottom" before a child is impacted by a parent's substance use.

Little ones are like sponges, soaking up everything that's going on around them. Even when a kid is "in their own world," they remain astute observers, having an exceptional ability to sense their surroundings, including dysfunction. No matter how acute or chronic the substance misuse is, kids can feel that something is off in their family. Where children are lacking, is in the ability to process the nuances of addiction accurately. They don't have the maturity or communication skills needed to make sense of the, sometimes overt but often subtle, things they are experiencing. It requires the help of an adult to adaptively navigate being the child of an addicted parent. Without a caring adult to lead the way, a child is left to their own devices to fill in the blanks. Unfortunately, kids tend to blame themselves for the problems in their home, leading to negative effects in the moment that can also extend throughout their lifespan. In the present, it diverts their imagination from childhood endeavors like make believe and curiosity, to worrying about their role in their parent's problems (¹ Helping kids handle worry). Adult children of addiction report profound grief surrounding the loss of their childhood to the disease that forced them, in many ways, to "grow up" prematurely. In this sense it's helpful to err on the side of caution, assuming that any child that has a parent who struggles with addiction could use a reprieve from their problems with an increase in daily playfulness.



¹ "Helping Kids Handle Worry (for Parents) - Nemours KidsHealth." <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/worrying.html>. Accessed 18 May, 2020.



As with other mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, addiction can present as “functional” to the outside world leaving the nonfunctional stuff for those at home.

In fact, substance misuse is often introduced as a futile means of managing ongoing depression and/or anxiety. In the short term substance use might feel like a successful way to deal with rough days. However, alcohol and drugs exacerbate underlying mental health problems, worsening those issues over time. Popular culture regularly references “taking the edge off” with alcohol, pills or weed as a reasonable, even humorous response to tough parenting day (SNL skit²). In reality, substances further cripple a parent's emotional capacity to tend to the limitless energy and needs of children. This contributes to more negative interactions between parent and child and fewer positive parent/child experiences day to day.³ By no means does a parent set out to have substance use issues or be emotionally absent as a caregiver. Rather, addiction is a slow creep. Parenting comes with unrealistic demands, and substance use can very easily feel like a reasonable coping option on hard days. For a caregiver existing in “survival mode” on the daily, substance use may even feel like it is making them a better parent. To a mom or dad that's weighing the options, being under the influence of alcohol or drugs can feel like the kinder option than a sober parent in crisis.

To outsiders, addiction can be easy to miss. It's like watching the ocean from shore. The view from a distance appears surrene, a keen eye is needed to see a riptide pulling occupants further and further from land. From a child's perspective, it's a very isolating type of turmoil to experience. Observers are misled to believe that things are all good, while the secret life at home feels bad and no one is

² "<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGyTXmKpVlw> - The"

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=94860702131&story_fbid=10156856360232132. Accessed 13 May. 2020.

³ "Helping Children Affected by Parental Substance Abuse"

<https://www.amazon.com/Helping-Children-Affected-Parental-Substance/dp/B01JXUJ2L0>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

allowed to acknowledge or talk about it. It's an atmosphere that slowly suffocates the cheer of childhood, replacing it with worry and anxious anticipation instead.

On the other hand, it's common for families to suffer immensely before any

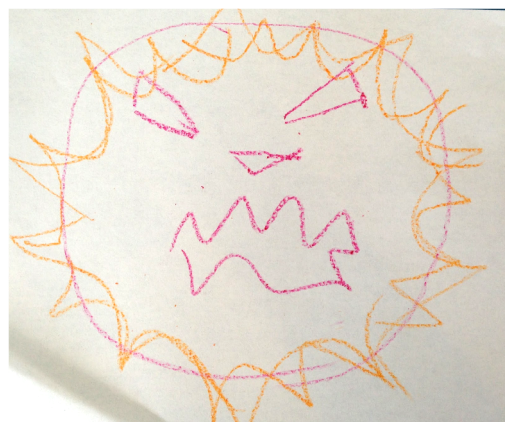
addiction interventions occur. This can include highly traumatic experiences such as police raids or arrest, incarceration, temporary or permanent child removal from the home, unsafe people and places, overdose and the alarming medical interventions to correct it, and in extreme cases the overdose death of a parent (4). For a child to withstand these type of adverse childhood experiences⁵ typically involves maladaptive coping mechanisms like numbing their emotions (both positive and difficult ones), walking on eggshells to prevent additional discord in the home, disappearing into the background to avoid unpredictable attention, doomed attempts at fixing their parent by being the "perfect" child, and more.



For lots of kids, fun isn't just nonexistent, in a way it's been "rewired" out of them. Consider the emotional consequence of experiencing brief moments of joy only to jolt back into random dysfunction. Maybe a parent goes from "buzzed" and acting silly, to intoxicated and scary. With an emotional climate that can change instantly, unguarded playfulness becomes less likely. Within these contexts it becomes easier to see why a child would not allow themselves to experience happiness. Because grieving finite delight is too painful.

A cruel twist for kids that have experienced blatant traumas, or even consistent minor transgressions due to substance problems in the home, is that they are more likely to have a difficult time controlling their emotions, behaviors and attitudes. Put simply, they become more taxing to parent day to day and more likely to seek and receive negative attention. These repercussions will extend to other areas in their lives like school, community and extended family.

These are the kids that will receive a removal of play as a consequence of their behaviors when a lack of play is a big part of the problem. Fun is a major way of regulating stress for kids. Removing or limiting their main coping tool will backfire on all parties involved. This does not mean ignoring behavior issues, rather, be mindful of tipping the scale to an



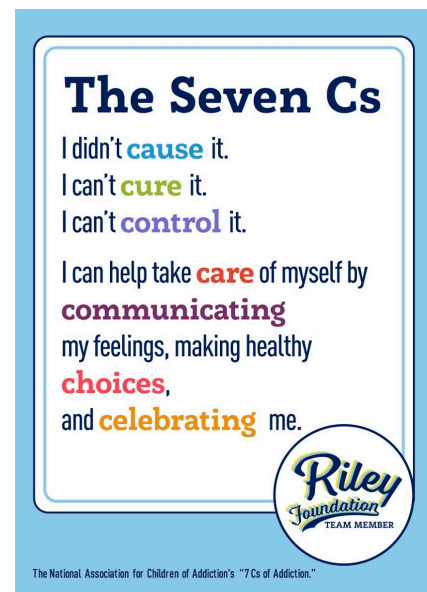
⁴ "Traumatic Experiences | Sesame Street in Communities" <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/traumatic-experiences/>. Accessed 14 May. 2020.

⁵ "Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) - CDC." <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/index.html>. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.

extreme. You might be surprised at the positive impact, especially active play has, on a child who struggles to behave, especially when they learn to count on it as a consistent part of their day, even the hard days.

When the road to recovery has started, there's often low insight regarding the impact addiction has had on the youngest members of the family. Even in recovery, there is a tendency for parents to overestimate how successful they were at shielding their child from the problem, significantly underestimating the adverse impact addiction has had instead. Just like the child who withdraws from potential joy because it's too painful, parents avoid acknowledging the probable toll their disease has taken on the people they love. Because to do so would hurt immensely ⁽⁶⁾.

A common sentiment in addiction treatment is that alcohol and drugs are merely a symptom of a bigger health issue underway. The child of an alcoholic will be exposed to the problem regardless of whether they witnessed alcohol consumption or not. It could be argued that the covert impact addiction has on kids is as distressing, if not more, than blatant drug seeking, use and inebriation. Addiction comes with unpredictable moods, a parent that goes "MIA" for moments, hours, or days at a time, chaotic schedules, broken promises, and time dedicated to nursing hangovers or coping with withdrawal. These are all destabilizing for a child to experience. Kids can readily put 2 and 2 together when a parent drinks and then starts acting out of sorts. It's a different kind of unease to sense that something is "off" but you can't quite put a finger on what makes your family life so "different." These are complex and confusing feelings to deal with at such a young age.



The Seven Cs

I didn't **cause** it.
I can't **cure** it.
I can't **control** it.

I can help take **care** of myself by **communicating** my feelings, making healthy **choices**, and **celebrating** me.

Riley Foundation
TEAM MEMBER

The National Association for Children of Addiction's "7 Cs of Addiction."



Lastly, and possibly the hardest part to digest, is that a parent's recovery comes at a cost for kids as well.

While ultimately beneficial, recovery is an arduous and time consuming process. Anyone that has transitioned from active addiction to active recovery recognizes how hard it is.

⁶ "Families in Recovery - Nacoa" <https://nacoa.org/families/family-recovery/>, Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.



It can take a number of years to consolidate all the new behaviors and lifestyle changes that make for stable sobriety. The stages of recovery require drastic change for the individual and their loved ones to adapt to.

Of course, a sober and healthy parent is the ultimate gift a child can receive. It's most definitely worth the challenges one will be required to overcome. However, it's essential to consider the price kids pay along the way. Children are bound to experience parental absences while considerable time is dedicated to recovery by attending support groups, seeking therapy and engaging in self care like exercise. Kids will also be exposed, by association, to some major life stressors common for parents in new sobriety such as tackling financial hardship, repairing damaged relationships and resolving legal problems. It can very much feel like "survival mode" for some time. With so many important things underway, making time for lighthearted fun can feel unavailable.

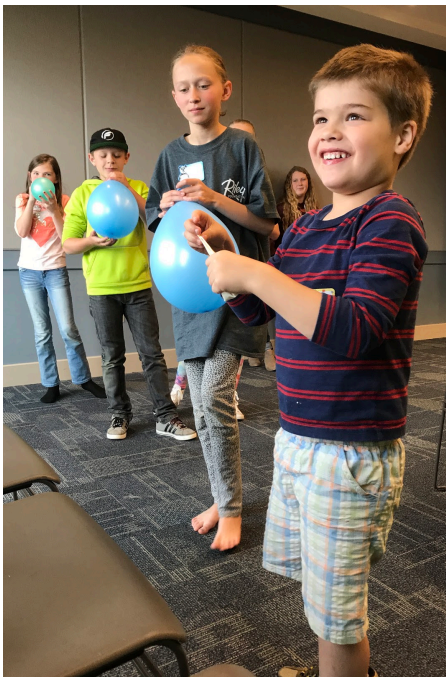
So what is the solution?

This is a difficult question to answer, but a good place to start is awareness, then action. By being aware and accepting that addiction AND recovery is hard on kids we open the door for healing. Now, this awareness isn't exclusive to the parent with the problem. Family and community members need to recognize that addressing addiction's effects requires as many outside supports as we can manage. Any caring adult can be a catalyst for positive change in a child's life. Whether small or significant, any action taken to help a kid access childhood is beneficial. The greatest thing is, you don't have to specifically identify if a child has a parent with addiction issues, as all kids prosper from understanding adult attention and care. Together we can do a lot to mitigate the adverse effects of addiction on children. Start by paying careful attention to the children you encounter, and you'll begin to notice opportunities to be of service.

We can do a lot to counter the adverse impact addiction has on kids. Any adult can advocate for a child, albeit to varying degrees, with intentional efforts to give them more “carefree” experiences that make childhood so fantastic. Access to fun, play, creativity, curiosity and silliness can significantly offset other moments in their lives that have been hindered by addiction. We hope you find the following suggestions helpful.

Suggestions

- Make time for self care. You can't take on other people's needs if yours aren't met!
- Make fun a daily priority.
- Ask kids what they would like to do with you.
- Take small and significant opportunities to engage in playfulness.
- Recognize that children who struggle to behave need fun too.
- Fun can take practice. Be patient when attempts to have fun “fail.”
- Some kids may need help learning how to have fun.
- Certain children might need explicit permission and encouragement to be playful.
- Be careful not to label kids as “bad” or “spoiled.” They are good kids who've had big experiences resulting in big feelings and behaviors.
- Model safe fun.
- Let a parent in recovery know if you are willing to help out and how.
- “Serious” children benefit from silliness too.
- Your efforts may appear to fall flat but, in fact, be greatly appreciated.
- Create opportunities for children to have fun with other kids from homes with addiction issues.
- Make room for appropriately unrestricted, messy fun.
- Being willing yourself, to engage in ridiculous, silly, and fun nonsense!



From the research

Play contributes to overall health and well-being, including coping with adversity, pain tolerance, building and maintaining meaningful relationships, and emotional and physical health.^{7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12}

⁷ "(PDF) The Effects of Laughter on Discomfort Thresholds: Does ..." 19 Nov. 2015.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/11839121_The_Effects_of_Laughter_on_Discomfort_Thresholds_Does_Expectation_Become_Reality. Accessed 30 Apr. 2020.

⁸ "Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to ..." <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0092656602005342>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2020.

⁹ "Greater strengths of character and recovery from illness: The ..." <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760500372739>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2020.

¹⁰ "Humor, as an adjunct therapy in cardiac rehabilitation ..." - NCBI. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20664127>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2020.

¹¹ "Sense of Humor and Creativity - SAGE Journals" <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.2466/pms.1996.82.2.544>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2020.

¹² "(PDF) The effects of humor on memory for non-sensical pictures." https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26660923_The_effects_of_humor_on_memory_for_non-sensical_pictures. Accessed 30 Apr. 2020.

Let There Be Play!

Suggestions for caregivers and those that want to be of support.



Make time for self care, whatever that looks like for you. You can't take on a child's high needs if yours are seriously under served!

Support network members: There are lots of ways you can help caregivers recharge. Offer to run an errand, provide a meal, arrange time to watch kids, lend an ear, offer words of encouragement. Even the tiniest of gestures that show you care can be such a kind relief for a parent or guardian.



Make fun a daily priority. Find doable ways to add more playfulness to your day. Take the detour to roll down the hill, add a couple drops of food coloring to the nightly bath, take a bubble blowing break. Small nods to fun are better than none!

Support network members: Next time you visit tell a funny story or joke, leave a little surprise like stickers on the doorstep, lend them your family's favorite game or movie, or alert parents to fun things you hear about in the community.



Plan for large opportunities to have fun. Every once in a while dedicate a day to having fun with the child/ren you care for. We know it's not always feasible to do, but setting the intention to have a whole day play every now and again is an excellent goal to have.

Support network members: If you have the resources, consider helping a family access fun activities they would otherwise be unable to do. Lots of families taking care of children from homes with addiction, such as grandfamilies and newly sober parents, are financially struggling and don't have the means to do extracurricular activities.



Create opportunities for children to have fun with other kids from homes with addiction issues.

Plan to get together with other kids in similar situations. It can help kids let their guard down when they know the children they are playing with have been through the same stuff. For instance, children that have a parent in treatment, been removed temporarily from the home, lost a parent to overdose, or have an incarcerated parent can benefit greatly by meeting other kids like them.

Support network members: With permission, you can introduce families in your social network to others that have had similar experiences. You can also support organizations that help families cope with adversity. For example, House of Hope, Grandfamilies of Utah, the Family Support & Treatment Center, the Boys and Girls Club, and yours truly are all donation based organizations that work with children from homes with addiction issues.





Recognize that children who struggle to behave need fun too. Let's face it, some kids are bigger boundary testers or have temperaments that require more attention. Avoid the downward spiral of regularly taking away fun as punishment. Coming from a home with addiction issues is HARD. These kids have big feelings that often show up as big behaviors. Make sure kids that struggle are getting enough time to play.

Support network members: Be compassionate and hold off on judgement. A child that struggles to behave hasn't learned the coping mechanisms they need to deal with the stress they are experiencing. If possible be a source of positivity, rather than criticism.

Be careful not to label kids as "bad" or "spoiled." They are good kids who've had big experiences resulting in big feelings and behaviors.

Certain children might need explicit permission and encouragement to be playful. Play might require some extra effort and patience. Don't give up when attempts to have fun fall flat. Consistently remind kids that they deserve lots of time to "just be kid."

Support network members: Keep an eye out for the kids that tend to fly under the radar. The "serious" and shy kids can easily be overlooked when fun is being had. Invite but don't pressure kids to join in on the fun. Even if they don't take you up on it, knowing that they are included feels good.

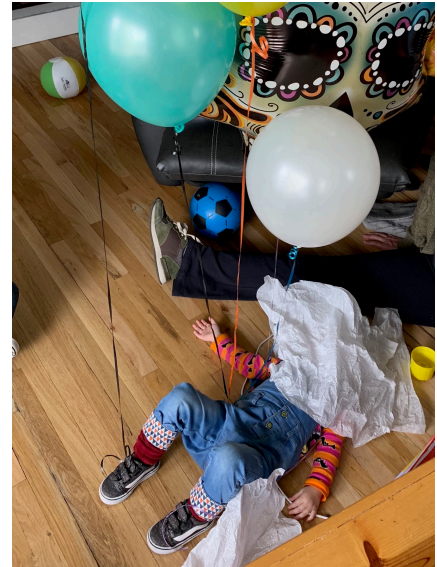
Twenty Alternatives to Punishment by Aletha Solter, Ph.D.

1. **LOOK FOR UNDERLYING NEEDS.** Ex: Give your child something to play with while waiting in line.
2. **GIVE INFORMATION AND REASONS.** Ex: If your child colors on the wall, explain why we color on paper only.
3. **LOOK FOR UNDERLYING FEELINGS.** Acknowledge, accept, and listen to feelings. Ex: If your child hits his baby sister, encourage him to express his anger and jealousy in harmless ways. He may need to cry or rage.
4. **CHANGE THE ENVIRONMENT.** This is sometimes easier than trying to change the child. Ex: If your child repeatedly takes things out of the kitchen cupboards, put a childproof lock on them.
5. **FIND ACCEPTABLE ALTERNATIVES.** Redirect your child's behavior. Ex: If you do not want your child to build a fort in the dining room, don't just say no. Tell her where she can build one.
6. **DEMONSTRATE HOW YOU WANT YOUR CHILD TO BEHAVE.** Ex: If your child pulls a cat's tail, show her how to pet a cat. Do not rely on words alone.
7. **GIVE CHOICES RATHER THAN COMMANDS.** Decision-making empowers children; commands invite a power struggle. Ex: "Would you like to brush your teeth before or after putting your pajamas on?"
8. **MAKE SMALL CONCESSIONS.** Ex: "I'll let you skip brushing your teeth tonight because you are so tired."
9. **PROVIDE FOR A PERIOD OF PREPARATION.** Ex: If you are counting on company for dinner, tell your child how you expect him to behave. Be specific. Role-playing can help prepare children for potentially difficult situations.
10. **LET NATURAL CONSEQUENCES OCCUR** (when appropriate). Don't rescue too much. Ex: A child who does not hang up her bathing suit and towel may find them still wet the next day. (But don't create artificial consequences.)
11. **COMMUNICATE YOUR OWN FEELINGS.** Let children know how their behavior affects you. Ex: "I get so tired of cleaning up these crumbs in the living room."
12. **USE ACTIONS WHEN NECESSARY.** Ex: If your child insists on running across streets on your walks together, hold his hand lightly (while explaining the dangers).
13. **HOLD YOUR CHILD.** Children who are acting aggressively or obnoxiously can benefit from holding, in a loving and supportive way, which allows them to channel their pent-up feelings into healing tears.
14. **REMOVE YOUR CHILD FROM THE SITUATION, AND STAY WITH HER.** Use the time for listening, sharing feelings, holding, and doing conflict resolution.
15. **DO IT TOGETHER, BE PLAYFUL.** Many conflict situations can be turned into games. Ex: "Let's pretend we're the seven dwarfs while we clean up." "Let's take turns brushing each other's teeth."
16. **DEFUSE THE SITUATION WITH LAUGHTER.** Ex: If your child is mad at you, invite him to have a playful pillow fight with you. Play your part by surrendering dramatically. Laughter helps resolve anger & feelings of powerlessness.
17. **MAKE A DEAL, NEGOTIATE.** Ex: If you are ready to leave the playground and your child is having fun, reach an agreement on the number of times she may go down the slide before leaving.
18. **DO MUTUAL CONFLICT-RESOLUTION.** Discuss ongoing conflicts with your children, state your own needs, and ask for their help in finding solutions. Determine rules together. Hold family meetings.
19. **REVISE YOUR EXPECTATIONS.** Young children have intense feelings and needs, and are naturally loud, curious, messy, willful, impatient, demanding, forgetful, self-centered, and full of energy. Try to accept them as they are.
20. **TAKE A PARENTAL TIME-OUT.** Leave the room and do whatever is needed to regain your sense of composure and good judgment. Ex: call a friend, cry, meditate, or take a shower.

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Lighten up and join in on the shenanigans. Be a model of safe fun by letting loose and getting silly yourself. When appropriate, bend the rules a bit in the name of having fun. Get real messy, loud, irreverent and childish together. The memories will be worth it.

Support network members: Adults that *feel good* to be around also *feel safe* to children. By being a source of playfulness you also gain some of their trust. Children from homes with addiction issues have better outcomes when they have supportive adults they can turn to in a time of need.

In conclusion, we think a fantastic way to build resilience in kids is by exercising the funny bone! And when the going gets rough, let's take it one silly day at a time together.

