

TIP SHEET FOR RELATIVES AS PARENTS

#7

10/05

Taking Back the Power

It is not easy raising children of relatives who abuse alcohol or drugs. With a lot to worry about and many things happening, you may feel a little out of control. But you do not have to let life happen to you – you can take back the power.

Lay down the law

As the person in charge in your house, you can make the rules. This means that you can decide you do not want people walking in and out of your house. You can decide to keep the door locked and decide who is allowed inside. Or you can decide that children can only have friends over when you are there to keep an eye on things. You make the decisions, and then tell your family the rules.

As you make the rules, you may worry about hurting some feelings, especially the child's parent's. Remember that most substance abusers know that people who love them worry. And they may try to use that to get what they think they need. For example, you might hear things like:

- *“I am trying to be a good parent. How can you keep me from seeing my child?”*
- *“You always treat me like a bum. No wonder my sons do not respect me.”*

It hurts to be criticized, but do not let that stop you. Keep in mind that everyone makes choices. If the parent goes into treatment and starts acting like a parent, he or she can become more involved in the child's life. But if the parent keeps using drugs, or behaves badly around the child, you must set limits. You are setting the rules – fair, safe, healthy rules – but the parent is choosing whether or not to follow them.

Avoid the guilt trap

Do not let yourself feel guilty for sticking to your rules. Suppose you set a rule that a parent must call first to set up a time to see her child, and not come over after drinking or using drugs. This is a simple rule, and good for the child.

But the next week, the parent comes by without calling first, and high. You refuse to allow the visit and the parent is angry. Although you may feel bad, you have done the right thing. You stood by your rules to do what is best for the child. It was the parent's fault because she did not follow the rules. If you are clear about sticking to your rules, nobody should make you feel guilty.

Doing what is right can be hard, especially if you are changing family patterns. If you are sad or feeling worried, try bringing your feelings to a support group. This is an issue that people will understand.

Other ways to take back the power

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF – With all your responsibilities and the disruption in your family life, you are under a lot of stress. You need to take care of yourself, and you have a right to. Take the time to keep up with your health, join a support group, go to church, stay close with your family, get a little exercise, and relax with friends. You will feel better and have more to give to the child in your care.

FOCUS ON THE CHILD – not the parent. The substance abusing parent is on his or her own path now, but the child is with you. Put your energy into helping that child grow strong and healthy. As much as you can, put the past behind you and focus on the child who needs you now.

SET REASONABLE LIMITS – in your relations with the parent. As you raise someone else's child, you may have continued contact with that child's parent. Since that parent is a substance abuser, many of these contacts may be stressful and draining. Your challenge is to learn how to stay in touch as needed, and at the same time protect yourself and your household from the drug abuser's problems.

LOOK TO THE FUTURE – Whatever happened in the past, this child in your care has a chance for a better future. Whether the child stays with you for a short time or a long one, your influence can and will last forever. You have the chance to help this child grow into a healthy drug-free adult by what you teach and do.

Recognize your limits

We all have times when we wish we could fix everything that is causing pain to those we love. You may wish you could give the children a perfect loving home, make all their problems go away, and help the child's parent stop abusing drugs. The truth is, of course, that you cannot, and neither can anyone else. But, you can do a lot to make sure you have a healthy life, for yourself and your household.

There's relief in understanding that you cannot – and do not – have to do everything. You can take pride in doing your best.

What you CAN and CANNOT do

- You CANNOT wish away your own sadness and anger over your problems. But you CAN find support for yourself during these hard times, and begin to get back your peace of mind.
- You CANNOT keep a child in your family from feeling sad or angry. You CAN offer care and understanding, and help find counseling if needed.
- You CANNOT make the child's parent get better. You CAN suggest drug treatment or other services you think might help, and try to convince them to go.
- You CANNOT do everything right - no one can. You CAN get services and supports to help you do your best.

For more information or to discuss this topic, please call Families And Children Together (FACT) at 1-866-298-0896 and ask for a Maine Kids-Kin staff person.

This information is excerpted from the National Organization on Fetal alcohol Syndrome's website <http://www.nofas.org/>



304 Hancock Street, Suite 2B
Bangor, ME 04401
1-866-298-0896
www.mainekids-kin.org

Copies of our tip sheets may be found on our web site at www.mainekids-kin.org
Please contact us for permission to reproduce Maine Kids-Kin materials at info@mainekids-kin.org