

Advocating at Complex Intersections: Domestic Violence, Substance Use Coercion, and Child Protective Services

Domestic Violence and Substance Use: What Are the Connections?

Being abused by an intimate partner can have traumatic effects, including using substances to cope with emotional and physical pain. At the same time, using substances can increase targeting and victimization by an abusive partner, which often includes substance use coercion.

What is Substance Use Coercion?

Substance use coercion is a pattern of domestic violence (DV) where substance use is leveraged as part of the abuse. These tactics include an abusive partner's efforts to intentionally:

- Coerce or force a survivor to use substances
- Blame abuse on substance use
- Escalate substance use to instigate problems
- Use withdrawal to intimidate or coerce
- Sabotage treatment and recovery, including controlling medications used in recovery
- Isolate from sources of safety and stability
- Undermine parent-child attachment
- Leverage legal systems against survivors

EFFECTS OF
SUBSTANCE USE COERCION
ON SURVIVORS

- Adversely impacts mental and physical health and well-being
- Increases isolation and entrapment
- Creates barriers to economic stability
- Jeopardizes custody
- Undermines recovery
- Prevents access to treatment
- Increases overdose risk

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The pervasive stigma and criminalization of substance use strengthens the effectiveness of these tactics. For more information on substance use coercion, check out <http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/publications-products/su-coercion-reports>.

ADDRESSING
SUBSTANCE USE COERCION

“ In order for services to be **effective, safe, and accessible to survivors, practitioners and policy makers need to understand the ways that substance use coercion impacts survivors and their children.** ”

Substance Use Coercion as a Barrier to Safety, Recovery, and Economic Stability: Implications for Policy, Research, and Practice
2019 Technical Expert Meeting Report by the NATIONAL Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health

Where Does Child Protective Services (CPS) Fit In?

It is a common tactic of substance use coercion to either threaten CPS involvement or engage CPS systems in attempts to harm and control survivors and their children. At the same time, studies suggest that the simple presence of DV or substance use can increase findings of child abuse or neglect; this risk was largest when both DV and substance use were present.^{1,2}

How Can Advocates Support Survivors and Their Families at These Intersections?

- **Raise awareness** and recognition of the many tactics of substance use coercion
- **Provide safety** for people to be able to talk about DV, substance use, and substance use coercion and access desired resources without fear of punishment, retribution, or having their families separated
- **Offer resources** that address self-defined needs, especially those that support safety and economic stability (including housing, transportation, childcare, and more)
- **Expand the focus** from a person’s substance use to also consider:
 - The abuse and danger they may face from an unsafe partner or ex-partner, including tactics of substance use coercion
 - How they strive to protect and care for their children
 - Child safety—a positive drug test does not say anything about a child’s safety³
 - The potential for any identified concerns to resolve with the appropriate support and resources that aid in safety and stability
 - Their self-defined needs and preferences, as well as their access to desired resources that help address those needs
- **Critically review** how stigma associated with DV and substance use can impact staff perceptions, influence staff decisions, and shape programmatic policies and procedures

For more information and resources, visit www.ncdvtmh.org.

¹ Victor, BG, Grogan-Kaylor, A, Ryan, JP, Perron, BE., & Gilbert, TT. (2018). Domestic violence, parental substance misuse and the decision to substantiate child maltreatment. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 79, p31-41.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.01.030>

² Freisthler, B, Wolf, JP, Wiegmann, W, & Kepple, NJ. (2017). Drug use, the drug environment, and child physical abuse and neglect. *Child Maltreatment*, 22(3), p.245–255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559517711042>

³ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). Parental substance use: A primer for child welfare professionals. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parentalsubuse>