

01 Background:

The term 'toxic trio' is used to describe the issues of **domestic abuse, mental ill-health and substance misuse**, identified as common features of families where significant harm to children has occurred.

The toxic trio combination has been clearly linked with increased risks of abuse and neglect of children and young people.

"Time and again, it seems that the combination of problems is much more likely to have a detrimental impact on children than a parental disorder which exists in isolation"

Cleaver et al (2011)

Why it matters:

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Children are exposed to significant risks and the harmful effects can be long term and corrosive

An analysis of 139 serious case reviews (Brandon et al 2012), showed that in 86% where children were seriously harmed or died, one or more of the "toxic trio" played a significant part.

Nearly two thirds of these cases featured domestic abuse and in 60% mental ill health was identified in one or both parents. Children in one quarter of the families experienced all three.

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Information:

Domestic abuse

- Creates an inconsistent and unpredictable environment for children
- Carers may demonstrate a lack of emotional warmth and / or higher levels of aggression
- Emotional abuse of children living in household where there is domestic abuse
- Established links between domestic abuse, neglect and the physical abuse of children

Substance misuse

It is not inevitable that substance misuse will affect parenting capacity

However, it is a significant feature in cases where children have been seriously harmed or killed

Alcohol dependence linked with depression is particularly associated with poorer, less consistent parenting

The impact of alcohol/ substance addiction on the child is often underestimated by professionals. Always review the impact of work in terms of the outcomes for the child.

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What to do?

All agencies must focus on the needs of the child, and act in their best interest at all times.

Further reading:

- [multi agency safeguarding procedures](#)
- [Child L SCR learning](#)
- [Toxic Trio multi agency training](#)

Questions:

- Is the parent's drug or alcohol use significantly affecting parenting capacity?
- Do assessments take into account all members of the household, including biological fathers, new partners or ex-partners who are still in the picture.
- Can sufficient change be achieved within a timescale that reflects the needs of the child?
- Is there evidence of [non engagement/disguised compliance?](#)

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Information:

Parental mental health

Mental health conditions such as depression can inhibit a parent's ability to respond to their child's emotional cues and offer consistent care. They can cause a parent to be either 'intrusive and hostile' or 'withdrawn and disengaged'

Adults with mental health problems are statistically more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol and people who abuse drugs have a markedly increased lifetime occurrence of diagnosable mental health issues.

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