

# UNDERSTANDING SCREENING AND ASSESSMENT OF SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS: CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE TIPS



National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare



Screening and assessment of parental substance use disorders (SUDs) provides workers the opportunity to identify family strengths, develop services, monitor progress, address challenges, and connect them to services. Using standardized screening and assessment tools and procedures can reduce bias and stigma and identify all parents who need a referral for a SUD assessment. Timely and equitable access to treatment services is critical for engagement and retention in services of high-risk families who are affected by substance use disorders and are involved with child welfare services.



**Know what to look for:** When conducting child welfare assessments, be aware that certain drugs have specific physiological effects. Potential signs and symptoms of substance use to look for include:



## Personal Appearance

- Change in speech (e.g., slurred speech, more rapid than usual)
- Nodding off
- Disorientation
- Tremors
- Cold or sweaty palms
- Dilated or constricted pupils
- Bloodshot or glazed eyes
- Needle marks
- Bruises
- Poor personal hygiene
- Disheveled appearance
- Sores on face



## Behavioral Signs

- A change in usual attitude or behavior
- Agitated behavior or mood
- Excessive talking
- Paranoia
- Depression
- Manic behavior
- Lack of motivation
- Financial challenges
- Missed appointments
- Missing work; change in employment status



## Physical Environment

- Signs of drug paraphernalia (e.g., straws, rolling papers, razor blades, small mirrors, glass pipes, aluminum foil, lighters, needles, syringes, tourniquets, belts, shoelaces, spoons)
- Unusual smells or chemical odors
- Reluctance to allow home visits



### UNDERSTAND that substance use can decrease a parent’s ability to:

- Provide for a child’s basic need
- Provide daily structure and routine
- Get their children to school on time or assist with homework
- Maintain employment
- Balance household expenses



**Screen all families for substance use:** The purpose of substance use disorder screening is to determine the need for further clinical assessment. The process should also include screening for co-occurring mental health challenges. It is important to gather information from a variety of sources, including a review of corroborating reports, signs and symptoms, drug testing, and valid screening tools (e.g., [Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test \(AUDIT\)](#), [The Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test \(ASSIST\)](#), or [Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment \(SBIRT\)](#)) to screen for substance use. The UNCOPE is another valid screening tool that asks the following six questions:

**U-** Have you continued to use alcohol or drugs longer than you intended?

**N-** Have you ever neglected some of your usual responsibilities because of your alcohol or drug use?

**C-** Have you ever wanted to cut down or stop using alcohol or drugs but could not?

**O-** Has your family, a friend, or anyone else ever told you they objected to your alcohol or drug use?

**P-** Have you ever found yourself preoccupied with wanting to use alcohol or drugs?

**E-** Have you ever used alcohol or drugs to relieve emotional discomfort, such as sadness, anger, or boredom?

Using standardized and validated SUD [screening tools](#) for all families helps reduce overidentification of people of color and disparity in outcomes for families. Screening tools should be culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate for accurate results.



**Refer for clinical SUD assessment:** When an individual exhibits signs or symptoms of substance use or screens positive for a potential SUD, arrange for a SUD professional to perform a clinical assessment. When an individual has a co-occurring mental health challenge, refer to dual diagnosis programs and services. If dual diagnoses services are not available, a parent will need a referral for individual providers that can meet the mental health and substance use disorder treatment needs. Use your agency protocol to refer a parent for a clinical assessment as soon as possible, since a delay can affect parents’ initiation of services and permanency decisions for children.



**Use SUD assessment results to tailor treatment and services to fit individual needs:** A SUD assessment provides a clinical diagnosis and recommendations for the intensity and setting of treatment needed (e.g., outpatient, intensive outpatient, residential) and supportive services. The SUD assessment may also identify co-occurring mental disorders and decreased life function pertaining to family relationships, employment, housing, and criminal justice involvement. Each of these areas may require a specific service or referrals to other agencies. When possible, refer the individual to a treatment provider who understands the child welfare system and its requirements.

## LEARN MORE

The National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare (NCSACW) developed this tool as part of a series of tip sheets for child welfare workers who serve families affected by SUDs. For more information and practice tips on working with families affected by SUDs and child welfare, read:

[\*Understanding Substance Use Disorders – What Child Welfare Staff Need to Know\*](#)

[\*Identifying Safety and Protective Capacities for Families with Parental Substance Use Disorders and Child Welfare Involvement\*](#)

[\*Understanding Engagement of Families Affected by Substance Use Disorders – Child Welfare Practice Tips\*](#)

[\*Child Welfare and Planning for Safety: A Collaborative Approach for Families with Parental Substance Use Disorders and Child Welfare Involvement\*](#)

[\*Understanding Substance Abuse and Facilitating Recovery: A Guide for Child Welfare Workers\*](#) helps child welfare workers understand SUDs and how to support and facilitate treatment and recovery.

[\*Understanding Substance Use Disorders, Treatment, and Family Recovery: A Guide for Child Welfare Professionals\*](#) is a self-paced and free tutorial that provides specific information about SUDs, engagement strategies, and the treatment and recovery process for families affected by SUDs. Continuing education units are available upon completion.

NCSACW's [\*Building Collaborative Capacity series\*](#), module 5 [\*Frontline Collaborative Efforts: Developing Screening Protocols to Identify Parental Substance Use Disorders and Related Child and Family Needs\*](#) provides an overview of the screening tools and processes that child welfare, substance use treatment, healthcare, another community-based agencies can use to identify parental substance use disorders and related challenges faced by children and families. It also describes the key steps that collaborative teams can take to develop a comprehensive screening protocol.

[\*Moms' Mental Health Matters\*](#) details information about common mental health challenges during and after pregnancy while offering treatment and support recommendations.

The Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC) Network's page on [\*Perinatal Mental Health\*](#) includes products, resources, webinars and training opportunities for professionals who work with individuals affected by mental health symptoms during the perinatal period.

SAMHSA's [\*Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator\*](#) is a confidential and anonymous source of information for persons seeking treatment facilities in the U.S. (or U.S. Territories) for substance use, addiction, and mental health challenges.

[\*Substance Use and Mental Health in Teens and Young Adults: Your Guide to Recognizing and Addressing Co-Occurring Disorders\*](#) provides guidance on effective treatments for substance use disorders and mental health disorders common in adolescence.

The [\*Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration\*](#) and the [\*National Institute on Drug Abuse\*](#) websites offers comprehensive information about .treatment for SUDs, mental health, [\*equitable services\*](#), and [\*treatment location services\*](#).



## CONTACT US



Email NCSACW at  
[ncsacw@cffutures.org](mailto:ncsacw@cffutures.org)



Visit the website at  
<https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov>



Call toll-free at  
866.493.2758

This resource is supported by contract number 75S20422C00001 from the Children's Bureau (CB), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), co-funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The views, opinions, and content of this resource are those of the presenters and do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, or policies of ACF, SAMHSA or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).



National Center on  
Substance Abuse  
and Child Welfare



**SAMHSA**  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration