

**Can Policies Provide Approaches to Remediate Substance Use Issues in the Context of
Child Welfare and Family Bond**

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March xth, 2022

Executive Summary

Substance abuse is a multifaceted issue that extends beyond individual users, impacting families, communities, the criminal justice system, and society at large. Medically, substance abuse is classified as a behavioral disorder characterized by an inability to regulate the use of substances such as alcohol and illicit drugs. This lack of control can lead to a diagnosis of substance use disorder (SUD), often accompanied by co-occurring mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia. The repercussions of SUD are extensive, including hospitalization, homelessness, unemployment, and family dysfunction, contributing to societal burdens such as domestic violence, child abuse, and neglect.

While numerous social agencies and institutions offer services to address substance abuse, many families remain underserved. Current policies often emphasize punitive measures rather than comprehensive rehabilitation that integrates healthcare access, family support, employment, and housing. This paper explores the intersection of substance abuse and child welfare, highlighting existing policies and proposing alternative strategies to mitigate negative consequences while fostering family reunification.

By shifting policy focus toward rehabilitation rather than punishment, a more effective and humane response to substance abuse can be achieved. Strengthening intervention programs that address not only substance use but also its underlying causes—such as economic instability and mental health disorders—can help break the cycle of addiction and prevent intergenerational harm.

Context and Importance of the Problem

This paper focuses on substance abuse within the child welfare system, where parental substance misuse frequently results in the removal of children from their homes. Child welfare agencies are authorized to intervene when parents are deemed incapable of providing a stable and safe environment. Between 2007 and 2017, the national rate of children entering foster care due to parental drug abuse increased from 80 to 131 per 100,000 children (Child Trends, 2019). By 2019, parental substance abuse accounted for 39% of child removals, affecting over 8 million children in the U.S. (NCSAC, 2019).

Parental separation due to substance abuse has profound consequences for children, particularly in terms of emotional and cognitive development. John Bowlby's attachment theory posits that stable parental relationships are crucial for a child's psychological well-being. Disruptions in these bonds can lead to increased vulnerability to stress, anxiety, depression, and poor social functioning. Research also links parental substance abuse to juvenile delinquency, externalizing disorders, and intergenerational criminality (Grekin et al., 2005; Gifford et al., 2017). While existing policies mandate child removal in cases of maltreatment, efforts should be made to balance child protection with family reunification whenever possible.

In addition to developmental risks, children of parents with substance abuse disorders often face instability in foster care. The adoption and foster care system is not always well-equipped to provide consistent, high-quality caregiving, and children placed into these systems frequently experience emotional and psychological distress. The negative effects of child-parent separation highlight the necessity of seeking alternative solutions that address both the child's well-being and the parent's potential for recovery.

Policy Options

Family Drug Treatment Courts (FDTCs) offer an alternative to parental incarceration, prioritizing rehabilitation over punishment. These specialized courts address child maltreatment cases involving substance abuse, incorporating mandatory drug testing, judicial supervision, sanctions, and treatment. Since their inception in the 1980s, FDTCs have expanded to over 300 courts nationwide, providing a structured approach to rehabilitation and family preservation (Burrus et al., 2011).

While FDTCs have demonstrated success in reducing recidivism and facilitating family reunification, challenges remain. Many programs lack sufficient resources, limiting their accessibility. Additionally, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) mandates that children removed from their parents must be placed in permanent homes within 12 to 15 months, a constraint that often hinders reunification efforts.

Aside from FDTCs, additional policy solutions include expanding access to comprehensive rehabilitation programs, implementing early intervention services for at-risk families, and integrating substance abuse treatment into broader social service frameworks. Coordinated efforts between healthcare providers, social workers, and legal systems are essential to developing effective, long-term solutions.

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