

Children's Center

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The Risks of Methamphetamine Exposure to Children

Parental drug use can have a devastating effect on children. While there are many illegal drugs that can impact a person's ability to parent, this paper will address methamphetamine (also known as "meth") use. Many people who become addicted to meth or other drugs often lose track of their priorities and present as disorganized and increasingly violent, in addition to experiencing many other problems. The silent victims of drug addiction are often the children. If a caregiver is getting high and "crashing" for days at a time, their ability to safely parent is compromised.

There has been a lot of attention in the media given to methamphetamine abuse and manufacturing due to the fact that it is such an addictive and dangerous substance. While the manufacturing of meth appears to be on the decline, the United States Drug Enforcement Agency (US DEA) documents that the use of this substance has been consistently high for many years. According to the US DEA website, "Methamphetamine is one of the most widely abused controlled substances in the state (of Oregon) and availability is high." Meth is cheaper than most drugs, easily accessible, somewhat easy to manufacture, and creates a very intense feeling of euphoria or "high." Because of this intense feeling and other effects, it is extremely easy for a person to become addicted, sometimes after only one use. The negative effects of methamphetamine can be uncomfortable and can include depression, irritability, paranoia, fatigue, and anxiety. A person may binge on meth to avoid these feelings. The tolerance for the drug builds up very quickly, which requires a person to use more at a faster rate to get the same "high."

What does this mean for children?

Unfortunately, children and youth are often lost in the drug addiction of their parents. The risk of children being neglected or physically and sexually abused is very high because their parent/caregiver has lost the ability to attend to their children's physical and emotional needs. For example, when a person crashes on meth and temporarily stops taking the drug, they can sleep for up to 48 hours and it is very difficult to wake them. Therefore, children can be left unattended and unsupervised or with unsafe people who may take advantage of the situation to offend. Children often must fend for themselves, including feeding and meeting basic needs for themselves and their siblings. Safety hazards, such as getting burned while cooking, can be present.

Some people who are addicted to methamphetamine are irritable and become agitated much easier. Their decision-making process can be compromised. This can lead to an increased risk for physical and emotional abuse of a child. If a child does something the parent doesn't want them to, the parent may yell or use abusive language. The parent may spank in order to discipline without realizing how hard they spanked, resulting in bruising to the child. In severe cases of abuse, a parent can become frustrated with an infant's crying and shake the baby, causing brain damage and even death.

Chemicals used to manufacture methamphetamine are very dangerous and can cause explosions and catch fire. Chemicals can also be very harmful if they come into contact with skin. Children found in meth homes are often filthy and extremely neglected. They may be living in squalor, with dangerous chemicals surrounding the food they eat and the areas they play in. Some children actually ingest the chemicals by accident. Children who are removed from such a home may test positive for methamphetamine themselves.

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Children may need to be placed into protective custody by law enforcement and child welfare caseworkers as a result of their exposure to caregiver methamphetamine use. Children may be very confused about why they cannot be home with their mom and dad.

Clearly, children are victims of caregiver methamphetamine use. They are at an increased risk for abuse and neglect by their caregivers and any other adults in the home when methamphetamine is being used.

For more information about methamphetamine and its impact on children, please visit the following websites:

- Oregon Alliance for Drug Endangered Children: www.oregondec.org
- The Partnership for a Drug Free America: www.drugfree.org
- National Institute on Drug Abuse: <http://www.nida.nih.gov/>