



# **It's not just about me: Coping in the context of relationships**

*Hidden Harm: Families, drugs and alcohol: taking practice forward*

*London, June 2010*

**Sarah Bernays, Kathrin Houmøller, Tim Rhodes and Sarah Wilson**

**Universities of London and Stirling**

# Background

- Harm is estimated as significant – 1.3 million children in the UK affected by parental substance use (PSU) (ACMD, 2003; AHRSE, 2004)
- PSU potentially harm producing to children at every age (ACMD, 2003)
- Some young people do cope and ‘get by’ (Bancroft et al. 2004; Backett-Milburn et al. 2007)

## ➤ *The Family Life Project*

- a qualitative study of how young people experience family life over time in the context of parental substance use
  - How do family dynamics shape experiences of coping over time?

# Outline

## *Caring for family and self*

How do young people cope with parental substance use within the context of their relationships with:

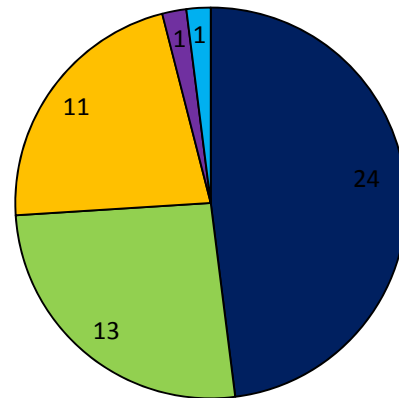
1. Substance using parents
2. Siblings

➤ ***How do these relationships affect their experiences of parental substance use and their coping strategies?***

# Methods

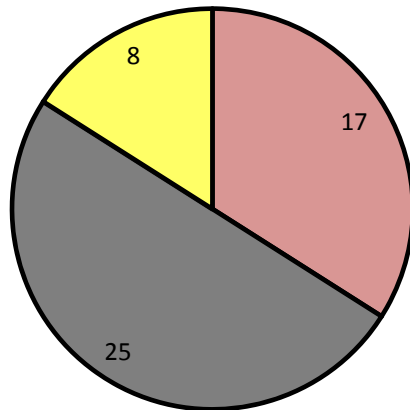
- Interviews with
  - young people (n=50), significant others (n=11), parents (n=29), service providers (n=17)
  - 16 young people followed-up over time (re-interviewed 1-3 times)
  - Recruitment in five different sites in the UK
- Young people: n=50
  - 20 boys; 30 girls (5 sibling relationships)
  - average age: 13
  - 10-13 years n=28; 14-18 years n=22
  - Recruited through specialist support services
  - Young people living with: substance using parent (n= 24), non-using parent (n= 15), in foster care, with extended family or on their own (n= 11)

# Young people sample



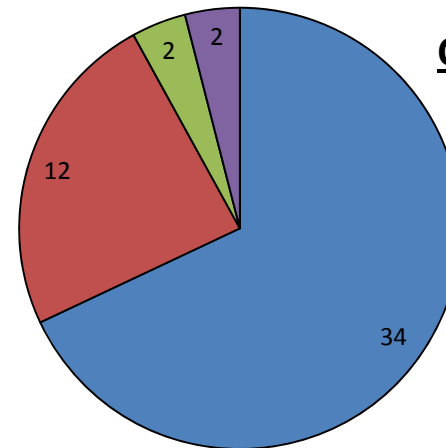
Using relation

- Mum
- Dad
- both
- Sibling
- Grandparent



Substance use

- Drug use
- Alcohol use
- Alcohol and drug use



Current substance use

- Current use
- In recovery
- Deceased
- Do not say

# 1) SUBSTANCE USING PARENTS

## *Young people's accounts of love and care*

- Although substance using parents express love for their children this is rarely demonstrated in a way that children can understand (Kroll and Taylor, 2008)
- Young people's need to exercise love and care may be as important for 'getting by' as is the need to receive these (Backet-Milburn and Wilson, 2008)
- How are young people's experiences and practices of love and care linked to their navigation of harm and sense of coping?

# Unconditional love

## *Idealising love between parents and children*

**Meg (10):** Everyone can give you their love but your Dad has a special love doesn't he?

## *Love is facilitated by family relatedness*

**Nick (18):** *You say you love her...?* Yeah, she's your Mum,  
ain't it...

**Sally (18):** I still, I still love my Mum and you'll ask any kid,  
no matter what their parents have done they still love  
them no matter what.

# Parents don't care

## *The unpredictability of care*

**Sally (18):** She's [Mum] just a selfish nasty person when she's on drugs and she just does not care about the three children that she's brought into this world.

## *Lack of care feels like not having parents*

**Dena (17):** I feel like I didn't have a Mum or Dad. Like a proper one where they...where you just spend time with them and they speak to you (...)

**Lauren (17):** (...) sometimes she's [Mum] a parent, but then sometimes when she needs to do what she has to do, she's not there.

# Questioning love

## *Lack of care feels like lack of love*

**Dena (17):** (...) I don't know, it really makes me angry because it's like if you love me you'd buy milk rather than that bottle of wine.

## *Continuing to believe in parents' love*

**Leslie (16):** And I know my Dad loves me, he's just not...he just don't care.

**Dena (17):** I'm sure that they [parents] do [love me], like I'm sure my Mum does. (...) She'd be too drunk to express it.

# Struggling to still love

## *Withdrawing love*

**Lauren (17):** And when I was younger, I obviously loved her [Mum] a lot, but when I got a bit older, I just got really so angry and so frustrated, so upset that I just went, “Okay, that’s your problem, nothing to do with me, I don’t care anymore.”

## *Giving love is a necessity*

**Anna (15):** I don’t particularly like her [Mum] very much but I have to love her (...) The best thing in an ideal world would be to turn away from her and say, “You’re causing me too much hassle, too much pressure, too much hurt. I don’t want anything to do with you” (...) but I just have to say “good morning” to her, “have you eaten, do you want me to make you a cup of tea?”

# Being in a family

## *The symbolic significance of family*

**Meg (10):** (...) I don't need him [Dad]. But then, everyone needs their Dad. I feel like I don't, but I know I do. *Yeah, how do you know that you do need your Dad?* Because everyone needs their Dad.

**Dena (17):** It is very important to have your Mum and Dad because there's going to be times in your life when you're going to just feel so lonely and you're going to want your family round you.

## *Doing what is 'right'*

**Anna (15):** (...) it would be terrible if my Mum died tomorrow and, and I thought well my last, Mum's last memory of me would be, me turning around and saying, I don't want anything more to do with you (...).

# Summing up

- **Unconditional love:** Double-edged - enables a distinguishment between love and care.
  - **Family relatedness:** the 'stickiness' of blood-ties – feels morally wrong to turn away from parents.
  - **Being in a family:** the idea about a parent and the significance of family lives on – 'necessary' to still give love.
- How does this affect young people's coping practices?

# Enabling love

## *Accepting parents*

**Anna (15):** We don't get on very well...but the way I see it is, my Mum's not very well...she's not going to live forever...I've just got to really try and ... even if it's just sitting together watching TV. Try really hard not to say something because she can be so horrid to me.

**Dena (17):** (...) now I understand why they [parents] are how they are. And before I didn't, I just thought that they chose to [use drugs and alcohol] and that's it. They chose it over me (...).

# Enabling love

## *Accepting parent's use and risk of relapse*

**Leslie (16):** (...) the relationship we have now it's the best it could be. It's the best it's ever going to be. It's never going to get any better. We don't argue anymore. (...) I'm angry but he's my Dad. *He's your Dad, yeah.* And that's it and if he wants to take whatever he wants to take, if he wants to go round causing trouble all the time like a child, then, that's his choice.

**Sally (18):** (...) before I'd be right on it [Mum's drug use]. I'd want to stop it. I'd want to try and do everything in my power to try and stop it but now I can't. I've realised I can't (...). She will find a way to do it if she wants to do it.  
(...)

# Caring for family and self

## *Giving love and care, with limits*

**Kerry (16):** (...) it's like every day that she's not drinking is an achievement but, we all know that there's gonna be a day when she's gonna wake up and she is gonna go on the drink. (...) it scares me but then it's like we, we always can't be here for her to say to her "Mum, you can't do this. You can't do that" and, we're all not gonna, we all want to live our lives and we can't be there all the time to say to her "Now Mum don't have a drink (...)".

# Caring for family and self

**Sally (18):** (...) I can't take the weight of my family on my shoulders (...) If it gets that bad, you can always step back and keep an eye on it but don't try and take it on all the time. (...) gradually I realised that it comes to the point now where I've got my own life to think about. My own worries. It's not selfish, whereas before I thought it was but it's not.

# The story so far...

## *Love*

- a normalising effect which keeps change from happening
- an integral part of young people's self-care

## *Navigating harm over time – a learning process*

- balancing act: caring for family and caring for self
  - re-interpretation of what love and care mean
- young people's relationships with parents don't happen in isolation > the conflict between caring for family and caring for self is often accentuated when **siblings** are part of the family picture

## 2) SIBLINGS

### *Young people's accounts of caring for and coping with siblings*

- Sibling-order
  - Shifting positions and roles
  - Opportunities and barriers for coping and support
- How do sibling relationships influence young people's ways of coping with parental substance use?

# Sibling care

## *Protecting younger siblings from immediate risks*

**Emily (13):** (...) like when in February I found two of them [Mum and Dad] injecting, I managed to go down the stairs and sit down there for a minute and then I took her [sister] out for a bit 'cause I didn't want her staying in the house.

**Mike (12):** *Were you around there when that happened [domestic violence]? Yeah...but my sister ran me in the front room (...)*

# Sibling care

## *Protecting younger siblings long term*

**Sally (18):** (...) I do it [pays for brothers' haircuts] because, I, I hate to say it, my brothers get bullied, they do, because of their appearance (...).

**Dena (17):** Like I didn't think it was wrong which was really scary because I hope I, I hope my brother knows that it's wrong...because I wouldn't want him to think that drinking excessively is okay...or taking drugs is okay because your Mum does it. And it's at home.

# Sibling care

## *Skill-building*

**Meg (12):** Well, I can tell when she's had something because her face looks a bit dozy, sleepy and she normally falls asleep quite a bit cause she used to do it. My sister Gemma (10) she don't know what's right and what's wrong. She don't know whether she's took drugs or she don't...so she don't know whether she's safe...

**Aiden (14):** *What other stuff would, would you used to do when things, you know, when it was a bad day or things were getting bad? Go out...phone up my [older] brother or my sister and tell them what's happened and see if they could come round and sort it out and stuff.*

# Blurring of roles

## *Parenting younger siblings*

**Leslie (16):** I've always tried to protect his head, keep him a child as long as – childhood's too short anyway...but that's never really going to be, but I tried to, you know. (...) and, you know, I've always complimented him on everything. (...) and, you know, I want him to feel wanted.

## *Cause of tensions*

**Dena (17):** I do need to start seeing him as my little brother... rather than like, my baby.

**Sally (18):** Me taking Ryan [younger brother] would be a bonus for her [Mum] because then she hasn't got that responsibility you know *.That's right.* She'd be living the life that she wants to live. All the time she's got Ryan she's got, she has got that little bit of responsibility.

# Prioritising siblings or self?

## *Prioritizing siblings*

**Dena (17):** (...) my little brother really wanted to move back [with Mum]. Like he really misses his Mum. And I didn't want him to move back on his own because I know that like, he wouldn't have been looked after properly, so I kind of had to go with him. (...) But, yeah I knew that if I wasn't there I don't really know what would of – I don't think that he, that he would've been allowed to stay there [by Social Services] and stuff like that.

## *Prioritizing self*

**Anna (15):** I remember thinking, “well there's not much good you being here now Mark [older brother] because you walked out and I was 5 years old and I had to look after this woman then who was like dribbling and not washing” and, yeah, it was really hard. So I had all that resentment against him...

# Getting through it together

## *A motivation to get through*

**Leslie (16):** I've always known that sooner or later it's going to be me that's left looking after him [younger brother]. I'm going to be the one that he's looking to. He ain't got no-one else really. (...) and I know he needs me, otherwise I probably wouldn't be here.

## *Having each other*

**Nick (18):** So we've just got through it, like, between us. I mean, me and me sister was, like, we was like a couple, we was always doing things together. We'd get through it together.

**Jackie (15):** (...) me and my brother got quite close 'cause...we were going through the same thing, so – we didn't talk about it, but we knew what each other was thinking (...).

# Barriers to talk

## *Talking is unnecessary or unnatural*

**Daniel (12):** They [older siblings] know what it's been like and they don't like him [step-dad]. *Yeah, were they quite shocked when you told them? Told them what? That, for example, that he was sort of using drugs quite a lot? They already knew. They did know, yeah. I didn't obviously tell them. They just knew.*

## *Protecting siblings*

**Sarah (13):** (...) I just don't like talking to Bianca [younger sister] about it in case I say something wrong and upset her. So like I leave Bianca to talk to her mates about it so then, but like if she does want to talk about it she can always like come and ask me or something. But I'll wait till she comes to me, instead of me going up to her.

# Different paces

## *Love and care*

**Kathy (15):** (...) she [sister] was like, she would text me stuff and be saying, oh she's [Mum] not her Mum and all this. (...) which got me like mad about her text. What do you think? Well she still is my Mum really, isn't she. (...) at the end of the day she is her Mum really. She can't just switch her off.

**Kerry (16):** (...) Aiden [brother] was turning round and saying, "Kerry, she's [Mum] old enough, do you know what I mean, you can't always, you're not always gonna be here(...)" ...it used to be the way that nobody could say a bad word about my Mum. And now it's like, well, he's the way I was.

# Different paces

## *Hope*

**Sally (18):** I've got no hope for her [Mum] at all anymore and I really didn't think that was going to happen but it has (...). *So you, you used to have hope and you used to kind of want to believe when she said, "I'm going to be straight, I'm not going to use"?* Yeah I really, really did. And I can see that in my little brother.

## *Acceptance*

**Leslie (16):** (...) you know, it's [Dad's drug use] not affecting my brother anymore...so why should I be bothering? It doesn't affect me.

# Summing up

## *Sibling-order:*

- different experiences and skills
- blurring of roles
- siblings move at different paces

## *Support*

- double-edged: sharing the experience is comforting but also creates barriers for talk

## *Coping*

- prioritisation of self is complicated by caring for siblings

# Conclusions

## *Family is a nexus of relationships*

- dynamic and fluctuating
- young people's coping is intertwined with other family members and how they are positioned in relation to each other
- conflict between caring for family and caring for self; caring for family is self-care
- caring for family may inadvertently sustain the harms of parental substance use (keeping it hidden; down-prioritizing own needs)

## *Implications*

- individual work may be undermined by returning to an unchanged environment > need for facilitated talk which engages with relationship dynamics

# Final report

**Final report available September 2010:**  
**<http://www.starsnationalinitiative.org.uk>**

## **Contact details:**

[sarah.bernays@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.bernays@lshtm.ac.uk)  
[kathrin.houmoller@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:kathrin.houmoller@lshtm.ac.uk)  
[tim.rhodes@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:tim.rhodes@lshtm.ac.uk)



# Acknowledgements

- All the young people, parents, family members, friends and service providers who participated.
- Sunlight Project KCA, WAM, STARS, Young Carers South Glos, IYPDAS, CASA Family Service, Family Action Islington, Margarete Centre, AASCI, Greg Holloway, Substance Misusing Parents KCA, Parental Substance Misuse Service, STARS National Initiative.
- Co-investigators: Dr Brynna Kroll, Dr Andy Taylor, Dr Chris Bonell, Dr Nicki Thorogood.
- Members of the Advisory Committee