

Family Dynamics

48,000,000
Smokers in the U.S.

15,000,000
Alcohol Abusers

9,000,000
Gamblers

5,000,000
Drug Addicts

A nation of addicts: The statistics paint a disturbing picture. And unfortunately, no family is immune. Numerous factors—particularly a child's biological makeup, temperament, and environment—may plant the seeds of addiction. The heartening news: You can help protect your child.

Could Addictive Behavior Be in Your Child's Future?

What You Can Do Today to Prevent Your Child From Becoming a Workaholic, Smoker, Drinker, or Worse

by Melinda Blau

**8,000,000
People With
Eating Disorders**

Joyce Martin* admits she often walks a fine line between being cautious and overprotective. "When my girls were little, I'd take away their Halloween candy and give them a few pieces at a time," says the Boston mother. "I was particularly concerned that my younger one, Haylie, wouldn't be able to control herself. She was 4 or 5 when I stopped regulating it. I was right: She ate her candy till it was gone."

Now in grade school, Haylie has since developed other behaviors that trouble her mom. If she can't do an art project "perfectly" the first time, she's apt to tear it up in a rage. Lately, she's become anxious about sleep-overs and is very irritable at school. Meanwhile, her strong craving for sweets persists. "She's always sneaking candy," says Martin. "Whenever I see her disappear into her room, I know what she's doing. I know it's compulsive behavior, but I wonder, 'Is it addiction?'"

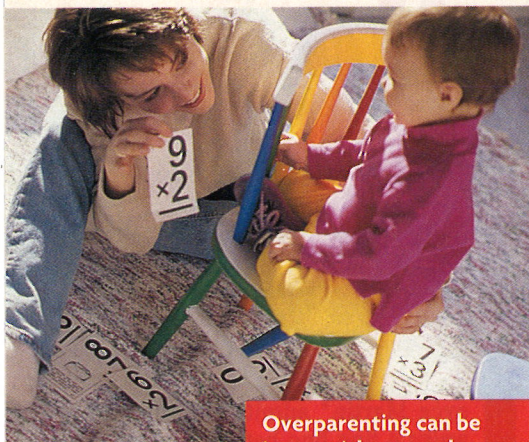
Martin's apprehension is not without cause. Alcoholism runs in her husband's family, and her own mother was clinically depressed. Over the years, Martin's husband stopped drinking, and she has been in counseling. Still, she says, "I have a lot of anxiety about having to break the chain."

Never Too Young

"Anything we repeatedly do or put into our systems to change the way we feel—from bad to good, good to better, anxious to numb—has the potential to become an addiction," explains Susan Meltner, M.S.W., Oceanport, New Jersey-based author of *Body and Soul: A Guide to Lasting Recovery From* ▶

*Some parents' and children's names have been changed.

“Children are experimenting at of fourth-graders feel pressure to use



Overparenting can be just as risky as neglect.

Parents often unknowingly push their kids to perform beyond their capabilities, damaging their confidence.

Compulsive Eating and Bulimia. “A desire becomes an addiction when we can’t resist the urge to engage in a behavior despite harmful effects on our health, relationships, or functioning.”

Parents with a family history of addiction have good reason to worry—heredity is the number-one risk factor. However, a child’s temperament and upbringing also have a significant effect so it’s critical for parents to educate themselves and keep a watchful eye, starting at toddlerhood. “Some risk factors begin to show at age 2, just when a child starts to learn those magic words, ‘mine’ and ‘no,’” says David

Wilmes, director of training and evaluation at the Johnson Institute in Minneapolis and author of *Parenting for Prevention: How to Raise a Child to Say No to Alcohol/Drugs*. “That’s when they most need parents to set limits, have expectations, and build structures.”

Statistics reveal that children require those parameters more than ever. Drug use, in steady decline since 1979, “has been making a clear comeback in the past two years,” according to the 1994 annual study of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) in Washington, DC. The study found the most dramatic increases among eighth-

graders: 13 percent smoke pot; 1 in 9 sniff glue or other inhalants to get high; and over half have tried alcohol.

Even more disturbing, children are experimenting at younger ages, says Wilmes, citing national “StudentView” surveys conducted by the Johnson Institute. A whopping 40 percent of wine coolers in this country are consumed by under-age kids. And a recent survey by *My Weekly Reader* revealed that 35 percent of fourth-graders feel pressure to use drugs and alcohol.

But parents can make a big difference, says Howard Liddle, Ph.D., director of the Center for Research on Adolescent Drug Abuse at Temple University in Philadelphia. “What parents put in the bank with kids in the early years does matter—and can protect them.”

Who’s at Risk

All addictions, ranging from compulsive eating to drugs, are “chronic, progressive conditions—just like diabetes,” says Meltsner. “We don’t choose to develop them.” And there’s no single reason why we do.

“One child may be susceptible because of biological factors, another because of personality traits like low self-esteem, and another because of the social environment,” says Harvey Milk-

Your Family Tree: The Role of Heredity in the Roots of Addiction

Unfortunately, no formula exists that can predict the potential for addiction. But

tracking family history will help assess your child’s chances. Heredity is the #1 risk factor.

ADDICTION	Child	Mother	Father	Sister(s)	Brother(s)	Maternal Grandmother	Maternal Grandfather	Paternal Grandmother	Paternal Grandfather	Aunt(s)	Uncle(s)	Cousin(s)
Smoking												
Alcohol Abuse												
Gambling												
Drug Abuse												
Compulsive Eating												

younger ages: 35 percent drugs and alcohol. ”

man, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Metropolitan State College in Denver and author of *Craving for Ecstasy*.

The list of known risk factors begins with family history: A person may inherit a predisposition. Studies have shown that children of alcoholics are two to four times more likely to develop the disease. Yet a child's genetic makeup doesn't necessarily doom him. Here, other risk factors and influences that may lead to addictive behaviors:

Temperament Studies reveal a link between alcoholism and impulsiveness, aggression, and thrill seeking.

Negative cultural messages "Society sends kids a message of materialism—if you're not happy, it's because you haven't found the right product," says Michael Elkin, Ph.D., director of the Center for Collaborative Solutions at South Bay in Newton, Massachusetts, and author of *Families Under the Influence*. "That's also the message of addiction: Something out there can give you the power to change the way you feel."

School environment Success in preschool and the early grades is often determined by "developmental achievements over which kids have no control," notes Gary Lawson, Ph.D., San Diego-based co-author of *Alcoholism and the Family: A Guide to Treatment and Prevention*. He recalls the time his 5-year-old begged him to have her loose tooth pulled. Soon after, he visited her kindergarten class, where he discovered the root of her anxiety: a

large, colorful chart displaying the names of children who had lost teeth. This struggle to measure up can eat away at a child's self-esteem.

Parental pressure Parents often unknowingly push their kids to perform beyond their capabilities, damaging their confidence. "It's no accident that so many children of celebrities and successful professionals develop drug problems," says Dr. Lawson. "These kids often feel they don't measure up."

The Parents' Part

Not surprisingly, parents' addictive behavior can be a significant threat. Alcoholics, drug addicts, compulsive overeaters, or workaholics model harmful attitudes and behaviors, says Meltsner. "They show that it's possible to use substances or activities to alter a mood or escape reality," she adds.

Even a teetotaler or overzealous recovering addict can bring about a similar outcome. Explains Dr. Lawson, "When kids get older and want to rebel, they often pick something parents vehemently disapprove of."

Accepting children for who they are—not for who you want them to be—is key to preventing addiction. Respect your child's rate of development, which may or may not be in sync with other children's. Appreciate his natural talents. And realize that the very young have thoughts and opinions that need validation, says Jonathan Lampert, M.D., med- (Continued on page 117)

10 Early Warning Signs You Shouldn't Ignore

Experts point to several red flags—even in very young children—that may foreshadow addictive and/or compulsive disorders. If your child has any of the following symptoms, don't be alarmed; they're a normal part of development. But do look for extremes. The warning signs:

1. MOOD SWINGS. Be alert to extreme shyness, fearfulness, depression, excitability, secretiveness, aggression, defiance, sensitivity, impulsiveness, or withdrawal. Also take heed if a child fails to react to a traumatic event at home or in school.

2. TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE. Kids with a low threshold for failure or criticism may be overly anxious.

3. ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR. Kids who lack friends may have a poor self-image, which prevents them from connecting with peers.

4. OVERLY RESPONSIBLE. Kids who worry about everyone in the family may be assuming an emotional burden that's overwhelming and inappropriate for their age.

5. HYPERACTIVITY. This may indicate Attention Deficit Disorder; future problems can occur if a child isn't helped to control compulsivity.

6. PERSISTENT EATING PROBLEMS. This includes under-eating or over-eating in young children and constant dieting in preteens.

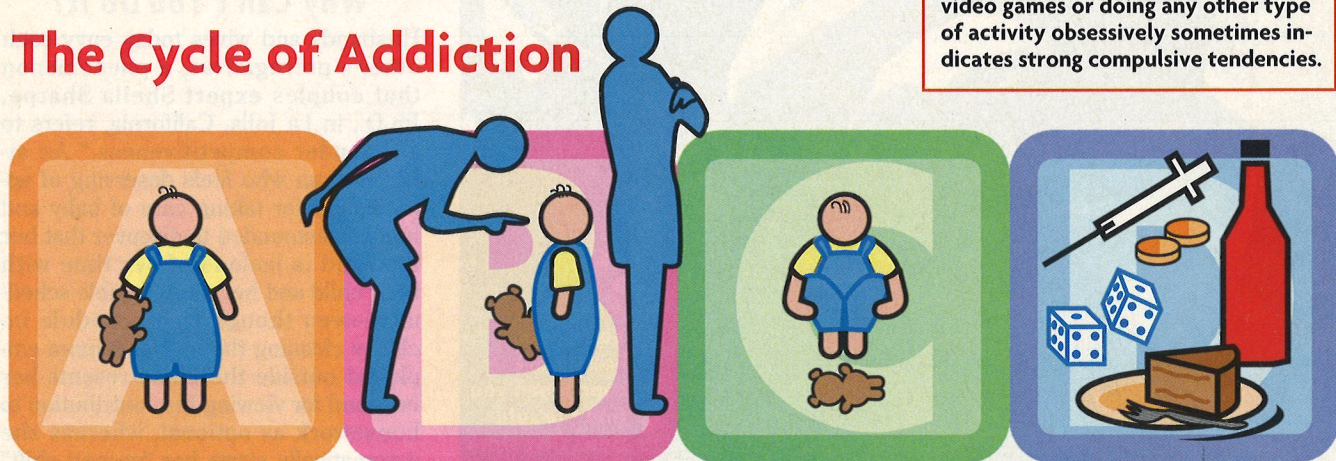
7. A SWEET OR FAT TOOTH. Pigging out when there's turmoil may mean that a child is trying to compensate for suppressed emotions.

8. STEALING. Pilfering money can be a sign of emotional neediness and a predictor of compulsive gambling.

9. HOARDING. An inability to share may signal emotional deprivation.

10. ACTIVITY COMPULSION. Playing video games or doing any other type of activity obsessively sometimes indicates strong compulsive tendencies.

The Cycle of Addiction



Nature vs. nurture: A child's environment counts for a lot.

Harsh or negligent parents can prime a child for addiction.

An un-nurtured child has trouble fighting bad influences.

She may later seek comfort in harmful substances or activities.

(Continued from page 81) ical director of the clinic at the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy in New York City. "If a child feels sad and a parent says there's nothing to be sad about, the child will question who he is and what he desires."

Your own upbringing often determines how you treat your child. If you come from a home with few rules, it may be more difficult for you to set limits. If you were constantly criticized, you may mostly notice what your children do wrong. If emotions were repressed as a kid, it could be hard for you to let your children express their feelings.

It's usually a matter of balance, says Dr. Lawson. An abusive or neglectful parent, more mindful of her own needs, can teach a child to mistrust others. An over-protective parent teaches a child not to trust herself. In both cases, a numbing substance or activity may later become a means of easing anxiety and boosting low self-esteem.

Steps to Take

"It's not just a parent's behavior that affects children, it's what a child makes of the parents and how he takes in experiences," says Sybil Wolin, Ph.D., Washington, DC-based co-author with Steven Wolin, M.D., of *The Resilient Self: How Survivors of Troubled Families Rise Above Adversity*. Studying adults who come from families in which parents were addicted, the couple found that well-adjusted adults utilize qualities like insight and initiative in order to triumph over their problematic environment.

Fortunately, experts now have a fairly clear picture of the kind of parenting that helps develop children's inner strengths. The key elements:

- **COMMUNICATE.** Encourage your child to talk about friends, interests, school, and feelings early on, urges Wilmes. "A 3-year-old can learn 'mad,' 'sad,' and 'glad.'"
- **LISTEN.** "A parental ear is more important than parental wisdom," says David Treadway, Ph.D., Boston-based author of *Before It's Too Late: Working with Substance Abuse in the Family*. Pay attention when kids reveal negative feelings. Telling an angry child, "Don't talk to me that way!" can teach him to hide anger. Kids should be allowed to say, "I'm mad."
- **SET LIMITS.** Don't be afraid to say "no." Limits help chil-

dren learn to overcome impulses and channel their abilities.

- **ENCOURAGE PROBLEM SOLVING.** When dilemmas are ignored, blamed on someone else, or always handled by parents, children don't get a chance to learn how to handle sticky circumstances. Give your child options. "If your 3-year-old is bored, ask, 'What toys haven't you played with lately?'" rather than entertain him," Wilmes suggests. Don't run after a school-age child with a lunch he forgot; let a natural consequence (such as a growling stomach) teach the lesson.

- **BOLSTER SELF-ESTEEM.** Early on, help your child "identify areas that he can master and control," says Dr. Treadway.

This can be a natural talent, hobby, favorite subject in school or network of friends.

- **SET A GOOD EXAMPLE.** "A parent who's got a cigarette dangling from his mouth is not a good role model," says Dr. Treadway. "What we say matters not a whit compared with what we do." If you need help, don't be afraid to get it.

- **VOICE VALUES.** Don't lecture; rather, use opportunities to discuss issues as they arise. If everyone is laughing at tipsy Uncle Harry, you might say, "I don't think it's funny. Uncle Harry often drinks too much, and that can be dangerous. He needs help."

- **TEACH MOOD MAINTENANCE.** Parents can help kids learn to deal with anxiety and anger. Make sure your child eats and sleeps well, exercises properly, and learns to relax. "Kids spend too much time on passive forms of relaxing, like TV watching," notes Wilmes. Encourage active hobbies like board games, art projects, and reading."

- **MONITOR OUTSIDE INFLUENCES.** Who are

your child's friends? Where is your child when she's not with you? "Make your home a place that other kids like to visit. That way, your child will be less likely to seek excitement away from home and your influence," says Dr. Treadway.

Invest the time in your child and help him develop healthy ways to handle stress *now*—the earlier you begin, the better buffer you build against experimentation and addiction. ■

Child contributor Melinda Blau, who lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, has won several awards for this column.

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