

What is the Toxic Trio and why is it important?

The 'toxic trio' is the combination of domestic abuse, parental mental ill-health and substance misuse within a family. The term is used to identify the common features of families where significant harm to children has occurred. Each of these issues is hard to manage on its own and can have a severe impact on family life, particularly for children.

However these problems rarely exist in isolation; there is often a complex interaction between them.

It is important to be aware of the toxic trio because it is viewed as a key indicator of increased risk of harm to children and young people. Studies such as 'New learning from serious case reviews' [Brandon et al. \(2012\)](#) have shown that, in 86% of incidents where children were seriously harmed or died, one or more of the trio played a significant role.

Need support for any of these issues?

The NHS have advice and support for anyone needing it:

[Domestic abuse](#)

[Substance misuse](#)

[Mental health](#)

The Toxic Trio

Parental substance misuse

This is the long-term misuse of drugs and/or alcohol by a parent or carer.

This includes parents and carers who:

- consume harmful amounts of alcohol (for example if their drinking is leading to alcohol-related health problems or accidents)
- are dependent on alcohol
- use drugs regularly and excessively
- are dependent on drugs.

It also includes parents who aren't able to supervise their children appropriately because of their substance use.

Most parents and carers who drink alcohol or use drugs do so in moderation, which doesn't present an increased risk of harm to their children ([Cleaver, Unell and Aldgate, 2011](#)).

However, parents and carers who misuse substances can have chaotic, unpredictable lifestyles and may struggle to recognise and meet their children's needs. This may result in their children being at risk of harm.

Recording and reporting small things you notice are so important in building a chronology of a child who may be experience a home life with one or more of these challenges.

Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse is any type of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between people who are, or who have been in a relationship, regardless of gender or sexuality. It can also happen between adults who are related to one another and can include physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or financial abuse.

Domestic abuse can include:

- sexual abuse and rape (including within a relationship)
- punching, kicking, cutting, hitting with an object
- withholding money or preventing someone from earning money
- taking control over aspects of someone's everyday life, which can include where they go and what they wear
- not letting someone leave the house
- reading emails, text messages or letters
- threatening to kill or harm them, a partner, another family member or pet.

Since 2020, children have been recognised as victims of domestic abuse.



Every Moment Matters

Seven Minute Safeguarding

WB 15th November 2021

Parental Mental Ill-Health

Many parents with mental health problems are able to give their children safe and loving care, without their children being negatively affected in any way. But sometimes, parents with mental health problems need support from family members, friends, neighbours and/or professionals, to help them care for their children. The term 'parental mental ill-health' in this context means that a parent or carer has a diagnosable mental health condition. This can include:

- depression
- anxiety disorders
- schizophrenia
- bipolar disorder
- personality disorders.

Mental ill-health can vary in severity and impact differently on people's day to day lives. This depends on parents' individual circumstances and the support they receive.

Parental mental health problems might occur alongside other stressful life experiences. Challenges may arise as a result of the condition, contribute to the condition developing, or make it worse. For example if a parent is experiencing financial problems, this can negatively affect their mental health. And if the parent becomes unable to work due to their mental health, this can exacerbate their financial problems.

Coping with lots of challenges at once can make it difficult for parents to provide their children with the care that they need.