



LAPSIASIAVALTUUTETTU

Child rights and parental alcoholic problems – policy development perspective

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What is the ombudsman for children?

- independent state authority, human rights institution
- established 2005 in Finland by law
- www.lapsiasia.fi
- advocates and promotes children's rights
 - evaluates the wellbeing of children
 - makes initiatives to decision makers
 - conveys children's own opinions to decision making process



Ombudsmen for Children in Europe

- in 24 European countries (www.enoc.org)
- oldest institution in Norway (1981)
- UN Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as the foundation of the work (1990)
- some European offices deal with individual cases or complaints too
- all of them influence societal policy, promote childrens rights and strengthen the voice of children



UN Conv. on the rights of the child

- most widely ratified human rights convention
- rights of citizenship, political rights, social economic and cultural rights
- children 's interests as a priority in all societal decision making
- goal: child-friendly society
- all children should be treated equally
- covers all minors under 18
- regular reporting from governments to UN



UN Rights of the Child - principles

1. Right to special protection
 - primarily parents, ultimately government
2. Right to a sufficient share in society's resources
 - provide services both to preventive and corrective work
3. Right to participate and to have an influence
 - acc. to the age and level of development



UNCRC article 19

- States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.



Child rights and parental alcohol abuse

- international debate about the rights of children recognizes very well the violence against children but neglects its connections to parental alcohol (ab)use.
 - UN
 - Council of Europe
 - European Union
- harm to children from parents alcohol use should be noted as a public health problem in general
- the role of alcohol industries should be discussed more – “not an ordinary commodity”



Some developments from Finland

- a significant cut in alcohol taxation 2004
- young people 's own use of alcohol has not increased generally but the problems caused by parents to the wellbeing of children clearly have
- some small restrictions to the marketing and sales arrangements were legislated in 2006 – intensive public discussion to increase the taxation
- Ombudsman for Children and A-clinic foundation prepared a common policy proposal to the government during 2006 – problems that children face from parental (ab)use



How to define the problem ?

- alcoholic families – conspicuous high quantity consumption
 - abuse - easier to recognize
- occasional ill-considered use of alcohol in family causes problems and fears to children too
 - more difficult to recognize
- goal: reduce and prevent children's suffering due to parental alcohol use – not only abuse



Problems experienced by children

1. Children of parents with alcohol problems are not heard.

Their efforts to speak out may be belittled.

The surrounding adults often do not take seriously.

Children find their means to survive.

Parents try to cover up drinking.

Smaller children have few means of telling.

Professionals that work with children do not always have skills/courage to recognize and act.



Problems experienced by children

2. The alcohol problem is different from a child's perspective than from that of the parent who drinks or of another adult.

For children a "modest user" parent can cause severe problems too (unanticipated behavior, not logical parenting)

Children can suffer social consequences: isolation, loneliness, bullying,

Many problems for children are only indirectly related to alcohol: lack of sleep > poor progress at school



Problems experienced by children

3. Harmful psychological and physical effects for children

- **self directed negative feelings**

Caused by negative and often powerful emotional experiences:

fear, anger, shame, insecurity, anxiety, sadness and worry, feeling unwanted, abandoned, unneeded

- **physical, sexual and mental violence**



Problems experienced by children

4. **Impossibility to lead normal childhood**

The parenting is to children's minds weak and daily life often chaotic.

Children do not have a right to play, recreation and leisure.

Childhood is shortened – they have to take over adults responsibilities, take care of their younger siblings and witness events that are harmful to their age and stage of development.



Problems experienced by children

5. The models and solutions that adults offer such as foster care or taking into institution do not necessarily sound better options from childrens perspective.



How to help children?

- Help parents to control drinking or abstain
 - prioritize parents in treatment
 - include the whole family in treatment process
- Rehabilitation takes often time – therefore the difficulties of children should be alleviated independently and if necessary regardless of their parents will
- Design general alcoholic policy so that it decreases the total level of consumption (taxation, sales arrangements and restrict advertising)



How to help children?

- social affairs and health sector professionals should be better trained in order to identify, help, support and treat children that suffer from their parents alcohol use
- take account of the children´s age
 - decrease the maternal alcohol use
 - monitor specially the risks for small children
 - at school age children face many indirect problems too



How to help children?

- Inform children about their rights and listen children themselves
 - arrange low threshold services, good general health services and possibilities for children to discuss their problems
 - websites, phone hotlines
 - school student care is crucial
 - it is not easy for children to find or attend special services



What did we ask Finnish government?

- That they should take up and recognize better the issue of parental alcoholic use and its harms to children
- They should support children whose parents abuse alcohol
- They should provide treatment for all those expecting mothers who abuse alcohol
- They should coordinate better policies nationally, gather research, assure commitment of local government (municipalities), secure education of professionals in these issues
- They should draft new legislation where needed



New Finnish government platform April 2007

“ The government will aim to decrease the use of alcohol by parents and the negative impacts of it to their children.

In order to secure the rights of children they will invest to the care of expecting mothers that abuse alcohol.

The support for children whose parents abuse alcohol will be secured”