

The Boston Globe DOWNTOWN

Warning: Alcohol can hurt the kids

A group targets drinkers' children

By Johnny Diaz, Globe Staff | February 13, 2005

For one Boston mother, Valentine's Day holds another meaning close to her heart, as the city has marked Feb. 14 Children of Alcoholics Day in Boston.

To her, the day acknowledges a quietly growing problem in the city, where one of every four children -- about 36,000 -- come from a family affected by alcoholism.

"Everyone has a different situation," said the woman, who asked that her name not be used to protect her 5-year-old son, whose father is an alcoholic. "It affects so many people, and so few people talk about it."

Because her son is too young for Alateen, a support group for teens affected by a problem drinker, the mother has sought family counseling at a local hospital and ordered books on Amazon.com such as "What's 'Drunk?,' Mama?" to help explain to her son why his father is sick.

In hopes of raising awareness of an issue that is rarely addressed from a child's point of view, Mayor Thomas M. Menino used a city proclamation to cite the Children of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, a newly formed group based downtown.

The local COASA chapter was born out of a need to help youngsters whose daily struggles often go unnoticed. Children of alcoholics are at greater risk for alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, and anxiety.

"There are all kinds of resources, but there is nothing specific for children of alcoholics," said Maureen McGlame, director of COASA in Boston.

While there are programs for adults, there aren't any support groups or services directly tailored for children of alcoholic parents except for Alateen, McGlame said.

"Everyone shuts up because it's taboo. You are not supposed to talk about it. The public is blind of the endemic nature of this issue," added McGlame, also an addictions specialist at Massachusetts General Hospital. "We are meant to be a resource. There is nothing in the city for these kids."

To get started, COASA has secured a space at the Boys & Girls Club in Charlestown to hold weekly meetings with children of alcoholics, so they can learn how to cope with their parents' problem and understand it's not their fault, McGlame said.

The weekly support group, which will begin in March, will include exercises focusing on the differences between the disease and the person who has it.

"They have a right to have a life of their own," McGlame said.

To commemorate Children of Alcoholics week, McGlame plans to screen an award-winning video, "Lost Childhood: Growing Up In An Alcoholic Family."

http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2005/02/13/warning_alcohol_can_hurt_the_kids/

The half-hour documentary unfolds in three parts, beginning in 1986 at a summer camp retreat for young children of alcoholics. One of the girls becomes a binge-drinker through her teens, while another comes to terms with her dead father's sickness.

The final chapter of the documentary returns to the summer camp in present day to visit the new generation of children of alcoholics.

"It's helpful to have children know their situation is not totally unique," said the 5-year-old's mother. "It's something not to be embarrassed about. The more normalizing it becomes for a child, the less traumatic it would be."

For more information about the movie "Lost Childhood: Growing Up In Alcoholic Family," call McGlame at 617-227-4183. A screening of the movie is planned for later this month at the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps at 11 Beacon St., in Boston.

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