



Both children and the society as a whole benefit from better support to families with substance abuse, physical and mental illnesses, or death

Many children grow up in families with substance abuse or mental illness. There are often serious consequences for their health, education and employment. This also applies when parents are seriously ill or have died. With support for children and parents, the intergenerational pattern can be broken.

Studies show that nearly eight percent of children in Sweden grow up with a parent with such serious abuse or mental health problems that the parent has received hospital care. When open care for substance abuse or mental illness and addiction-related convictions is included, the percentage of children rises to 17 percent.

Several risks for young people of parents with substance abuse

Young people of parents with substance abuse are more than twice as likely to leave compulsory school with incomplete grades compared with other young people. Those who manage to complete high school do not finish a post-secondary education as often as others with comparable grades.

When a parent has been treated for abuse, the risk for the child developing their own substance abuse is nearly four to seven times higher compared to other young people. During young adulthood, mortality is nearly three times higher. The need for social subsistence is four times more common in children of parents with substance abuse.

Mental illness at risk of being inherited

It is two to three times more common that young adults with a parent who has been hospitalized for mental illness have themselves also been treated by a psychiatric specialist. Suicide attempts when hospital care is needed are three times more common in this group.

Parents' disease can affect the child's future mental health

Close to six percent of all children in Sweden grow up with a parent that has cancer. If the parent's illness is serious, it is more common that the child's school performance is poor. The most obvious negative consequences for the children in adulthood is an increased risk of substance abuse and crime compared to their peers.

Risk of mental problems among young people who have lost a parent

Just over three percent of children in Sweden suffer during childhood due to a parent dying. A follow-up of children at 30–35 years showed twice as many mental health problems, compared with others. Children of parents who have died by accident, suicide or violence in young adulthood are five times more likely to be treated for addiction and three to four times more likely to attempt suicide. More than twice as many had died compared to other young people.

The right support can act as prevention

When parents with substance abuse, mental illness and/or serious illness receive care from the health care system and from the social services the children's situation needs to be paid attention to. The same applies if a parent dies.

When a parent or another close relative experiences serious difficulties it affects everyone in the family, the family environment, parents' mental health, the conditions for parenting, everyday life, and how the children are doing. The support needs to focus on the family, the parents, and the children's needs.

It is about strengthening protective factors through often quite simple measures – to provide adequate information and answers to questions, help the family to be able to talk about problems, let the children express their concerns and experiences, ensure that they are able to have friends and serious hobbies and that they are supported in school. Supportive relationships within the family, and with any supportive adult in addition to the parents, are fundamental and parents need to receive the help and support they need, both for themselves and in their parenting.

A life with routines and structure is important. Practical support may be needed to relieve the children and young people from the overwhelming responsibility and a heavy burden of care. A survey shows that three per cent of 15 year olds stay home from school one day a week to care for someone at home. Playing and learning in preschool and school is an important protective factor. Here children need special support and extra care.

Good relationships and a safe childhood can counter the risk that a genetic vulnerability to addiction and mental illness can entail. A tailor made support can make families and children better off here and now – and prevent the problems from being passed on to the next generation.

Everyone benefits from it

It is also cost effective. An economic analysis shows that the costs for society could be reduced by 35 billion SEK per year if a child dealing with abuse or serious mental illness in the family does not develop this him/herself in adulthood.

Referenced registry studies and reports on www.anhoriga.se (in Swedish)

Children as next of kin to patients in care – how many are they?

Children that are carers – how does it go for them in school?

Growing up with parents who have substance abuse problems or mental illness – how is life in young adulthood?

Health and social living conditions of young adults who lost a parent in death during childhood

Young carers in Sweden

Children as next of kin – Economic study of society's long-term costs

Children to a parent with cancer – how many are involved and what are the consequences of a life course perspective?