

When It's More than Nature vs. Nurture

Helping parents take action when their child struggles with addiction

For parents of young people who struggle with addiction, the need to identify the cause can become all consuming. Most parents are compelled to determine whether their child has a genetic predisposition toward addiction or whether environmental influences are at the root. But searching for a definitive answer to the proverbial “nature versus nurture” question will not unlock the door to a young person’s recovery. Instead, it has a tendency to trap parents in a place of fear and panic.

Hazelden, a part of the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, specializes in the assessment and treatment of addiction and co-occurring disorders for adolescents and young adults ages 12–25. Experts at our Plymouth, Minnesota, campus also work closely with parents and other family members throughout the treatment and recovery process. Leslie Adair, PhD, LP, LMFT, director of Mental Health and Family Services, explains how parents can move beyond their fears to effectively address the real threat to their child’s life: the disease of addiction. Below Adair discusses five important concepts for parents to consider.

1. Searching for the “cause” is a natural place to start.

Given the moral implications associated with addiction and mental health issues in our culture, it’s not surprising that parents assume they must have done something wrong when their child has an addiction. This is the mind-set that often sets parents in search of the definitive “cause” of their child’s addiction. *Is it absolutely a genetic condition (nature) and inevitable, or is it something I did to mess things up as a parent (nurture) that I can now change?* If only parents could answer that question, they could resolve the problem . . . or so they think.

2. Addiction isn’t a matter of *either nature or nurture*. It’s both and more—and almost beside the point.

Parents who turn to Hazelden for help are given a fresh perspective. Yes, parents learn about the “nature” aspect of addiction: that a genetic predisposition for addiction may exist, just as it may for any number of other medical conditions that run in families. And parents learn more about the “nurture” aspect of addiction: that individuals constantly interact with their environment—*influencing, changing, and modifying actions from both proactive and reactive standpoints*. But it’s only when parents put that search for the cause aside and to see their child’s addiction for what it is—a progressive and life-threatening disease—that they can begin to focus on helping their child.

3. Things can be explained away and explained away . . . until they can't anymore.

By the time most parents seek help for their child's addiction, the disease has progressed and the family has been traumatized and is in crisis. The child has been lying, cheating, perhaps stealing. There are arguments and confrontations, slamming doors, and sleepless nights. There may be failing grades at school, a car accident, arrest for underage consumption, or other serious signs of trouble. It's not uncommon for parents to feel like prisoners in their own home when addiction takes hold. They wonder, *Who is this kid? How could this happen to us? Where did my child go?*

4. Nothing changes if nothing changes.

When parents see through the fog of fear and anxiety long enough to take a closer look at their responses to their child's difficulties, options begin to surface. For example, perhaps the parent has been more reactive than strategic in addressing the child's behavior. As a parent, are you typically able to hold firm on limits with your child, or do you tend to give in easily? Do you allow your child to experience the consequences of his or her behavior? As Adair tells parents, "You can't break your child. It's okay to try new strategies as a parent—to hold limits, to stop enabling, to place more accountability on your child." In considering options and taking strategic action, Adair suggests parents evaluate their efforts by asking themselves: *Will this decision or action make it more or less likely my child will continue to use alcohol or other drugs?* By taking simple, positive action, continually evaluating the effectiveness, and making adjustments as needed, parents begin to see results. They realize they can hold limits, and they can stop enabling—and they gain sense of equilibrium and hope in the process.

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—Leslie Adair,
PhD, LP, LMFT

Director of Mental Health
and Family Services
Hazelden

5. Really, it's okay to stand back. Sometimes, it can be the best move you make.

Parents do not want to see their children suffer. That's a given. But struggles, disappointments, and perceived unfair situations can be opportunities for growth and positive change. And letting children deal with their difficulties provides them with hard-won but meaningful lessons for life. "The greatest gift parents can give their children is to allow them to struggle and work through their problems," says Adair. "That's how children develop the critical skills and abilities they will need in life."

Hundreds of young people find freedom from addiction every year through Hazelden's programs for adolescents and young adults, and parents often serve as powerful change agents in that process. But it's not an easy road for parents, and the path isn't always clear. That's why Hazelden provides extensive help and support for parents and other family members. Learn more today by visiting hazelden.org/youth or by calling **855-348-7048**.

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Hazelden's Adolescent and
Young Adult Services

hazelden.org/youth
855-348-7048

11505 36th Ave. N.
Plymouth, MN 55441-2398

Hazelden, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949,
helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction.

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