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[Elementary School Counselors' Experiences Working with Children Affected by Parental Substance Use](#)

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PURPOSE OF THE STUDY To better understand the experiences of school counselors working with elementary-aged students affected by parental substance use (PSU). Childhood exposure to PSU is linked to a variety of challenging effects, ranging from disarrangement of the home, contradictory emotions, difficulties in school and increased risk of experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as physical abuse, neglect, and navigating the death of a parent. School counselors are oftentimes the first line of intervention for elementary-aged students and their families, but the literature in this area is surprisingly sparse.

HOW THE RESEARCH ADVANCES THE PROFESSION This research sheds light on the experiences of elementary school counselors working with students affected by PSU, including their perceptions of the issue, observed effects on students, intervention strategies utilized, training experiences, and observed barriers to intervening with this important student population. All participants in this study described having a high prevalence of children affected by PSU in their schools. Participants perceived this student population as having increased frequency of ACEs, lacking classroom readiness skills, experiencing negative social and emotional effects, and struggling to navigate complicated housing situations (including living with other relatives or foster care). Multi-tiered interventions, including individual and small groups, school wide interventions, and family interventions are among the most identified. School counselors highlighted the importance of collaboration with school-based mental health counselors, family resource coordinators (FRCs), and school resource officers (SROs). Trauma-informed care approaches were highlighted as a helpful guide for school counselors navigating this issue. Concerningly, nearly all participants cited a need for increased training on substance use and its effects on children and families.

GUIDANCE FOR PRACTICING SCHOOL COUNSELORS Students affected by PSU should be considered a high-priority population requiring sensitive and specialized intervention, and often require multi-tiered approaches. Children exposed to PSU have an increased risk of ACEs, including parental overdose and death, having incarcerated parents, neglect, and abuse. These students are also at higher risk of substance use later in life. Participants in the current study noted that students affected by PSU may be likely to struggle emotionally, socially, and academically. These students are also more likely to live with other relatives or in foster care, which complicates the efforts of school counselors working to provide support and intervention. Participants in the current study affirmed the importance of multi-tiered systems of support for this student population, including having individual meetings with students, small groups (e.g., grief groups for students that have lost parents) and school-wide programming (such as Red-Ribbon Week). In addition to these approaches, school counselors should also consider the value of family-based interventions, such as conducting home visits, sending supportive notes to parents, connecting families to resource center supports, and additional outside referrals for substance treatment and mental health needs as appropriate. Third-party interventionists, such FRCs, SROs, and school-based

mental health counselors are invaluable resources and partners. Trauma-informed care approaches, obtained mostly through recent continuing education, appear to have bolstered elementary school counselor's sense of efficacy in working with this population, and provides a framework to understand the complex nature of addiction and its effects on children and families.

EQUITY DIMENSIONS Those with addictions and substance issues are a marginalized group. The stigma surrounding substance use and addictions is a barrier to treatment and access to resources. As a result, children of PSU also suffer a disadvantage as their parents or caregivers struggle to access help or resources. Stigma, shame and misunderstandings about addiction also make it difficult for children to ask for the help they need. This research addresses issues of equity that children of PSU experience. Findings from this study can help school counselors promote equitable treatment for these students and families.