



# **Drug Abuse and Fatherhood** Results of a Qualitative Study

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# Objectives

- Research on drug abusing parents focuses almost exclusively on mothers, whereas fathers are ignored
- Study seeks to narrow this research gap by gathering information on drug abusing men's
  - perceptions of fatherhood
  - patterns of reproduction
  - paternal involvement and parenting role
  - relationship to children's mothers
  - own childhood
  - impact of drug use on fatherhood and vice versa
  - skills, obstacles and concerns regarding fathering

⇒ Implications for prevention and intervention efforts?

# Methodology

Qualitative research design based on

## **A) Semi-structured interviews with 25 drug abusing fathers**

- eligibility criteria: 1) history of illicit drug abuse, 2) use of an illicit drug within the last 12 months or OST, 3) biological father of at least one minor child
- recruitment into the study via treatment services or referrals through the mothers of their children

## **B) Focus groups with 20 professionals working in drug treatment services for families**

## DRUG ABUSE AND FATHERHOOD

# Sample (n=25)

AGE:	M=38 years (range: 25 and 55 years)
EMPLOYMENT STATUS:	unemployed (n=19), employed (n=4), parental leave (n=1), disability benefits (n=1)
MONTHLY INCOME:	M=940€ (range: 175 to 4.900€; Mdn= 450€)
MARITAL STATUS:	married and living with a spouse (n=6), divorced/separated (n=4), unmarried (n=15)
DRUG USE:	history of heroin abuse (n=15), history of cocaine and/or amphetamines abuse (n=9) history of cannabis abuse (n=1)  use of an illicit drug last month (n=15)  currently in OST (n=11)

# RESULTS

# Patterns of reproduction

- 57 children (M=2.3 children)
- Number of children: 1 (n=10), 2 (n=5), 3 (n=6), 4 (n=1), 5 (n=3)
- Age when first child was born: M=26 yrs (range: 17 to 38 yrs)
- 39 different mothers: 11 of the 15 fathers with more than one child had conceived them with different partners
- 23 mothers had a history of illicit drug abuse
- Most children were conceived with women whom the men were in a committed relationship with (married or cohabiting)
- Planned fatherhood (n=12)
- Most fathers claimed to have had a (latent) wish to become a father

# Children and family situation

- Children's age: M=9.7 yrs (range: 7 months to 35 yrs)
- 46 of 57 children were minors
- Legal guardianship for the 46 minor children: both parents (n=19), mothers alone (n=17), foster care (n=7), fathers alone (n=3)
- 13 fathers currently not living with any of their children
- Living situation of the 46 minor children: with their mother (n=19), with both parents (n=13) , foster care (n=11), with father alone (n=3)
- Contact frequency to the 30 minor children not living with fathers: no contact (n=10), less than monthly (n=6), monthly (n=4), weekly (n=6), daily (n=4)
- Involvement with child protective services: ever (n=17), currently (n=13)

# Perceptions of fatherhood

- “fatherhood means responsibility”: breadwinner role most important
  - “being an involved, engaged and caring father”
  - “being a role model and teacher”
  - “being a disciplinarian and authority figure”
  - “being a protector”
  - “not being a drug user”
- ⇒ majority of respondents lacked a positive father figure in their own life: clear idea of how not to be as a father, but lack of a positive role model and a positive concept of fathering



# Living up to own perceptions: obstacles and challenges

- breadwinner role vs. poor economic situation
- taking responsibility and being committed vs. not being involved/in contact with all children
- conflicts with the children's mothers: mothers as "gatekeepers"
- insecurities about fathering due to the lack of a positive father figure and a positive parenting concept
- finding other ways to discipline children than using physical punishment

⇒ drugs abuse as the biggest barrier for achieving aspirations as a father

# Impact of drug use on fatherhood

## DIRECT EFFECTS

being indifferent, emotionally disconnected and withdrawn, distracted and absent-minded, unpredictable, impatient, easily irritated and hostile towards children, children withdraw themselves

## INDIRECT EFFECTS

being less involved and invested in family life, abandoning the responsibility for children, being absent and unreliable, increased conflicts with the mother(s), feelings of shame and guilt as an obstacle to (re)connect with children, purchasing drugs has priority over financial obligations to the family, separation from children due to imprisonment, children being taken into custody of child services, harm to children



Effects ran counter to the participants' aspirations as fathers

# Impact of fatherhood on drug use

- Most respondents indicated that becoming a father had not affected their drug use
- Some described an increase in use because drugs helped them to cope with the stresses and strains of fatherhood
- For several respondents the prospect of fatherhood was a motivator to reduce or quit using drugs
  - ⇒ fatherhood as a “turning point” not independent of the relationship to the children’s mother
  - ⇒ (non-drug using) partner’s support regarding involvement as a father and abstaining from drugs made it more likely that fatherhood worked as a turning point

# Conclusions

- Ignoring drug abusing fathers in research and treatment may feed into the existing negative stereotype of this group
- Discrepancy between drug abusing fathers' intentions to be good fathers and their ability to meet their aspirations
- Respondents held well-developed notions of what qualifies as good fathering but faced major obstacles; drug abuse as the biggest barrier
- Fatherhood has the potential to serve as a turning point
- Need for drug treatment and intervention programs that address fathering issues
- Need for greater acknowledgment of the fathering role of drug abusing men in research and treatment

# Thank you for your attention!

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