

# Talking about addiction and recovery

You've learned about the disease of addiction while you're in treatment and recovery programs. This knowledge has helped you understand your behavior and the changes in your brain because of chemical use. But your children may not have learned much about addiction and sobriety. It's important that they learn that you have a disease and that the disease is treatable. Here's one way you could talk with them:

Answer these questions and discuss with your group

**What do your children know about the disease of addiction? Where did they learn about it? Do they have the correct information?**

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**• What questions might your children have about addiction and treatment? Do you feel you have the knowledge you need to answer the questions? If not, where can you find the answers?**

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**• Does talking with your kids about addiction and recovery scare you? Why or why not? If so, how will you deal with this fear?**

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**• If you were your child, what would you want a parent to say to you now?**

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# Searching and fearless

In our fourth step, we take our inventory and identify which shortcomings and defects of character have affected our lives the most. We also discovered strengths and assets that we can use in our recovery. Some of these same shortcomings and assets apply to our parenting.

**My greatest strength as a parent is:**

*"I pay attention when my child talks to me."*

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Begin a parenting inventory here.

**Things I am good at doing as a parent:**

*"I stop what I'm doing to look at my child when he talks."*

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**My greatest weakness as a parent is:**

*"I don't get along with the other parent."*

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**Things I'm not so good at doing as a parent:**

*"Make a commitment to not putting my child in the middle."*

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# Why can't I discipline my kids?

**S**ometimes recovering parents have trouble setting limits and disciplining their children. But teaching kids how to behave appropriately and interact with the world is one of the parent's most important jobs. Here are some reasons we might give for not disciplining a child:

- **“I’m afraid my child won’t love me.”**

Kids will probably object when parents set limits. When you take away the fork your baby has found on the kitchen floor, she cries. When you tell your toddler he can't have a cookie before dinner, he throws a fit. When you forbid your 5-year-old to watch a PG-13 movie, he's likely to cry or sulk for a while. Sometimes a child may even send an insult your way: “You’re the meanest mom (or dad) in the world!”

These responses make us worry that limit setting will cause our kids to dislike us. But even though children cry, sulk or yell when you set limits, they really don't want power over their parents. Children realize that they're small and vulnerable, and they're terrified when they don't feel that an adult can keep them safe. It's important to set reasonable limits and enforce them consistently to help your child feel loved and secure. Your child will love you more when you show you care and are there to teach them.

- **“I don't know what to do.”**

All parents have times when they aren't sure how to handle a parenting situation. It can be especially difficult if you did not have good parenting models growing up. Even experts don't always agree on the answers. Sometimes it's a matter of trial-and-error to see what works with your child. Learn as much as you can about parenting by taking classes, reading, talking with other parents and seeking help when you need advice. The more options you know, the more choices you have for how to respond when your child misbehaves. Trust your instincts. If you are acting out of love, you will find a solution.

- **“I feel guilty for the past.”**

This is a big one for recovering parents. Overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame over past actions can make us unable to step in when a child needs direction. Working a program of recovery and finding support in our community can help with these feelings and allow us to discipline without guilt. Review your personal inventory and get support to overcome these feelings, knowing that guilt over the past can stop you from being the best parent you can be in the present moment.

# It works if you work it

## Using the slogans to be a better parent

### First things first

Don't lose sight of what's important. Your focus must be on your recovery – keep yourself balanced and work your program.

### If you want your child to love you

Get to know parents who have warm and loving relationships with their children. Learn from them and ask for their thoughts on how to handle parenting situations. Join a parent support group or take a parenting class. Ask for help from your child's school or community group.



### No more “stinkin’ thinkin’

It's not only a threat to recovery, but a threat to parenting as well. When we have a long list of “should” and “must” things related to our kids, we often end up angry, resentful and depressed. Remember that you can control your thinking and, in turn, control your emotions and behavior.

### Live and let live

When we live and let live, we accept ourselves and others; this includes our children. When we truly accept our children for who they are, we open the door for loving relationships. “Accepting” does not mean allowing behavior that is cruel, rude or destructive – it means we understand where a child is coming from and work with him to improve behavior.

### Have an attitude of gratitude

No matter where you've been or how long you have been away from your children, you are clean and sober today and you can be around to parent them for the rest of your life. Be grateful that you have a new chance to be a better parent and be part of your child's life!



### HALT

Hungry, angry, lonely and tired. Sometimes a minor adjustment in one of these areas can get us back on the right path. Pay attention to the basics – rest, nutrition, exercise, fun, support – in both yourself and your children.

# Recovery & Parenting – A balancing act

In early recovery, your first priority is to stay clean and sober. It's important to learn to balance your own needs and your children's needs so that you can face the challenges of parenting without drugs or alcohol. Remember – nothing is so bad that a drink or drug won't make it worse!

Identifying three needs you have in recovery and in parenting, and write down a few ways to meet these needs.

Many of the same things that are important for maintaining sobriety are also important in parenting.

**RECOVERY**

**PARENTING**

**My needs:**

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**Ways to meet these needs:**

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# Preventing Relapse

Here are some things that parents who have relapsed have said:

- I used to kill the pain after visits with my children. I felt like I could manage the feelings better if I used.
- Past physical and sexual abuse issues brought a lot of painful memories to the surface once I got clean.
- I got so busy with taking care of my kids that my sobriety wasn't the priority anymore.
- I was ashamed and felt so guilty about my kids, I just couldn't deal with it.
- I was clean for a long time and things were so much better. Then I figured I could handle using and control it. I couldn't.
- I never had a problem with alcohol in the past, so I started drinking. Next thing I knew I was back on heroin.
- Being clean meant so many responsibilities and I didn't think I could do it. Everything was so hard.
- I couldn't tell the truth to the people who could help me. I just didn't trust anyone to help.
- Not having structure in my life was bad. I had too much time on my hands when I had an urge to use.
- Nobody in my family is healthy. I needed more support and didn't reach out to get it.
- I figured I was too busy to go to NA meetings and decided that "everyone there is using."
- Enabling family members made it easier for me to use.
- I just never felt worthy of good things in my life. When things were going OK it just felt so strange.
- My old friends showed up just at my lowest point, offering drugs, and it all seemed so familiar.



Come up with some strategies and note them here.

How can you plan the plan now to prevent relapse?

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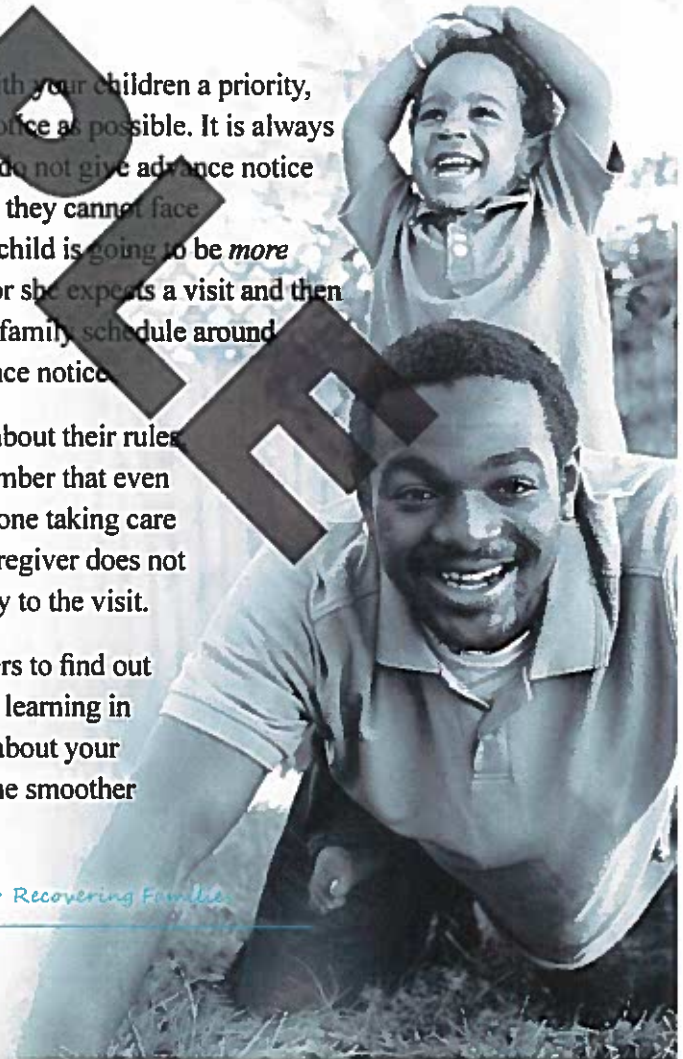
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# Connecting with your children through visits & phone calls

**E**ven if you are not going to be living with your children right away, you can improve your relationship with them by making the most of the time you get with them. Visits with children can be awkward and confusing, for both parents and children. Even though children are usually happy to see their parents, they sometimes act out before, during or after visits as they react to the changes in their lives.

## TRY THESE TIPS:

- **Plan ahead:** Whenever possible, visits should be planned ahead of time and the date, time, location, and who will attend should be clearly understood by everyone. If there is too much tension between you and the caregiver to talk directly with them about visits, ask another relative, a friend, or a counselor to help with communication.
- **Prepare yourself:** Think about what you will talk about, any activities you have planned and any information you have to share. Line up your support system for after the visit in case things don't go well and you need a listening ear.
- **Give advance notice for cancellations:** Make visits with your children a priority, but if you cannot make a visit, give as much advance notice as possible. It is always better to cancel than to just not show up. Some parents do not give advance notice that they cannot make it to a visit because they feel like they cannot face disappointing their child (or the caregiver) — but your child is going to be *more* disappointed (and perhaps worried or angry, too) if he or she expects a visit and then you don't show up. And the caregiver has arranged the family schedule around the visit, so it's also just more considerate to give advance notice.
- **Respect the rules:** Talk with the caregiver in advance about their rules and respect the caregiver's rules during the visit. Remember that even though you are your child's parent, the caregiver is the one taking care of your child day in and day out. For example, if the caregiver does not allow your child to eat a lot of sweets, don't bring candy to the visit.
- **Know your child's interests:** Use phone calls and letters to find out about your child's favorite activities, what your child is learning in school, his favorite music, TV shows, and games. Ask about your child's friends. The more you know about your child, the smoother your transition back into her life will be.







## PFSA Publication Helps Recovering Parents

For many parents in recovery from addiction, the hardest part of staying clean may be facing up to the effects of drug or alcohol use on the family. Risk of relapse is high when the demands of parenting are combined with the needs of the parent to maintain a program of recovery. But with help and support, people recover and become better parents.

Recognizing the link between substance abuse and child maltreatment, PFSA worked closely with parents in recovery and professionals in the field of chemical addiction to create *Recovering Families*, an easy-to-read, practical workbook that can be used in both group and individual settings. **Our goal is to help parents with a history of chemical addiction understand how their drug or alcohol use has impacted their children and how they can move forward in recovery while nurturing and supporting their children.** Since its introduction in 2010, the workbook has been used in dozens of locations across Pennsylvania and in other states as well. One organization committed to offering help to recovering parents is White Deer Run (WDR), a 260-bed inpatient facility in Allenwood (Union County).

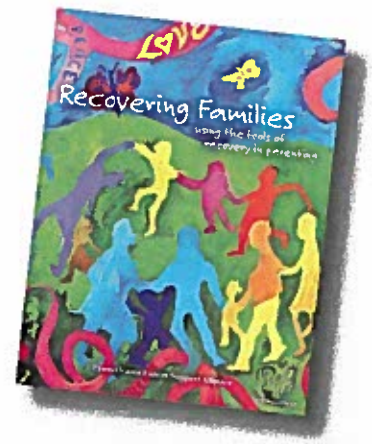
For the past year, WDR has offered its patients a special treatment program called HUGS, geared to combining the tools of recovery and parent education. A cornerstone of the HUGS program is PFSA's *Recovering Families* workbook. "We chose *Recovering Families* because it focuses on giving clients skills for working on both their recovery from addiction and their parenting. It's unique," says Amber Dissinger, Quality Improvement Coordinator for WDR. "Before we started the program, there was a big gap in our treatment. If we don't address our clients' parenting and family issues, we miss a big chance to help them recover."

To date, more than 560 recovering parents have participated in the program while patients at WDR. "They love it. It's become the most popular group we offer here," says Amber.

Patients who wish to enter the HUGS program meet with staff for assessment. They attend weekly group sessions (males and females attend separate sessions) to discuss a wide range of topics, based on the *Recovering Families* book; for example, how to talk with children about addiction and recovery, making amends to children, understanding child behavior and tips for reuniting with children following treatment.

Between group meetings, participants work through the activities and exercises in *Recovering Families* and receive individual time with the HUGS staff to discuss their progress and concerns. A highlight of the HUGS program is a visit with the patient's children, who have an opportunity to spend time with their parent in a safe, informal setting. Caregivers of the child also receive information and support when they arrive for the visit. Clients take the workbook with them when they leave the facility and are encouraged to continue the discussion during outpatient or counseling sessions.

Recently, alumni of the program have returned to the facility to share their experiences in using the *Recovering Families* strategies after they return home to parent clean and sober, often for the first time. "It's so powerful for our current participants to hear from others who have been where they are now – in treatment, scared and unsure of how they will ever make it as a parent. To talk with another recovering addict who is using what they learned here to be a better parent – that's so valuable and encouraging," says Carly Klinger, HUGS facilitator for WDR.



*Recovering Families* will be revised and updated in a second edition, to be published in early 2014. It is available for purchase on PFSA's website or by calling our office. •

### Recovery Month 2013

National Recovery Month (September) is a national observance that educates Americans on the fact that addiction treatment and mental health services can enable those with a mental and/or substance use disorder to live a healthy and rewarding life. The observance's main focus is to spread the positive message that prevention works, treatment is effective, and people can and do recover.

Recovery Month, now in its 24th year, highlights individuals who have reclaimed their lives and are living happy and healthy lives in long-term recovery and also honors the prevention, treatment, and recovery service providers who make recovery possible. Recovery Month promotes the message that recovery in all its forms is possible, and also encourages citizens to take action to help expand and improve the availability of effective prevention, treatment, and recovery services for those in need. For more information visit [www.recoverymonth.org](http://www.recoverymonth.org).

PFSA is proud to be part of National Recovery Month, and to offer our *Recovering Families* program to parents across the state. •



## You can talk to yourself.

Your thoughts are powerful; you can change your feelings – and behavior – by changing your thoughts. Affirming what you will do each day helps you stay in the present. It keeps you from creating expectations for yourself and your family that lead you to become angry, resentful or depressed. Try a few of these:

- Today, I will love my child unconditionally.
- Today, I will accept myself.
- Today, I will choose how to react.
- Today, I will not regret the past. I will not worry about the future. I will live in the present.
- Today, I will be honest with myself and my family.
- Today, I will be grateful.
- Today, I will model the kindness, understanding and respect I would like to receive from my children.
- Today, I will maintain my serenity.

Someone said, "Recovery is like walking up a down escalator. If you stand still, you go backward." The tips in this brochure are real. You can become a better parent. You can bring love, honesty, and trust to your family. It's not easy – but you've already seen one miracle happen in your life.

*"In this brochure "alcoholic" and "addict" are used interchangeably. They refer to all individuals with chemical/behavioral addictions.*

*Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance is supported by the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, Office of Children, Youth and Families.*



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# Parenting One Day at a Time

*Help for parents in recovery*  
Parenting Series



## When you are a parent who is in recovery from drug or alcohol abuse...

You are not alone. Many of the people you've met in treatment programs and meetings would like to improve their parenting now that they are clean and sober. It often feels like an uphill climb! Your efforts to become a better parent are like your efforts to stay sober. It's not an easy task.

- **Change is frightening.** Old voices – fear, guilt, self-pity, self-doubt – will work overtime to drown out the new voices. Remember that your growth as a parent begins when you are willing to risk failure in order to succeed. Your best defense against the ups and downs of recovery is to know what to expect.
- **Conflict** between your own recovery needs and the needs of your family may surface. For example, your family may resent the time you spend at meetings. If yours is like most alcoholic\* families, you're used to avoiding conflict, denying feelings and withdrawing from other family members. You'll need new tools for dealing with conflict in healthy ways.
- **Your partner and children need to recover, too,** and the way they do that is different from your own recovery. Initially, your family may be relieved and ecstatic about your sobriety. Slowly, fears, hurts and resentments that built up over the years come to the surface. Your partner or older children have taken on your share of responsibilities and may not want to hand them back to you.

- **Children often blame themselves for your addiction or relapse.** They may think that they are bad or unlovable – why else would their parents want to drink? Children need lots of reassurance and positive messages.

- **You are creating a new family.** The people in your family may look the same, but you are all different people now that you're clean. Your addiction defined your family and gave each family member a role and identity. Your recovery takes away some of your family's most serious problems, but it gives you some new challenges. You'll need new traditions, activities and even new relationships if you want your new family to succeed.



## You can use what you've learned in recovery to be a better parent.

- **Keep it simple.** This is one thing about recovery that fits perfectly with parenting. You might look at your family now and feel overwhelmed by all the things that need "fixing." Don't deal with all of them, only the things that are important. Keep it simple – not easy, just simple.
- **Easy does it.** It's tempting to believe that "once you quit, everything will be OK." Fact is, when you put on a new suit of sobriety, you bring a stranger into the house. Your children don't know what to expect; your partner doesn't trust you. Be gentle and go easy.
- **Have an attitude of gratitude.** Part of what fed your addiction was ingratitude – focusing on problems rather than on opportunities. Gratitude helps you focus on others – your children especially – and gives you patience and tolerance. Keeping your gratitude attitude will help you appreciate your children and your new life.
- **Make amends.** You cannot turn back the clock and make up for lost years, but you can repair the damage that your addiction caused. The way to make amends with your children depends on their ages and your conduct when you were in your addiction. Start with an apology. Remember, some behavior from addiction effected your child indirectly; for example, you lost your driver's license and your children couldn't get to after school activities.
- **Let go.** For parents, letting go means many things. It means coming to realize that we cannot control our children. It means allowing our children to have the time they need to unfold their lives in their own way. It means being willing to grow along with – and sometimes in spite of – our children. For most addicts, letting go of guilt and shame is the most rewarding part of recovery.
- **Seek progress, not perfection.** You don't have to be all things to your kids, and you cannot be a perfect parent. When you make mistakes – and all parents make them – you have an opportunity to show your children how to admit mistakes, learn and move on.
- **Go to a meeting.** Not that kind of meeting – a family support meeting. This is a time for parents and kids to get together to share ideas and make plans. Family support programs are a way for you to connect with other parents who've "been there" and can help and support you in your parenting struggles.
- **Live and let live.** This applies especially to children. Accepting your child is not the same as accepting rude, cruel or destructive behavior. Acceptance is love, understanding, respect and encouragement.
- **Keep coming back.** Don't ever give up on yourself, your children or your family.

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