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NATIONAL CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS WEEK ENCOURAGES HELPING YOUTH COPE WITH FAMILY CHALLENGES

An estimated one in seven children in the United States lives in households with one or more adults who abuse alcohol, with more than a third of these children – 3.5 million – five years of age or younger. To encourage awareness of this fact, the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services is promoting National Children of Alcoholics Week Feb. 9-15.

The theme for this year's observance, "No Child Unsupported," notes the fact that effective prevention measures exist to help children of alcoholics cope with life's many challenges. By providing such youths with the support they need, family members, friends, doctors and entire communities can be a steadying force, bringing hope to young lives and preventing more problems down the road.

The National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACOA) states that children of alcoholics are at higher risk for school failure, depression, increased anxiety and developing problems of their own with alcohol. Children of alcoholics also are increased risk of accidental injury, verbal, physical or sexual abuse, and neglect associated with their parent's excessive drinking. In fact, hospital admission rates for children of alcoholics are substantially higher than rates for children from non-alcoholic

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families: for substance abuse, the inpatient admission rate is three times that of other children; and for mental disorders, the rate is double.

Children who live with alcoholic parents need accurate information so they can understand that alcoholism is a disease and has nothing to do with them, NACOA reports. By learning about such things as denial, blackouts, relapse and recovery, these children can come to terms with the fact that they are not to blame and they can't make it better.

The NACOA has this advice for children of alcoholics:

● Talk about how you feel. You can talk with the safe people in your life – maybe a close friend, a relative, a school counselor or teacher, or a minister. Sharing your feelings is not being mean to your family. When you talk to someone, you might feel less alone.

● Try to get involved in doing enjoyable things at school or near where you live – the school band, softball, Boy or Girl Scouts, etc. Doing these types of activities can help you forget about the problems at home, and you could learn new things about yourself and about how other people live their lives.

● Remember that feeling afraid and alone is a normal way to feel when you live with alcoholic parents. It's confusing to hate the disease of alcoholism at the same time that you love the alcoholic parent. Having two different feelings at the same time is the way many kids feel about having alcoholic parents.

● Have fun! Sometimes children from alcoholic families worry so much that they forget to be "just a kid." If things are bad at home, you might not have anyone who will help you have fun, but don't let that stop you. Find a way to let yourself have fun.

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● Don’t ride in a car when the driver has been drinking if you can avoid it. Walk or try to get a ride with an adult friend who has not been drinking. If your parents are going out to drink somewhere, try not to go with them. (If you must go, sit in the middle of the back seat, buckle up and stay calm.)

● Don’t pour out or try to water down your parent’s alcohol. The plain fact is it won’t work. You have no control over their drinking. You didn’t make the problem start and you can’t make it stop. It’s up to your parent to get help. What your parent does is not your responsibility or your fault.

NACOA has a toll-free number – 1-888-554-2627 – to provide information and materials for parents, children, teachers and others. Also, in Oklahoma, children and teenagers can talk to a caring, concerned listener through the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services’ “Teenline” at 1-800-522-TEEN. Teenline operates from noon to midnight seven days a week.

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