

Families With Special Challenges

Poverty, substance abuse and domestic abuse: their effect on our children

Starting school is an important event in children's—and their family's—lives. Children and their parents approach this milestone with a mixture of excitement, pride, anticipation, and anxiety. All these are normal feelings. But some families face extra challenges during this time.

Children are particularly sensitive to emotional stresses and changes in their physical environment. They may not understand everything that's going on, but they react, often negatively, to unsettled family conditions. Schools and other organizations that serve families and children need to be aware of these special needs, and respond with extra support.

Poverty is the single greatest threat to children's well-being. It has negative impacts on children's health, their access to educational materials and experiences, and their interactions with other children and adults.¹ Poor children, in general, start school "behind" their more well-off peers, and fall increasingly behind as school progresses.² In Vermont, about one in nine children live in

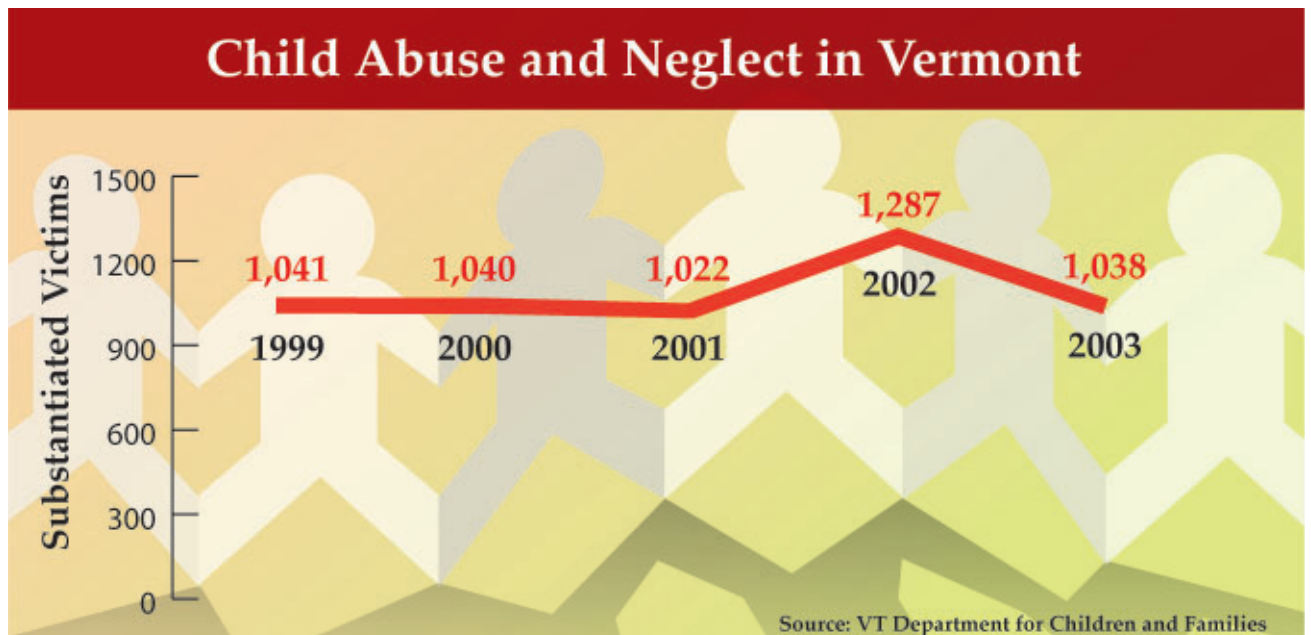
families with income less than the official poverty level.³ Many consider a more realistic measure of poverty to be twice the official poverty threshold; using that measure, more than a third of Vermont children are poor.⁴

Another serious issue for many Vermont children is domestic violence and substance abuse. Children who are victims of violence by family members, or who witness family violence, suffer harm that doesn't easily go away. Abuse during childhood can have permanent effects on the developing brain, and can lead to a number of behavioral and academic problems.⁵

Substance abuse by family members who are responsible for the care of children is child abuse. And substance abuse is often associated other with forms of domestic violence.⁶

Unfortunately, domestic violence and substance abuse are often "hidden." But we know both are far too common in Vermont. Nearly 4,000 "Relief From Abuse" orders—the first line of legal protection for domestic violence victims—were granted by Vermont courts in 2004.⁷ More than 1,000 Vermont children were "substantiated" victims of abuse in 2003.⁸ There are many more victims who do not come to public attention.

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Alcohol and other drugs are widely abused in Vermont.

About one in four adults report “binge” drinking at least once in the past month.⁹ About one in ten use marijuana at least monthly; among younger adults (18- to 25-year-olds), it’s closer to one in four.¹⁰ Many of these adults live with young children.

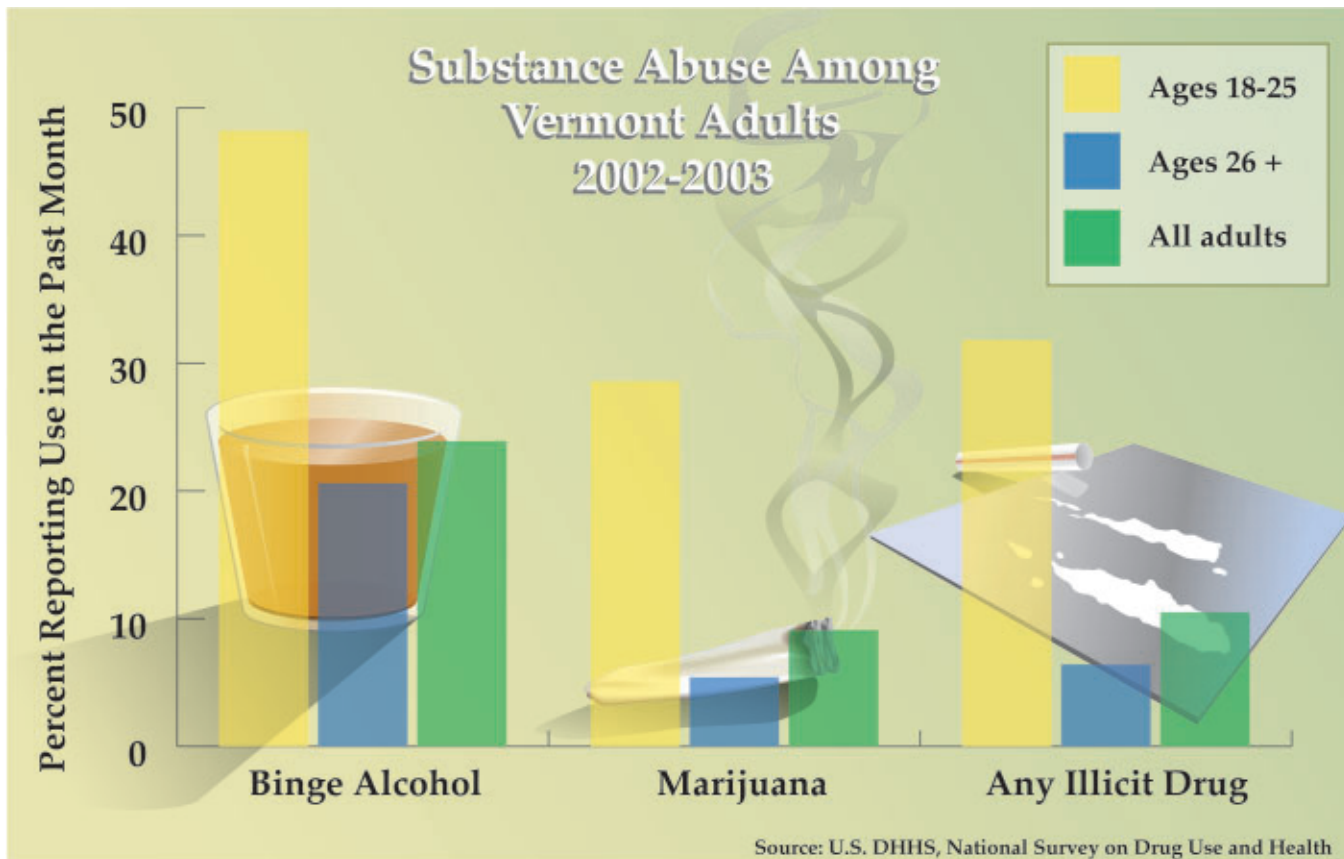
Many children have a parent who is, or recently was, incarcerated.

These children are also at high risk for stress, a disrupted home-life, and behavioral difficulties. In Vermont, hundreds of children each year face having a parent put in prison, and thousands have a parent come home from prison, often bringing new challenges as he or she makes the adjustment

to life on the “outside.” Families in these circumstances must adapt to many challenges with respect to economic stability, housing, transportation, and parenting. Community members who reach out with support can help them through a very difficult time.

Some new Vermonters are refugees—

victims of wars, internal strife, or political repression in other countries who have been granted a safe haven in the United States. While their numbers are relatively small, children in refugee families have a number of special needs. Many of these families are just learning English. Many have experienced physical and psychological trauma and deprivation. All have the stress of leaving behind familiar settings and entering into what to them is a foreign environment.



What Can You Do?

- Contribute or volunteer with organizations in your area that seek to alleviate poverty or address its underlying causes.
- Learn the facts about domestic violence and substance abuse. Start by looking at your own behavior—does it set a good example?
- Report suspected abuse (you can do so anonymously).
- Urge family members and others you know to get treatment for domestic violence and/or substance abuse.
- Work with your local community justice center or reparative board to strengthen the supports

Start by looking at your own behavior—does it set a good example?

communities provide to returning offenders, and help build the community assets that will lower rates of incarceration.

- Volunteer to assist refugee families, as an English language tutor, or by helping with short-term transportation and other needs.

For More Information:

Reach Up Program

Contact your local Department for Children and Families District Office

Vermont Food Stamp Program

Contact your local Department for Children and Families District Office

Emergency Food Assistance

1-800-585-2265

Vermont Livable Wage Campaign

(802) 863-2345 x8, or www.vtlivablewage.org

Reporting suspected child abuse

Contact your local Department for Children and Families District Office, or call 1-800-649-5285 (after 4:30pm)

Vermont Network Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

24-hour hotlines: 1-800-228-7395 (domestic violence), 1-800-489-7273 (sexual assault)

Community Reparative Boards

contact Sherry Burnette
(802) 241-2302

Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program:

(802) 655-1963

State Refugee Coordinator

(802) 241-2229, or denisel@ahs.state.vt.us

- 1 Sherman A. Poverty Matters: The cost of child poverty in America. Children's Defense Fund. Washington, DC, 1997.
- 2 West J, Denton K, and Germino-Hausken E. America's Kindergartners: Findings from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99, Fall 1998. NCES 2000-070. U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC, 2000.
Denton K, and West J. Children's reading and mathematics achievement in kindergarten and first grade.
- 3 U.S. Census Bureau. 2003 American Community Survey.
- 4 National Center for Children in Poverty. Rate of children in low-income families varies widely by state. New York, September 2004.
- 5 Teicher MH. Scars That Won't Heal: The neurobiology of child abuse. Scientific American, March 2002, 68-75.
- 6 U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation. Violence among family members and intimate partners. "Special report" in Crime in the United States, 2003. Washington, DC, 2004.
- 7 Office of the Vermont Court Administrator. Montpelier, VT. Accessible at www.vermontjudiciary.org/Library/PDF/pdfstats/Annual/fy04/familyfy04.pdf
- 8 Vermont Department for Children and Families. Accessed at www.path.state.vt.us/cwyj/stats/can/2003stats/2003.shtml
- 9 Vermont Department of Health. Behavioral Risk Factors Surveillance System. Burlington, VT.
- 10 U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. 2001 NHSDA state estimates of substance abuse—Highlights. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies. Washington, DC, 2004.

School Readiness Series:

What Do We Know?

Children's readiness for kindergarten
Schools' readiness for children

Are Our Young Children Healthy?

Children who are overweight or at risk
Health factors affecting learning

Families With Special Challenges

Children living in poverty
Domestic violence and substance abuse
Incarceration of parents
Refugees

Social-Emotional Development

Behavioral/emotional development
Interaction with other students
Challenges for teachers

Children With Special Needs

Who are children with special needs?
Support information

The Workforce in Early Care & Education

Caring for caregivers
Paid caregivers
Investing in quality childcare

The School Readiness Series is one of several research initiatives currently supported by the Vermont Research Partnership. Too many children enter kindergarten with physical, social, emotional and cognitive limitations that could have been minimized or eliminated through early attention to child and family needs. States are developing comprehensive school readiness indicator systems, a necessity to sustain current investments in the most effective programs for children and to make the case for increased investments to improve outcomes for young children and their families. Vermont's School Readiness Series strives to communicate that "readiness" is a shared responsibility of families, schools and communities. The Series provides fundamental school readiness indicators and resources for additional information about what can be done to help young Vermonters make the most of school.

The Vermont Research Partnership was established in 1998 as a collaborative between the Agency of Human Services, the Department of Education, and the University of Vermont. The Partnership's primary objective is to study and improve the effectiveness of community-based initiatives undertaken by these three parties. The Vermont Research Partnership develops shared research agendas on topics of particular importance for enhancing policies and practices that affect children, youth, and families. Projects engage the diverse perspectives of researchers, program directors, practitioners, and community members from across the state.



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