

PENNSYLVANIA FAMILY SUPPORT ALLIANCE



# parenting one day at a time

**HELP FOR PARENTS IN RECOVERY**



**PARENTING SERIES**

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# 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 they 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.
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# 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.
- **Making 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.
- **Letting 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.

# 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 Public Welfare/Office of Children, Youth, and Families**

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