

HANDLE WITH CARE
SOUTH CHARLESTON, WV

When a state faces an addiction crisis as severe as West Virginia, it's bound to create many problems beyond addiction itself. Consider children living in homes where addiction occurs.

The decline of the coal industry, in a state that boasted for decades "Coal is king," caused severe financial hardship for many families. The Mountain State is second nationally for grandparents raising grandchildren and is ranked number one for children removed from their home. All that creates lasting effects.

"If you grew up in a home where you were on hyper alert at all times, you carry that with you in your body," says Andrea Darr, director of the Handle With Care program. "As you grow up, it's still there. You may pick up habits like smoking, drinking, or drug use to help you deal with these problems in the short term. But in the long run, it creates terrible problems for you, such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer."

It especially can lead to problems at school. This is why the program was created. "We have Handle with Care because we want children to learn. We don't want them stuck in the trauma of what happened last night when the police came to their house."

In its most basic sense, the program helps children living in homes where addiction is present to put their focus on learning.


It started in 2015 with just two counties. Now it operates statewide and has even gone on to 20 other states as well.

How does Handle with Care work? It's very simple. Whenever law enforcement officers discover a child living in a challenging home environment, they send a confidential message alerting school officials to handle that child with care. They don't provide details regarding the



SOLUTIONS TO HELP CHILDREN IMPACTED BY SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

According to the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children, over nine million children in the U.S. live in a home with at least one parent who uses illicit drugs. These children are at an increased risk for depression, suicide, poverty, delinquency, anxiety, homelessness, and substance misuse. Many children who have a family in active addiction live in kinship or foster care.



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– Andrea Darr





handlewithcarew.org

incident that prompted the message. (The message doesn't stay in the child's permanent record, either.) All school officials receive are three simple words: Handle with Care.

The program also educates school staff about trauma and how to mitigate its effects. "We want to shift the response to 'What happened to you and how can I help?' We want teachers to be proactive rather than reactive," Darr explains. "We don't want to join students in their chaos but rather we want to bring them into our calm." Interventions include helping with homework, providing food, postponing tests, and making a counselor available.

The final step involves providing therapy onsite at school as needed. Space is made available on campus for therapists to talk with children privately. It also removes reliance on parents to take their children to therapy sessions.

The program is available to all public-school grade levels. It doesn't cost any money; it's merely a new way of looking at the issue and providing help to a hurting child.

"The best thing we can do is to give them an education," Darr says. "If Handle with Care can get them through this day, through this week, through this year, that's the best shot in life they've got." Handle with care shows that three simple words can make a big difference.

NUMBERS:

- 1 in 4 West Virginia children lives in poverty
- West Virginia leads the nation in children removed from their home.
- It is second in children being raised by grandparents.

SUMMARY:

- The Handle With Care program provides caring support for children where addiction exists in their home.
 - If a law enforcement officer encounters a child during a call, that child's information is forwarded to the school with the message to "handle with care."
 - The alert means additional steps can be taken to make sure the child receives caring support.
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