

**ABSTRACT**

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Protecting Children in Families with Alcohol Problems
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**TRYING TO INFLUENCE THE PROCESS OF A SOCIAL PROBLEM
THE FRAGILE CHILDHOOD PROJECT IN FINLAND SINCE 1986**

The prevention, research, training and treatment project "*Lasinen lapsuus (A Fragile Childhood)*" started in 1986 as a joint venture of the main Finnish alcohol treatment organization, A-Clinic Foundation, the Finnish alcohol monopoly, ALKO and the City of Helsinki. There has been many other cooperating cities, agencies, companies and individuals.

The project was born during the era when the Anglo-Saxon oriented *Children of Alcoholics* movement was expanding to other countries. In Finland the project initiators considered that the COA emphasise on adult children and "alcoholics" are not the most attention needing elements in the phenomena. Fragile Childhood departs from the assessment that rather small children and all alcohol using families in which children perceive problems due to the parental drinking, should be focus of the work. It was also deemed that due to the emphases on small children an *indirect* policy programme is needed, with focus on intermediates: a process rather than an act, trying ambitiously to influence the emerging *social problem* with a strong *child perspective* and to avoid adult bias. The aim is to build infrastructure to help people before awareness raising, and support professionals to arrange low threshold services and to prioritise children for adults, especially if they work with children.

The important messages of the Fragile Childhood project are: 1) Alcohol families are very common, it is a question of a *public health problem*. There is a lot of harms caused. 2) Because of the child perspective it is not only question of "alcoholics", but also of - according to adult perspective - normal "alcohol families". 3) The focus is on small children and not only the "Adult children of alcoholics", because small children have no-one inside the family to help. 4) Professionals, even the child care professionals tend to be biased to work with adults instead of children. 5) The main nature of the project is to emphasise optimism because children have a lot of inborn resources. Therefore everyone can help. 6) Preference for support is by close people and self-help for *survival* in spite of the drinking of parents. Non-severe cases should be dealt with *symptom level* rather than directly with alcohol issues to avoid guilty-labelling. In severe cases, naturally, different professionals are needed. 7) On family level the idea of *responsible parenting* is promoted to decrease the risk for later addiction problems.

The schedule of the project is that between 1986 and 2008 first professionals, then alcohol families, mass media, and finally general public are approached by surveys, research, information material, lobbying, supportive work, training of professionals (more than 15 000 trained already). The *extensive project material* consists of text books, reviews, writing competition, research reports, self-help material, videos, television spots, www-pages, print and electronic media contributions, telephone support line, professional network, training courses, brochures, posters, post cards, stickers, pins etc. There is regular press coverage, the most recent items (Nov 2006) a talk show on the main TV channel featuring FC expert and writing competitions winners as well as articles in the evening papers and family magazines. The most recent www.lasinenlapsuus.fi will be updated in 2006 as an Internet support site for professionals. Later on a version for alcohol families and the public at large will be opened. Close cooperation with several extensive Encare projects in taking place.

The 1994 and 2004 national representative Fragile Childhood surveys suggest that 10 % of the Finnish population has lived in *alcohol families*. According to the professional survey in 1995-96 most part or 71 % of the respondents had identified in their work at least one, and in average nine cases of children in alcohol families. The clear *differences* between the organizations may be due to both their different client material and the differences in the facility of recognition. The 1994 and 2004 surveys seem to indicate that even if the prevalence of alcohol families has not changed. Still compared to the extensive increase of alcohol consumption during that period it may mean a slight downward trend. There are also indications that the reporting of the phenomena by women may have increased. When trying to analyse the possible effects of the Fragile Childhood project during its life span of two decades on these developments it can be concluded that in Finland it may have had a part in influencing the formulation of the new emerging social problem. Recently it has also gained some influence to the top decision makers. In Europe it has had been one of the catalysts in creating Encare activities.

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