

PITCH 4 KIDZ

By Stacey Beck



Admit it, there is something exciting about those kids' menus at restaurants. As adults, we secretly want to color that surfboard or play tic-tac-toe; and the crayon gives us permission to play and create. Even people who would not identify themselves as artistic seem to abandon that belief when crayons are placed in the center of the table. The crayon gives us permission to revisit a common childhood experience, even if just for a few moments. There is power in that crayon, a sense of freedom and simple joy which is often missing from our daily routines.

When families are dealing with the disease of addiction, creativity and playfulness are frequently lost in the turmoil and fear. When living in a home where a loved one struggles with the disease of addiction, children are profoundly affected. They are often subjected to conflict, instability and a chaotic environment. Children may internalize a lack of trust and may not openly share feelings. They innately understand that secrecy is paramount. They often feel isolated, confused and frustrated.

Regardless of how well family members attempt to conceal a family member's addiction, the children know a problem exists even if they do not have the vocabulary to verbalize their experience. When families hide the truth, children often create stories in their minds about what is occurring; they search for a framework that makes sense of the chaos. Often the result is the children blame themselves for family conflict and dysfunction.

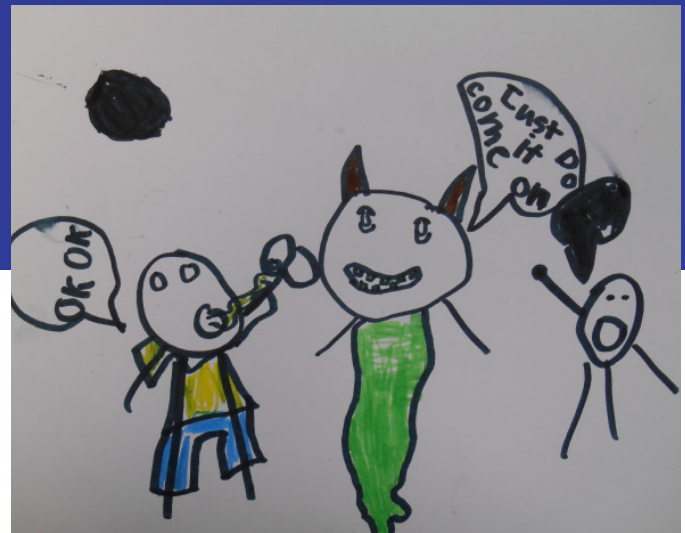
Recovery and healing are necessary for each family member, and children are no exception. Even if the addicted family member does not seek help, the children benefit from supportive programs. When children are offered support and education about what is occurring in their families, they are able to cope more effectively in all aspects of their lives. While participating in group settings, they learn they are not alone; other kids have similar challenges.

PITCH 4 KIDZ is a program for children ages six through twelve who have a parent or other family member coping with addiction. Children living in these families are at greater risk for behavioral, emotional and physical challenges. They are also at an increased risk of future substance abuse. The goal of the PITCH 4 KIDZ program is to increase resilience and offer hope and healing for children and families. Our weekend workshop is designed for children to learn about the disease, develop healthy coping strategies and build effective communication skills.

The use of the arts is an essential component of the PITCH 4 KIDZ approach. Creative activities offer a fun and safe way for children to express themselves. The staff uses techniques from various expressive art forms to offer children different ways to share their stories, explore their feelings and communicate difficult experiences. The message to the children that they are valuable and important is communicated by incorporating into the program music, physical movement, color and texture. Drawing, singing, dancing and acting offer ways for children to gain insight into their experiences, feelings, hopes and personal value.

Kids are taught to separate the person they love from the disease of addiction, giving the children permission to love and value their parent, but also permission to express anger and frustration with addiction. The children are also introduced to the concepts of treatment and recovery. Children are eager for their parents to get well, and they learn they are not responsible for their parent's drinking or recovery.

During the three-day program, children draw what addiction looks like in their family. Six-year-old Kyle was rambunctious, and appeared angry, often using the word Satan. He drew everything with black crayons until given this assignment. He depicted his father on the left side of the page, *filled with the drink*. He drew himself shouting something. In the center he drew addiction, which resembled Satan. Until the




PITCH program, the only word he had for the chaos he was experiencing in his home was Satan. By the end of the weekend program, Kyle had replaced the word Satan with addiction. His new understanding and vocabulary allowed him to express his anger at the disease, while giving him permission to love his dad who was in early recovery. Kyle's art allowed him to illustrate his feelings and to visualize in a concrete way the difference between his father and the behaviors associated with addiction.

PITCH 4 KIDZ also incorporates musical interventions, which offer children alternative ways of expressing the emotions and the details of their personal stories. Children often feel safe banging out their anger on a drum or gently stroking the drum to express the sadness of seeing their parents drink. In one program, a young boy sat silently with the drum on his lap for a minute or so before saying, "I'm done." He then said, "In my room there is no sound. It's very lonely." That small boy spent a lot of time in his room as a way of coping with his parents arguing over his father's drinking behaviors. Ironically, the drum was a profound instrument for communicating the child's silent world.

The PITCH 4 KIDZ program empowers children to express their feelings in safe and healthy ways, and to understand their parent's addiction is not the child's fault. One nine-year-old girl drew her family in front of Disneyland with everyone smiling. She shared, "This is my family having fun now that treatment and recovery are with my dad."

Crayons and drums are instruments of healing and communication. They provide children with ways to tell their stories and explore their dreams. It is a gift to your children to foster a childhood which includes fun and imagination. Indulge in these moments when the crayons are on the table; color with abandon. Those moments are an essential part of family healing.

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