

Dok : 8

TIPPREZENTA KONFERENZA
NAZZJONALI TAHT IL-PATROCINJU
TA' E.T. GEORGE VELLA
PRESIDENT TA' MALTA

IL-ĠINGHA,
7 TA' LULJU

GRAND HOTEL,
MGARR GHAWDEX
09:00-13:00

IT-TFAL U L-ADDICTION

Il-madjarja l-konferenza
Dr. Joseph G Azzopardi

KELLIEMA TAL-KONFERENZA:

DR. CHANTAL
VIELINO

Forensic Psychologist

DR. MATTHEW
BERRY

Clinical and Counselling
Psychologist

DR. MARY
MUSCA

Child Advocate Family &
Juvenile Courts

GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR GOZO

eco
GOZO



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The Rationale of the Conference

Over the last three decades, we have experienced a worldwide drug use normalization process. This process is not a static one but is ever-changing. This is evident in the ever-evolving societal norms attached to this phenomenon.

Addiction is a multifaceted condition that does not manifest itself only in substance use but also in behaviours that incorporate an addictive component, such as gambling, sex, the internet, social media, etc. Moreover, the mega ripple effects of addiction are not only felt by the individual who is addicted but the immediate family, extended family, and society at large.

One category of actors at play in the addiction scene is the children. Very often children are unheard and their intrinsic needs go unnoticed.

Throughout this conference, we have explored:

- What are the impacts of addictions on children?
- What are the needs of children in a family afflicted by addiction?
- What is society's role in mitigating the negative impact on these children?
- Do we consider enough the effects on children's needs?
- What are the long-term repercussions on the children's lives?
- What does the Law say about this?

The conference was moderated by Dr Joe Azzopardi and the speakers were Dr Chantal Avellino, Ms Deborah Francalanza, Dr Mary Muscat, and Dr Matthew Berry.



'It-Tfal u l-Addiction' from a Psycho-Social Perspective

Dr Chantal Avellino – Senior Forensic Psychologist and Lecturer
& Ms Deborah Francalanza – Trainee Forensic Psychologist



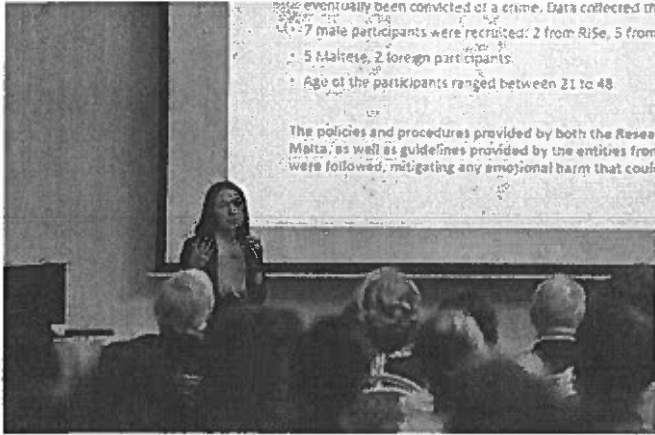
Dr Chantal Avellino started off her presentation by highlighting the urgency of the issue considering the fact that thousands of children are affected by the chronic and unpredictable behaviour of at least one parent with addiction every year. **She emphasised the importance of children forming a connection through secure attachment.** This secure attachment does not necessarily need to be with the biological parent but with a caregiver who will offer nurture.

Moreover, attachment process is easily compromised however, if a parent is preoccupied with their addiction.

Throughout giving examples from situations she experienced when working with persons' social difficulties especially those who came in contact with the criminal system, she noted how local families are struggling. **Recalling how some adult children of parents who have an addiction admit that they learned how to use and buy drugs from their parents.** Or that they can recall situations such as learning about **waste separation at school and going home to find that their parent has been using, and separating the waste left behind into their appropriate waste bin.** This is referring to role reversal where a child takes on the role of the parent is called parentification and many children who have a parent with an addiction face this issue. The lack of routine in children's lives is something else which negatively impacts not only their childhood but also creates foundations for behaviours later on in life. Finally, Dr Avellino mentioned **secrecy** as being another factor in the life of a child whose parent has an addiction, possibly due to the risk of stigma attributed to dependency, even when seeking help. Oftentimes children try to hide what is happening at home for various reasons. Often times children try to hide what is happening at home for various reasons.

She also made a note regarding cannabis use in Malta. Referring to the change in legislation making personal possession of up to 7g legal. Yet, it is the most addictive illicit drug in Europe. Dr Avellino questions the long-term implications of such change and how it might impact families.

Dr Avellino concluded by noting that having a parent who has an addiction does not necessarily mean that the child will do the same. However, it does **increase the chances of the child developing mental health issues** especially if a child is continuously exposed to different stages of addiction such as recovery and relapse.



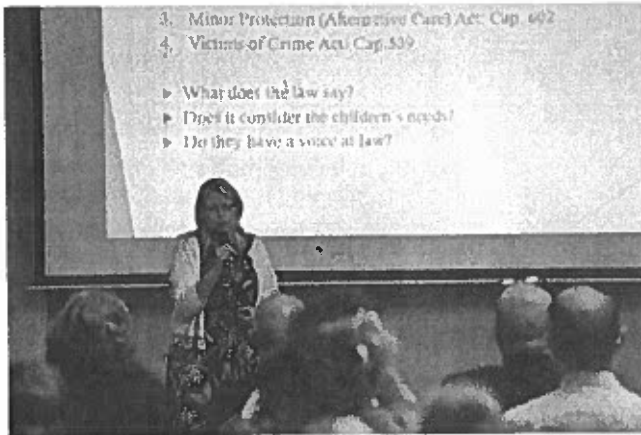
Alongside Dr Avellino, Ms Deborah Francalanza presented her study which was a local research on the pathway from Childhood Victimization to Crime. In this research, Ms Francalanza recruited individuals aged 18 and over who had started engaging in crime at a young age and had eventually been convicted of crime. One of the key findings of this study was that **recurrent parental substance abuse** was in fact one of the adverse childhood experiences remembered by the participants who had negative long-term effects, such

as lack of trust in others and having difficulty being open. **Childhood adversity refers to trauma, abuse or bad experiences** experienced by children and that can have long-term impacts later on in life. She also found that attachment had an interpersonal affect on the reality faced by the participants. Another common finding was that the participants struggled in school and then had issues to find and keep a steady job which only increased the stress.

Finally, Ms Francalanza highlighted that there is still **stigma** attached to seeking help both for parents and their children which can be a significant barrier to recovery. The importance of preventive measures was also highlighted such as raising awareness.

'It-Tfal u l-Addiction' from a Legal Perspective

Dr Mary Muscat – Lawyer and Lecturer



Dr Mary Muscat is a lecturer with the Faculty of Laws and a Child Advocate with the Family and Juvenile Courts. She explained the rights of the child by highlighting provisions from the Civil Code (Cap 16), the Minor Protection Act (Cap 602) and the Victims of Crime Act (Cap 539). The concept of the 'best interests of the child', which emanates from the UN's Convention of the Rights of the Child, was explained in the context of the rights and duties of parents in the Civil Code which are transferred to third parties in loco parentis, such as the

Director of the Child Protection Services and the Look After Children Directorate within FSWS.

One major aspect in relation to addiction is the child's standard of living, which the UN CRC establishes as a basic need. Addiction can lead to poverty and other behaviours such as hoarding which can all impact the child's standard of living. The other two points from the UN convention mentioned were access to adequate education for every child and the need to establish the child's social identity.

Dr Muscat noted how as a Child Advocate her role covered the representation of children not only newborns, but unborn children as well, right up to eighteen years of age, and giving them a voice. The remit of protection orders established in Cap 602 includes care, removal, supervision, welfare and rehabilitation orders, amongst others.

She stated that it is imperative for a Child Advocate to have training to deal with the child's cultural context as it is a legal requirement, much unlike Legal Aid lawyers in Cap 539, for example. Child Advocacy is a delicate balance in different barriers, including the cultural one, and in truly representing what the child needs especially when the minor cannot adequately articulate such needs or have the foresight of potential consequences of not asking for these needs.

Dr Muscat gave an example where a child who was Muslim and asked for permission to attend religious activities. In another example, **she referred to a case of bullying at school where the minor siblings were associated with their parents' behaviours and reputation.** In such cases a Child Advocate can intervene and support the child with the help of their social workers in an effort to safeguard the wellbeing of the child both short-term and long-term. **One such case involved changing the minor's surname.**

She also noted that the **grounds for which a child is removed from a parent's custody includes failing to perform parental obligations** such as endangering or neglecting the child's wellbeing or education. This removal of parental authority can be revoked by the Family Court when the situation improves.

As a conclusion, Dr Muscat noted the importance of the child feeling safe to express themselves with their child advocate which can include being open for listening and supporting the child but also being in an environment where the child feels comfortable.

'It-Tfal u l-Addiction' from a Clinical Perspective

Dr Matthew Berry – Clinical Psychologist and Lecturer



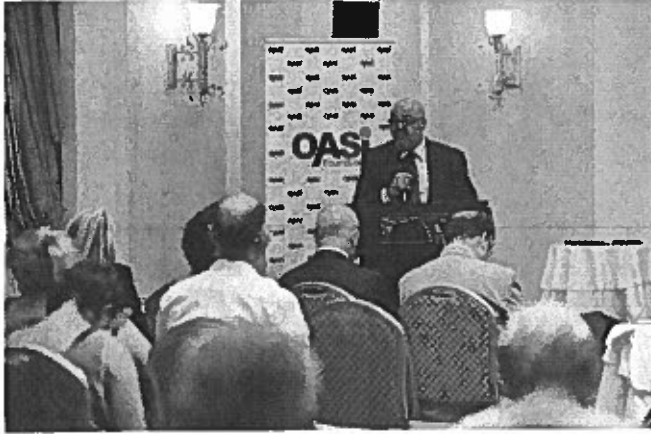
Dr Matthew Berry focused on adult children of a parent with an addiction and what can happen as a result. He began by noting that **some children of alcoholics tend to stay away from alcohol at first as they have witnessed what it has done to their parent** however, once they begin to struggle to cope with life stressors – specifically around the late twenties – **they may be likely to try it and can feel relieved that their stress is silenced for a while.**

Dr Berry focused on the relationship between the parents. He stated that this relationship can be more important than the relationship with the children themselves. **Violence between the parents can have devastating effects for a child.** In fact, Dr Berry notes how a **child's mental health is one of the biggest reflections of the parents' relationship with each other.** He also gave importance to the fact that **it can be more harmful for a child to know of good things that did not happen to them rather than bad things that did happen.** This is because there are more resources to turn to for comfort and support if something bad happens rather than if a good thing does not happen. Children often feel at the centre of every situation and therefore, if bad things happen at home, they are likely to interpret it as being their fault.

Dr Berry also mentioned that children whose parents have an addiction often **do not learn how to handle emotions but rather see emotions such as anger or frustration being taken out on drink or drugs.** Then as an adult, the child does not know how to manage emotions. If a child's parent is aggressive for no reason apparent to the child this can result in the child fearing authoritative figures. Children of parents with an addiction can often mistake pity and vulnerability for love, as they might have never seen what real love can look like.

In conclusion, Dr Berry emphasised that it is no one's fault that a child's parent has an addiction. Rather, a parent is responsible for their addiction and any subsequent effects it has on the family but there is no one cause that directly created the addiction.

Address by Mr Noel Xerri, Chief Executive



Mr Noel Xerri remarked that 64% of the people that sought help in 2022 were in fact people that grew up with parents who had an addiction problem. Mr Xerri emphasised that OASI Foundation never wanted people to end up imprisoned because of substance abuse. Mr Xerri always remarked that OASI together with other organisations opposed strongly against the legalisation of cannabis the main reason being the protection of children as the law allows cultivation of cannabis plants

at home. Mr Xerri remarked that a lot more research is needed to shed more light of what is happening in our society especially where children are involved keeping in mind that they are the future of tomorrow.

Address by Hon. Clint Camilleri, Minister for Gozo



Hon. Clint Camilleri began his speech by emphasising the importance of considering the devastating effects addiction has on the person, their family as well as the community as a whole. He went on to say that a chaotic home environment where parents make use of drugs can increase the risk of the child making use of drugs themselves. It was also emphasised by the Hon Clint Camilleri that schools, workplaces and communities are to be captured by prevention efforts. Hon Camilleri finished his message by thanking OASI

for the hard work it puts into helping persons with addictions and their families.

Address by Hon. Dr Alex Borg, Shadow Minister for Gozo



Hon. Dr Alex Borg opened his speech by saying that the topic of children and addiction is tough from any perspective. He mentioned the risk of children and adolescence becoming victims of addiction if they are exposed to a life of addiction from a young age. Hon Dr Borg went on to say that the reality of children and addiction is complex and that there is no one absolute cause or solution. He encouraged the listeners to have an open-mind even with realities which are hard to hear and with we might not always be ready to hear.

Address by H.E. Mgr. Anton Teuma, Bishop of Gozo



H.E. Mgr. Anton Teuma opened his speech by noting the complicated nature of addiction, whether viewed from a psychoanalytic or a psychodynamic perspective. He referred to research which showed that the first six months of life are when most behavioural patterns form. This, influenced by the care the child receives, creates a foundation for the child's behaviour throughout his or her life. H.E. also noted that addiction does not have one cause or one solution. It was emphasised that families are at the core of not only our

communities but also the church and other NGOs, which is why the issue of children and addiction needs to be handled as an urgent matter. Finally, H.E. noted that it is not only the addiction to drugs and alcohol that we need to give importance to but also addiction to technology, which can have similar devastating effects on families.

Address by Hon. Dr Michael Falzon, Minister for Social Policy and Children's Rights



Hon. Dr Michael Falzon began by thanking everyone who works in the field of addiction. He described it as being similar to slavery. It takes away your freedom and it makes decisions for you. Hon Dr Falzon went on to say that it is our duty to safeguard our children and to create an environment where their wellbeing is catered for. We should do our best to help out wherever we can rather than choosing to judge others on the decisions they made in the past, not just at home but also at the workplace, at school and within all

the relationships we have. Hon Dr Falzon concluded his statement with highlighting the importance of creating an inclusive society where every person should do their part as one can never know when an act of kindness can help improve a person's life.

Address by Hon. David Agius, Shadow Minister for Social Policy



Hon. David Agius opened his message remarking how easy access to drugs and the common nature of purchasing drugs makes it easier for youth who are looking for ways to cope with stress to resort to drug use. The normalisation as well as the easy access to drugs is having disastrous consequences for many families. He also agreed with previous statements regarding the importance of supporting the family of a person who has an addiction and not solely the person themselves.

H.E. the President of Malta, Dr George Vella



H.E. Dr George Vella in his video message remarked on the importance to recognise that when a person has an addiction problem people around them are affected, especially children. The President stated that this impact effects the child both physically and mentally. The President emphasised that the children are tomorrow's future and just like when we want a good fruit one needs to cultivate the seed, the

same goes to children and this will determine how they will grow to become adults in the future. Dr Vella remarked that as a society we should show empathy towards every individual.

Speaker Biographies

Dr Chantal Avellino

Dr Chantal Avellino has a first degree in Psychology and a Post Graduate Diploma in Probation Services, both awarded by the University of Malta. Having developed an interest in the field of forensics, she went on to complete an MSc in Forensic Psychology at Glasgow Caledonian University. This led to reading for a PhD in Psychology with the University of Portsmouth, under the supervision of Prof Alan Costall, Dr Michelle Newberry and Dr Adrian Needs. Her research focuses on risk assessment and risk management of offenders, with a special interest in community-based sanctions. She is also a warranted Forensic Psychologist and a Lecturer at the University of Malta. Dr Avellino is also a member of the Victim Offender Mediation Committee (VOMC). Furthermore, she is also a member of the British Psychological Society (BPS) as well as a member of the Malta Chamber of Psychologists (MCP).

Ms Deborah Francalanza

Deborah is a Forensic Psychology Trainee. In 2017 Deborah graduated from the University of Malta with a bachelors degree in Psychology. She has experience working at the Correctional Services Agency and has worked for over 6 years in a residential programme offered by Richmond Foundation for children exhibiting severe challenging behaviour. In 2019 she obtained an Advance Diploma in Cognitive Studies with the University of Derby. For two years she worked as a part-time producer for Xarabank and L-Erbgħa Fost il-Ġimgħa. She finalised her Masters in Forensic Psychology with the University of Malta and is the Student Representative on the council of the Malta Chamber of Psychologists.

Dr Matthew Berry

Dr Matthew Berry is a counselling and clinical psychologist whose career has focussed upon addiction throughout the community. He has also been clinical director of a rehab in Australia, as well as teaching addiction counselling at Swinburne University for the past 22 years.

Dr Mary Muscat

Dr Mary Muscat is a full-time resident academic with the Department of Civil Law, Faculty of Laws (University of Malta). She coordinates the Masters in Mediation and the practicum part of the Masters in Advocacy. She practices as a Child Advocate with the Family Court and the Juvenile Court and forms part of the team specialising in domestic violence issues with the Legal Aid Agency. Before joining Laws, she was attached to the Department of Criminology at the Faculty of Social Wellbeing, lecturing in Policing, after having served in the Malta Police force for thirteen years as an Inspector. She still trains Police Constable recruits in Criminal Law and in Contemporary Crime, and covers civil law issues in the Sergeants' in-service training at the Academy for Disciplined Forces. She also trains LESA's new Community Officers in Eco-Offences. Dr Muscat also lectures in Substantive Criminal Law in the Legal Procurator Higher Diploma. As a parent of a daughter with cerebral palsy, Dr Muscat advocates on behalf of children with disabilities in the media. She is currently reading Matrimonial Canon Law for her PhD with the Faculty of Theology. Dr Muscat is also a councillor and Minority Leader with the Marsaxlokk Local Council.

Media Coverage

Newsbook - <https://newsbook.com.mt/ghandna-tfal-ta-12-il-sena-li-diga-jafu-minn-fejn-jixtru-d-droga-u-kif-juzaw-il-labra-dr-chantal-avellino/?fbclid=IwAR20Flpv5riYIHWcxjYTTc39QIZqMOJkakw9pMSZTaBAY2IGvKjLkImNKvU>

Times of Malta - <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/fewer-users-cannabis-sought-help-la-st-year-ngos-say.1042697>

Talk.mt - <https://talk.mt/jitimghu-lit-tfal-ikel-tal-klieb-biex-huma-jixtru-d-droga/>

Illum

<https://www.illum.com.mt/ahbarijiet/socjali/68163/64> ta persuni li fittxew lgainuna ta oasi trab bew minn enituri li abbuaw middroga

Net news - <https://netnews.com.mt/2023/07/08/appell-biex-nindirizzaw-il-problema-kbira-tad-droga/>



