

fostering perspectives

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What foster parents need to know about methamphetamine

by John McMahon

If you have been paying attention to the news you may know that abuse of the drug methamphetamine, or "meth," is having a growing impact on North Carolina. If you are a foster parent, you already know that many of the families involved with child welfare struggle with substance abuse, and so you may be asking yourself: are there things I need to know to support children and families involved with meth?

The short answer is, yes and no. On the one hand, child welfare agencies in North Carolina are working with meth-using parents in the same way they work with parents who abuse other drugs: by ensuring the safety of their children, connecting parents with treatment resources, and monitoring their progress. Child welfare agencies are using strategies such as shared parenting and child and family team meetings with meth-involved families only when they can ensure the safety of children, foster parents, and everyone else involved.

What makes meth different from other drugs is that some users have learned to make the drug in dangerous home "labs." Because children are present in about one in every three meth labs, foster parents need to know about labs and the threat they pose to children who have been exposed to them.

Meth Lab Basics

Meth users have discovered a way to make the drug in small batches in homemade "labs," using readily-available ingredients. These ingredients include cold medicine, matches, drain cleaner, and paint thinner. Although it is extremely dangerous, making meth does not require a chemistry background or special equipment.

In North Carolina meth labs have been found in homes, apartments, hotel rooms, vehicles, and close to schools. Meth labs can be highly mobile; some fit into a duffle bag or the trunk of a car.

Statistics from California indicate that most cooks make meth 48 to 72 times a year. It takes between four and six hours to cook the drug. For every pound of methamphetamine they make, these labs generate five to seven pounds of toxic waste.

Effects on Children

Threats faced by children exposed to meth labs include the following.

Chemical contamination. A recent study of meth labs found that “chemicals spread throughout the house. The methamphetamine is deposited everywhere, from walls and carpets to microwaves, tabletops and clothing. Children living in those labs might as well be taking the drug directly.”

Indeed, approximately 35% of children found in meth labs test positive for toxic levels of chemicals in their bodies, including meth. Children in meth labs most commonly come into contact with chemicals through inhalation and absorption through the skin. Long-term exposure to meth lab toxins can damage the nerves, lungs, kidneys, liver, eyes, and skin.

It is not uncommon for children removed from meth labs to have chemically-induced asthma or pneumonia that clears up after the children are out of the lab.

Fires and explosions. Experts report that approximately one in every six meth labs seized by authorities is discovered because of a fire or an explosion caused by careless handling and overheating of volatile, hazardous chemicals and waste and unsafe manufacturing methods.

Neglect. When parents use or make meth, their children often lack necessities such as food, water, and shelter, and they frequently lack adequate medical care, including proper immunizations and dental care. In addition, the cycle of meth abuse has a built-in phase when parents “crash” and are unable to look after their children. Children in meth-using families may also face hazards such as used hypodermic needles and razor blades.

Abuse. Exposure to parents intoxicated by meth may compromise child safety: when high, users often exhibit poor judgment, confusion, irritability, paranoia, and increased violence. Because meth increases the sexual appetites of users, children of meth users may be at greater risk for sexual abuse, either by parents themselves or by other adults coming in and out of the home.

Other risks. Loaded firearms are found in easy-to-reach locations in the vast majority of meth labs. Dangerous animals and booby traps designed to protect meth labs pose added physical hazards. Children may even be involved in the manufacturing process, but receive no protective gear.

Effects on Communities

Meth labs have a tremendous impact on communities. In North Carolina typical cleanup costs for a meth lab are between \$4,000 and \$10,000. These costs must be absorbed by property owners and local and state government. Unlike other drugs, meth creates little revenue for law enforcement. Instead of seizing homes and valuables that can offset interdiction costs, officials are left with costly cleanup and ruined properties.

Meth labs also pose a threat to the general public and the environment. Because clothing and other articles are so easily contaminated by meth production, toxins can quickly spread from one place to another, requiring involved cleanup. Meth cooks often dispose of lab waste by burning it, dumping it in streams, fields, and down toilets, or by simply leaving it behind in hotels, on roadsides, and in other public areas.

North Carolina’s Response

Our state has responded by:

Obtaining Federal Funds. North Carolina received a grant through the federal Drug Endangered Child program; Watauga, Johnston, Ashe, and Harnett counties received a total of \$312,000 to fund meth-response efforts.

Meth Summit. Attorney General Roy Cooper convened a group of experts in October 2003 to develop a comprehensive strategy to fight meth. The summit's final report is available at <<http://www.ncdoj.com>>.

New Laws and Funding. Several new laws to fight meth were passed in 2004:

- Penalties for making meth increased greatly, from likely probation to a mandatory five to 17 years behind bars.
- There are additional penalties for making meth in the presence of children, or if someone is injured while seizing the lab.
- If someone consumes meth you made and dies of overdose, you can now be charged with murder.
- Possessing ingredients in quantities sufficient to make meth can be punished with up to five years in prison, if prosecutors prove intent to make meth.
- Funding for additional SBI mobile clandestine lab response units.
- Funding for child protective services policy development and child welfare training. The new drug endangered child policy is online at <<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-65/man/CSs1000.htm>>.

Limiting Precursors. California found that legally restricting the sale of chemical key ingredients needed to make meth is one of the most effective ways of combating the drug's spread. After that state enacted laws restricting the sale of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, lab busts were cut in half, from 2,090 in 1999 to 1,130 in 2002. In North Carolina, Attorney General Cooper hopes we can achieve the same results by asking retailers to apply restrictions voluntarily. Currently many retail chains voluntarily restrict sales of products containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine.

Cooper told the *Charlotte Observer* in 2004 that we will know soon enough whether this voluntary approach works. If it doesn't, the state could seek a legislative solution.

Recognizing a Meth Lab

Although not in and of themselves conclusive evidence, the following could signal the presence of a meth lab.

- Unusual, strong odors (like cat urine, ether, ammonia, or acetone) coming from sheds, outbuildings, other structures, fields, orchards, campsites, or especially vehicles (older model cars, vans) etc.
- Possession of large amounts of over-the-counter cold/allergy medications containing ephedrine or pseudo-ephedrine, or large quantities of solvents such as Acetone, Coleman Fuel, Toluene, etc.
- Discarded cold medicine/ephedrine bottles, coffee filters with oddly-colored stains, lithium batteries, antifreeze containers, lantern fuel cans, propane tanks.
- The mixing of unusual chemicals in a house, garage, or barn, or the possession of chemical glassware by persons not involved in the chemical industry.
- Heavy traffic during late night hours.

- Residences with fans in windows in cold weather, or blacked-out windows.

If You Suspect a Meth Lab

Seventy-five percent of meth labs found in North Carolina have been “stumbled upon.” If you suspect a meth lab take these steps:

- Remain calm. Give yourself time to think.
- Do NOT approach suspects. They are often armed and may be dangerous.
- Do NOT enter the lab area. Do not try to clean up the area. Evidence should remain undisturbed for investigation by law enforcement.
- If you are in the lab already, find an excuse to leave immediately.
- Never try to identify unknown substances by smelling or touching them.
- Keep a safe distance. Hazardous materials may ignite or the fumes may overcome you.
- Promptly notify local law enforcement.

Meth Labs Have Implications for Foster Parents

When a child has been recently exposed to a methamphetamine lab (within the past 72 hours) the risk to foster parents and other placement providers is minimal; the child has been fully assessed by qualified professionals and, if necessary, decontaminated. However, to protect yourself and others in your home and for the welfare of the child, be prepared to take the following actions:

Decontamination Precautions. Place any clothes worn by the child into a plastic bag until they can be washed. The clothes should be washed separately on the hottest setting. Rewash a second time and air dry outside the home, **not in the dryer**. Run the washer once empty to clean it thoroughly. Shoes should be washed with the clothes if possible or wiped off with soap and hot water.

The child should bathe in very warm, **but not hot water**. Use lots of soap. Wash the child completely including hair, face, between toes, and other hard to reach places. Drain the tub and give the child a second bath to remove any residual chemicals. Drain and clean the tub thoroughly afterwards.

Unfortunately, because of concerns about possible chemical contamination, children exposed to meth labs must leave behind all their personal belongings when they enter foster care. Foster parents should anticipate this and continue working collaboratively with agency social workers to ensure children have what they need in terms of clothes, stuffed animals, toys, shoes, etc.

Seek Information. Be sure that the placing social worker provides you with:

- As much information as possible about the extent of the child’s exposure to chemicals and/or toxins
- A description of medical treatment the child has received

- Information about any follow-up medical appointments the child may require

Family-Centered Strategies. Child welfare agencies are using strategies such as shared parenting and child and family team meetings with meth-involved families only when they can ensure the safety of children, foster parents, and everyone else involved. Even when face-to-face meetings with parents are not possible, it will still be helpful to the parents and child to have ongoing communication through an exchange of letters, photos, etc.

Monitor Child Well-Being. Because some effects of chemical exposure can develop slowly, foster parents should seek immediate medical attention if they notice the child experiencing:

- Headache
- Drowsiness
- Unusual movements such as tremors, shaking, jumpiness, agitation, or seizures
- Trouble breathing, coughing, or poor color
- Fever
- Hallucinations or mental confusion
- Any other unusual symptom that seems severe

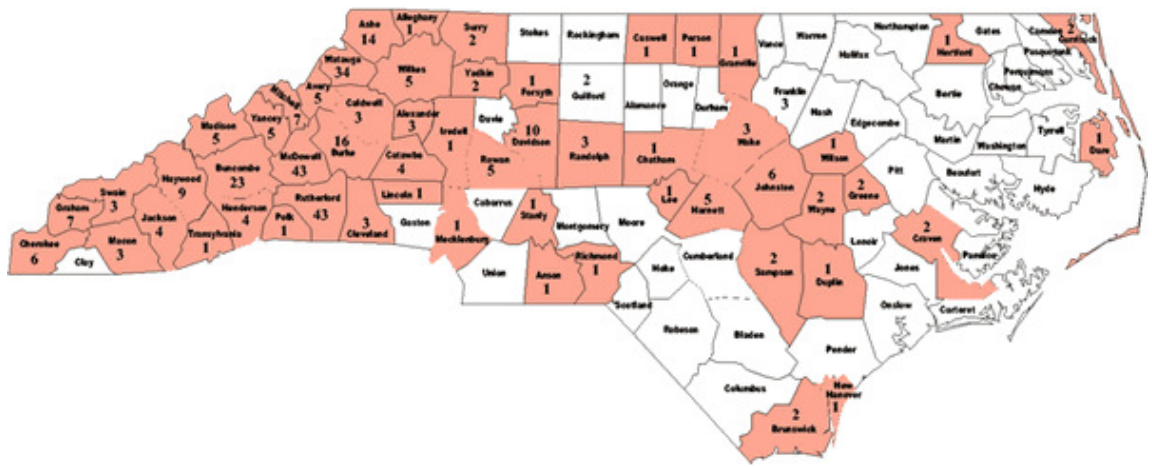
Anticipate Emotional Trauma/Stress. It is likely that the circumstances of the discovery of the illegal methamphetamine laboratory and removal have been traumatic for the child. Often labs are seized in SWAT-style police raids and analyzed by people in Hazmat “moon suits.” One or more parents may have been arrested. In addition, the child may have been subjected to neglect or physical or sexual abuse. Foster parents should ensure the child has a warm, stable environment and be prepared for emotional reactions from the child that may follow placement.

More about Meth and Meth Labs in North Carolina

Meth lab seizures in North Carolina increased twenty-fold in the last four years. In 2001, 34 meth labs were found; in 2002 there were 98; in 2003 there were 177; in 2004 there were 322. North Carolina is doing what it can to combat this trend because it can get much worse: some states seize more than 2,000 meth labs a year.

Rural communities are particularly at risk. Teens aged 12 to 14 who live in smaller towns are 104% more likely to use meth than those who live in larger cities. Meth “cooks” often site their labs in rural areas to hide the odors produced during manufacture.

The trend is for labs to spread from rural to suburban to urban areas. Relatively few labs have been found in larger cities such as Charlotte and Raleigh, but they are becoming more common in small towns in western and eastern North Carolina.



For More Information. To learn more about meth, visit *Training Matters*, vol. 6, no. 2 (www.training-matters-nc.org) and *Children's Services Practice Notes*, vol. 10, no. 2 (www.practicenotes.org).

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