

Family Roles in Families with Addictions

When a parent is addicted to alcohol or drugs, the entire family is set up around the addict and their addiction. Children tend to follow designated roles as the family acts out the drama of addiction. Children develop these roles due to family dynamics. For a child in an addicted household, he or she will usually only fulfill one role. The parents and family will not acknowledge any behavior outside this family role. In a more functioning household, children often move fluidly between roles.

Little Parent: This child usually functions as a surrogate parent. While the parent is immersed in their addiction, the *little parent* will take on the parenting of younger children and sometimes begin to parent the parents.

Inside the *little parent* feels overburdened by the responsibilities they have been given. While they gain esteem from the love they give and receive, they miss opportunities to be children themselves.

Hero. This child fulfills the family values. If the family values emphasize the need for advanced education and careers, this child will be the perfect student. If the family values are criminal in nature, this child will become a professional criminal. Addicted parents often brag about the *hero* child.

Inside, the *hero* feels tremendous pressure to achieve. It feels as if the entire family is depending on them to be successful. They will often put aside their needs in order to achieve. This child is particularly vulnerable to addiction due to the disconnection from himself.

Mascot. This is the fun and funny child. They are the life of the party. In fact, many family occasions cannot begin until the mascot arrives. The *mascot* child often “lights up” the room.

Inside, the *mascot* is terrified of family conflict. This child feels responsible for everyone getting along and will often intercede in family arguments with jokes to distract from the argument. While popular in school, this child struggles with any form of intimate relationship due to their fear of conflict.

Chief Enabler. The chief enabler is person who makes the addict’s life work. They generally absorb the consequences of the addict’s behavior. While the *chief enabler* is usually the other parent, it is not uncommon to have children fulfilling this role by working jobs to provide for the family, buying drugs or alcohol for the addicted parent, and enabling the addict to continue in his or her addiction.

Inside, the *chief enabler* feels very out of control. Their life revolves around the addict and the addict’s behavior. Because the *chief enabler* lives in response to another person, they are unable to live out their own wishes and dreams.

Scapegoat. This is the problem child; the child who absorbs the family conflict. As a young child, the scapegoat might be blamed for things that he has not control over. This teaches the child that they will be in trouble no matter what they do. Therefore, by adolescence, the *scapegoat* acts out the family anger through aggressive acts, criminal behavior and difficulties in school. This child seems to always be in trouble.

Inside, the *scapegoat* feels hopeless and trapped. There is very little this child can do without getting into trouble. The *scapegoat* believes that something is significantly wrong with him.

Lost child. This is the forgotten child. The *lost child* is often left places or otherwise forgotten. In turn, this child becomes involved in their own world of books, fantasy or television. A lost child may have an entire world filled with friends and activities that the family knows nothing about.

Inside, the *lost child* feels very sad and alone. She is invisible to almost everyone in the family. Often, in adulthood, the *lost child* may completely disconnect from the family literally creating her own world.