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## **Alcoholism: How is it affecting your teen(s)?**

**How Families Operate**The family operates as an emotional system with no heroes, villains, good people, bad people, and healthy or unhealthy members. Family problems result from a problem within the family system and not from the behavior of any one person. What each person does effects every other person and a chain reaction is set off. Problems do not exist separately in individuals themselves but in the chain reactions. These chain reactions become repetitious and predictable. If one can get distance, one can study them, observe how they get set off, how they get reinforced, who picks up what cues, and the part each plays in the chain reactions.

Each person in the family eventually gets programmed into a specific role in the system. Once a person is labeled, they are going to act out the role suggested by the label. The family system is more powerful than any of the individuals that make it up. It is possible to become aware of how one has been labeled and to change it. This is not easy, however, as each person gains something from the label no matter how uncomplimentary it happens to be. They gain some identity from it and it becomes familiar to them. It is frightening to become a "new person," but it is also liberating. Labels prevent growth and limit one's potential. Usually the label has very little to do with the true nature of the person. Collaboration is necessary among family members in order to keep conflicts going. No one person is ever to blame. It is a 50-50 proposition. The happiest people are those who stop blaming others and take major responsibility for their own happiness. Much frustration can be avoided by concentrating on changing oneself rather than others. Triangles tend to form in families because of the close intense relationship. When one person feels hurt, angry, disappointed, or frustrated with another family member and cannot settle it with them, they tend to bring someone else into the relationship. Parents often use their children to make up for what is lacking between them. Children also involve their parents in triangles by playing one against the other. Sometimes a friend or relative is brought in from the outside to form a triangle. If one person in the triangle changes his position, the while triangle will shift. It is desirable to have a separate relationship with each person, which does not involve any other person. Family roles where alcoholism reignsWhen we are little, we need to feel loved and protected by the significant people in our life. To fill those needs, we discover "ways of being" (roles) that assured us of love and protection. The roles that we chose could have been positive or negative, but either way the roles were a way to take care of our

emotional needs at that time. Often the roles took the focus off the alcoholic parent(s) and placed it on the child. The roles helped to establish balance amidst confusion and, on occasion, offered the outside world a positive statement reflecting a family image that the child felt called upon to protect. Four common roles that children in alcoholic families assume are described below. When you examine the categories, understand that although you may have reined one role; you probably slipped in and out of all four at times in life. As an adult, you need to recognize when you began to play the role (its origin) and how you felt about it (its ultimate expense).

**FAMILY HERO – Overly Responsible or Irresponsible**  
The family hero is the family “star.” Heroes are often the oldest or only children. They exhibit exemplary behavior and honor their families through achievement as students or leaders, and they can earn praise by assuming adult tasks (e.g. Preparing meals). Heroes are capable and accomplish, and they appear responsible and mature. However, inside they may feel lonely, fearful, and have a lot of unexpressed anger.

**FAMILY SCAPEGOAT – Shield**  
Family scapegoats are troublemakers. Often children, youngsters in this role are defiant and seek self-importance outside the family. They may break the law, get pregnant (or get someone pregnant), have association with wild friends, and begin to use drugs and alcohol earlier. Scapegoats are usually difficult to understand and impossible to discipline. They seldom listen to others and often block attempts to closeness. As troublemakers, they divert the emphasis from the alcoholic to their behavior. They cry for attention, and negative attention fulfills an emotional need.

**LOST CHILD – Isolates**  
Lost children isolate themselves for self-protection. Often living in fantasy, they are quiet and dreaming. Some come to believe their fantasies, and lies become truth for these children. Most lost children want peace at any cost and become agreeable and appeasing, and rarely offer opinions or questions anything. They are “good little boys and girls” and never draw attention to themselves or cause concern. They usually adapt well and seek safety in solitude.

**FAMILY MASCOT – Family mascots** make everyone laugh and feel jolly. They are “on stage” and over-active. They entertain while defusing the tension the alcoholic creates. When the focus is on frivolity, problems seem to disappear. Although they act happy and easy going, inside they often feel scared and lonely.

What family role do you identify with? Which family role(s) do you think your children play? Are these roles healthy? If not, what will you do to change? The health of your family depends on it.

References 1. Brown, S., & Lewis, V. (1999). Alcoholic family in recovery: A developmental model. 2. Steinglass, P. (1980). A life history model of the alcoholic family. *Family Process*, 19(3). 211-226.

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