

Roles Children Might Assume in Substance Using/Abusing Families

The Hero – These children try to make sure that the family appears normal to the rest of the world. They develop a strong sense of responsibility and project an image of competence and achievement. This is often, but not always, the first-born child. They learn as children that someone has to be responsible for the family, and if the parents induce chaos, it is up to the “hero” to provide stability. These people grow up to become academically or professionally successful; although, they are prone to denying their own emotions and feeling like imposters.



Characteristics: perfectionist, self-worth is activity based, and individual feels inadequate

The Lost Child – Often the third or latter child in an alcoholic family is the “lost child.” This child is unable to have his/her needs met, becomes overwhelmed, and withdraws from the world. In both childhood and adulthood, the child might appear unfocused, unmotivated, and helpless. “Lost” children might tend to try to attach to partners or groups that substitute for their unmet need for a family.



Characteristics: independent, withdrawn, and individual feels unworthy

The Placater – These siblings are the ones who learn early to smooth over potentially upsetting situations in the family. At the expense of their own feelings, they develop a good ability to read the feelings of others. They may go into “caretaking” professions later in life, even though this reinforces their tendency to ignore their own feelings.



Characteristics: people pleaser, submissive, and have a hard time saying no

The Scapegoat – Individuals know these children as the family problem. They are the children who get into trouble, including alcohol and drug abuse, as a way of expressing their anger at the family. They serve as the “pressure valve” in the family: When tension builds, they misbehave as a way of relieving pressure while allowing the family to avoid dealing with the parent’s drinking and/or drug problem. When they grow up, they are unaware of feelings other than anger.



Characteristics: defiant, falsely accused, individual feels rejected