

Children of A Dysfunctional Family

God's plan for children is for them to be raised in a way that will bring out qualities that will help them to lead healthy lives and fulfill their purpose in life. Children need parents who can model for them healthy living—relationally, spiritually, emotionally, and in every other way.

When children are raised by healthy parents, they learn relational skills and good boundaries. They find out who they are and how they're wired. They grow emotionally, spiritually, and relationally in ways that will increase their likelihood of becoming healthy adults. Additionally, children in healthy families learn that, while problems do occur, they can be met with courage and confidence and with the support of family.

By contrast, children who are raised in unhealthy or dysfunctional families don't learn the boundaries that are necessary for healthy relationships. Their emotional and spiritual growth is stunted because of the difficult family dynamics where they observe and experience inappropriate or destructive behavior.

In this kind of family dynamic, the children learn to behave in ways that help them cope. They often take on roles in the family that leads to problems in their adult lives. Let's examine some of these roles.

The Hero Child – These children are the achievers of the family. They make the family look good because of their excellence in academics, music, sports, or some other area. They receive a lot of positive attention for what they achieve. They are children who appear to be doing well in spite of the family difficulties. On the inside, however, these children are often anxious, because on some level they may believe that the family is precariously balanced on their ability to achieve.

When these hero children become adults, they often become perfectionists and may develop anxiety disorders that include compulsive behaviors. They may have difficulty feeling loved for who they are instead of what they achieve.

The Rebellious Child – These children will act out in rebellious and destructive ways which may serve to put the focus on them and take the focus off of the family's issues. Sometimes these children are referred to as the "Scapegoat" because the family may hold the belief that they would be "healthy," or "normal" if it weren't for this wayward child.

The family attends to this child's negative behavior, using a great deal of time, energy, and other resources. The underlying issue, of course, is that the family is enabled to ignore the pressing problem of the family brokenness, and focus on the acting out child. The family usually will not see that the child is *part* of a larger family problem.

These children learn to get negative attention, and become labeled as the "bad" one, and have a greater likelihood of becoming an adult with self-destructive patterns of addictions, criminal behavior, broken relationships, or homelessness. They see themselves as bad, and set themselves up for living life as a dysfunctional adult.

The Withdrawn Child – These children will withdraw from the family in order to avoid problems. They isolate from the family and pull away into their own little world. Often the goal of these children is to avoid attention, staying "under the radar," to steer clear of the family problems and dynamics. They emotionally disappear from the family. They are often depressed, lonely, and anxious.

These children often grow up to be adults who have an inability to feel. They often suffer from low self-esteem. They may have a difficulty forming intimate relationships. They have learned to avoid hurt by isolating, and they continue that pattern into their adult lives.

The Clown – These children usually use humor and antics to draw attention away from the family problems. They, unlike the Withdrawn Child, seek to be the center of attention. Sometimes these children are labeled "hyperactive" by teachers and other adults. The role of these children is to help the family to laugh instead of feel angry or sad.

These children are underneath it all very sad, and they have learned to cope with family problems by laughing and keeping things like.

As adults, they tend to focus on others and have little ability to get their own needs met. They don't know how to receive love, or how to be emotionally honest when it comes to their deepest heart. They sometimes become caregivers who have "clients" instead of friends. They continue their role of focusing elsewhere instead of on the pain inside.

Children need to grow up in an emotionally safe and nurturing environment, one where they can learn who they are and develop to be all God made them to be. They need to be helped to express their feelings without fear of being judged or criticized.

Children need balance. They need structure and not rigidity or chaos. They need discipline, without parents expressing out of control anger. They need to learn that they are not responsible for the family problems, but that they are responsible for their own behavior and attitudes. They need acceptance and love. Children need to be able to honestly express their anger or sadness without fear. They need a family that is safe, emotionally and physically.

There is hope for these children if the adults make a decision to change the family dynamics by changing their own behaviors and attitudes. Usually that starts with them working on their own individual issues in counseling or a twelve step group. Change takes time and work, but the effort pays huge dividends in the lives of these children!