

Teens and Troubled Families (part 2)

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Last month's blog described some common family dynamics when an adult in the home suffers with an addiction, has anger issues, perpetrates sexual abuse, etc. The entire family is affected and codependency develops as members of the family sacrifice their identity and personal interests to 'help' (or hide) the person with the problem.

We mentioned three unwritten rules in this type of a family:

1. Don't feel (too painful)
2. Don't trust (promises aren't kept)
3. Don't talk (even if other people know about the problem).

You can find out more about troubled families by reading last month's blog. This month, we focus on how we can help the kids who appear on our doorstep.

The first step of course is recognizing the signs, because these kids are unlikely to tell you about their dysfunctional family life. Here are a few clues you can start to watch for:



- Chronic late arrivals and spotty attendance. Their daily routine is disrupted and their participation depends on the immediate situation at home.
- Reluctance to go home after an event or meeting. A boy I knew about lingered and found ways to help when other kids had left, preferring the atmosphere of the youth center to his home.
- Dislike of conflict, to an unhealthy degree. If an argument arises in the group, they become very anxious.
- Regular complaints about not feeling good, usually stomachaches or fatigue.
- Sleep-deprived, due to stress or disruptions at home. One girl that attended my friend's group sat in the back and fell asleep, every week. He later learned it was chaotic and hard to sleep at home, but she felt safe and relaxed when she came to church; the leader decided it was important to give her the space to sleep.
- Other possible signs: unexplained fever; difficulty concentrating during the meeting; inability to express emotions appropriately.

- Anxiety or fear about the possibility of the youth leader meeting their parents or seeing their home.

Of course, these symptoms may point to other issues, but the more you notice, the higher the likelihood that your teen comes from a family where all is not well.

The first and most fundamental thing you can do is to pray for your kids, their families, and for wisdom about how to help. God knows each situation and wants to give us wisdom when we ask for it (James 1:5).

It is also very important to help kids break their unwritten rules, 'Don't talk, don't feel, don't trust.' Your task is to earn their trust, so they will open up and begin to share their feelings and experiences. This will take time, so don't pressure them; keep building trust until they are ready. Being a constant adult friend will help them understand that it is safe to talk to you.

In his book, *Broken Bottles, Broken Dreams*, author Charles Datch offers advice on helping children of alcoholics:

- Kids need to understand that you want what's best for them, that you are willing to listen to them and keep all their secrets.
- Give kids the opportunity to express themselves. Be a good listener. Believe what the teenager tells you. Build a good relationship.
- Be available to these kids, take time to build trust.
- Don't speak badly about parents, ex. 'How could your dad be such a jerk?!' Children's self-esteem is connected to how they view their parents. Criticizing their parents feels like criticizing them.
- Help the teenager understand the problem. Don't talk vaguely about drunkenness and alcoholism in the family; speak clearly.
- Discuss the problems of addiction in general. Buy him a book or share other helpful materials on the subject so that he can understand his situation (in addition, seeing videos or hearing stories about others from similar situations help them realize they are not alone).
- If possible, provide the teenager with professional help.

May God bless you as you seek to help your students from troubled families.

Material adapted from the course, 'Working with Problem Families.' Instructor: Charles Sell.

See also his book: Sell, Dr Charles M. 'Helping Troubled Families: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Supporters'. Baker Books · 2002.