

## **Teenagers and Troubled Families (part 1)**

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January 2026

Some of our kids are likely growing up in dysfunctional homes, where at least one adult has a problem which is out of control. They may battle addiction, anger, sexual abuse or one of various mental health issues. Chances are that these parents grew up in troubled families themselves, because dysfunctional families often reproduce themselves. The problem presents itself like the 'elephant in the room' that no one talks about. Everyone knows it's there, but pretend like it isn't. Most dysfunctional families are in denial.



In seminary, I took a class with Dr. Charles Sell called, 'Ministry to Troubled Families.' Most of what I share here is borrowed from his book, 'Helping Troubled Families.'

### **The Impact of Dysfunctional Families on Children (Sell 302- 303)**

There are four major areas of difficulty in the home when someone has an addiction or another pervasive problem: 1) trusting people, 2) handling feelings, 3) depression and 4) pressure to be over-responsible. One study showed children of alcoholic families to be more depressed, guilt prone, anxious, approval-seeking, and unable to trust others, than the average teen.

Sadly, as these teens grow into adulthood and leave the home, their formative years go with them and present difficult challenges. Here are a few traits of adult children from dysfunctional families:

- They feel they are making guesses at what normal behavior is; they feel different than other people.
- They judge themselves without mercy
- They find it difficult to have fun and finish projects
- They constantly seek approval, even if it means lying
- They may be overly responsible or irresponsible
- They take themselves very seriously and overreact to circumstances outside of their control.

- They can be extremely loyal, even in the face of evidence that loyalty is undeserved.
- They tend to be compulsive: they overachieve, overeat, overwork, over-exercise, and overspend.
- They develop addictions of their own, even if not to harmful substances: sex, pain, eating, religion, power, money, spending, etc.
- They tend to have trouble regulating their emotions and suffer excess feelings of depression, guilt, anxiety, fear, anger and shame.

### **The Processes of Family Influence (Sell 303 – 306)**

One common characteristic of dysfunctional family members is, 'codependency.' This is an unhealthy dependence on each other that smothers each person's autonomy. The afflicted family's life is centered on the person with the problem; all family members yield in some way to the compulsive member who has forfeited control to his addiction.

The child's life is regulated by the condition of the parent. Is she drunk, angry? Is he sick, or will I be sexually abused tonight? When the kids come home from school, they want to know what kind of home they are entering: one with a drunk, high, sober, or angry parent?

A codependent system hinders personal development: individual needs are not fulfilled directly. There is no 'you', 'me' or 'we.' there is only 'we.' The child's life is swallowed up in dealing with the problems of the parents.

In order to survive, kids learn coping mechanisms. These include certain rules that the family must maintain to stabilize their situation. The three most common rules are: don't feel, don't talk, and don't trust. These rules are set up to avoid confronting the shame and pain of the family situation.

There are different ways individual family members yield to the demands of the dysfunctional adult. Children often take on roles, aimed at either saving the family or rebelling against it. Four common roles include

- Overachiever: This is the child who is determined to protect or hide the family's reputation, and/or to escape a legacy of failure, by being successful.
- Rebel/ underachiever: This is the child who uses delinquency or failure to express anger or to draw attention to his needs.
- Withdrawer: This is the child who escapes as often as possible into her own space, just trying to survive until she can leave.

- **Mascot/ Clown:** This is the child who makes everyone laugh, who uses cuteness or humor to diffuse tension, or keep himself on the good side of the unpredictable parent.

This is the troubling portrait of a dysfunctional family and the teens growing up in it. In the next blog, we'll look at what we as student ministry leaders can do to help.

Information from:

Sell, Dr Charles M. *Helping Troubled Families: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Supporters*. Baker Books · 2002.