

Family Roles: Assigned and Assumed

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Whenever there is a group of people, invariably, there are going to be role assignments. Sometimes it is obvious what the specific roles are and who assigns the roles. For example, on a sports team, the coach decides who will play which position. In drama, the director decides who will play each role. Similarly, in a work setting, the boss decides who will have which responsibility. This structure exists in order for the group to meet a common goal. Although less obvious, there are also role assignments in families.

The idea of family roles began from studying children in alcoholic families. Subsequent study has clearly shown that almost all families have role assignments in varying degrees. Typically, the parents have the greater influence over which role the children will be assigned. These roles are most often imposed on children at an early age. Although they are formed subconsciously by the parents and children, there can be great rigidity. Children can also assume roles. The more chaotic and disorganized the family, the more rigid the roles become. More often than not, the children cooperate with the role assignments. The underlying message to the children is the family needs them to play that role in order to function and manage stress. In times of crisis, the roles become even more pronounced as the family members attempt to negotiate the crisis.

Knowing and understanding role assignments and assumptions can be beneficial because the child's role often persists in adulthood. The role affects one's thinking about themselves, relationships to others, and behavior. There are generally four roles: the hero, the scapegoat, the lost child and the mascot.

Oftentimes, the oldest child is assigned and assumes the role of "hero." The hero is characterized as: being a leader, getting good grades, volunteering to help, involved in many activities, overly mature and a perfectionist.

The scapegoat is the child who is frequently wrongly blamed for all the family's problems. The scapegoat cooperates with the assignment by acting out. He may do poorly in school and be a risk taker and pleasure seeker. In teen years, he may develop an addiction.

The lost child role is characterized as a loner, who retreats into their own world to avoid meaningful relationships. He tries to go unnoticed and will not volunteer an opinion.

The mascot role is characterized as being the class clown. On the outside, he tries to appear happy-go-lucky but is often fearful and anxious. He has superficial relationships, and can be hyper-energetic.

Family roles have strong influences over how we think, feel and behave. Unless recognized and dealt with, these roles and difficulties associated with these roles can persist into adulthood. It is encouraging to know, there is hope. Once the role is recognized, the individual can choose how and if they wish to participate, or not participate in that role. This can be a significant step in improving one's family life and roles in other groups.

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