



Survival Roles

Children from families that use violence to express anger may experience traumatic shock as well as fear, anger, sadness, anxiety, loneliness, and hopelessness. They may take on “survival roles” to make life less painful. These survival roles are superhero, scapegoat, lost child, and clown.

Superheroes

Superheroes are sometimes called “over achievers” or “too-good-to-be-true” children. They believe that if they are only good enough, or perfect enough, their families’ problems will be solved. These children help out at home, get good grades and try to be therapist to their parents. Superheroes are outwardly successful. The family can point to them, feel proud and say, “We’re okay.” Superhero children, however, generally end up feeling like failures because, no matter how good they are, their “perfect” behavior can never be good enough to make their parents stop fighting, using violence, or hurting as a result of violence. Superheroes may become rigid and perfectionist and overreact to the slightest criticism from an authority figure.

Scapegoats

Scapegoats try to take the blame for the family's anger. These children act out their own anger by fighting or yelling at home or at school. They tend to get themselves in trouble, and, in this way draw the anger of the violent parent away from the spouse to themselves. They sacrifice themselves in an attempt to save the abused parent. Scapegoats feel hurt and abandoned, angry and rejected, and totally inadequate; they possess little or no self-esteem.

Lost Children

Lost Children may feel personally responsible for the parental chaos in a violent home. Rather than trying to control the chaos, however, lost children try becoming invisible. Invisible, they won't be held accountable for parental stress. These children might spend a lot of time by themselves, away from other family members, “lost” in their own worlds. Lost children give a family with violence some relief. Pointing to the quiet, lost child, a family can think that everything's all right. On the inside, lost children feel unimportant; lonely, hurt, abandoned, fearful, and defeated. They may become overachievers or underachievers in school. Lost children feel unimportant, lonely, hurt, abandoned, fearful, defeated.

Clowns

Clowns provide comic relief for the family. They try to make the family forget about the violence by making jokes and doing funny things. They might even make fun of themselves. Clowns focus attention away from the problem of the violent parent, or deflect that violence, through humor. These children generally see themselves as “jokes.” Thus, they have low self-esteem and feel frightened, lonely, anxious, inadequate and unimportant. Family clowns may have learning disabilities in school, or they may have difficulty paying attention in class.