

Understanding Your **Family of Origin**

What is a family of origin? 02

Cutting your spouse's apron strings 04

Nurturing a secure child with the gift of your affirmation 06

What is codependency? 08

The impact of addiction on the family of origin 10

Additional resources 11



What is a family of origin?

By Focus on the Family Canada

Our family of origin is the family we were born or adopted into. It's the people who raise us and who we spend most of our childhood with.

The importance of an individual's family of origin is enormous. Since parenting shapes a child's core beliefs about himself or herself, our family's beliefs about what it means to be human and the purpose of life will have a tremendous influence on what we learn and how we develop. These beliefs will, in turn, inform every decision and choice you make and every relationship you have.

The beliefs, values and rules of a family are passed down from one generation to the next through living life together daily, and this is how an unhealthy or healthy family of origin is perpetuated.

Unhealthy families

Since the quality of family life is created by the parents, it stands to reason that if a parent or both parents are not mature enough, they will have difficulty creating a healthy family environment. Depending on the degree of immaturity, the family environment can range from slightly unhealthy to extremely unhealthy. Children raised in an unhealthy environment will inevitably perceive themselves and the world around them in a way that distorts the true meaning and purpose of life, which is to live in dependence on God who loves us.

Immaturity includes, but is not limited to, being unable to resolve conflict well, an inability to communicate openly and honestly, an unwillingness to assume adult responsibilities, and wanting to be "taken care" of. In marriage, all too often men and women look to their spouse for what they didn't get in childhood from their parents. An immature woman may want her husband to take care of and love her in a way her father never did. An immature man may be looking for the same thing in his wife, someone who will fill the gaping hole left by an absent mother. To stop looking for someone or something to fill that emptiness means coming to grips with that void and letting God give our hearts the love we didn't get as a child.

Many people enter adulthood without the proper tools to build a good, solid, loving relationship. They don't have them because their parents didn't have them to pass on, nor did their parents' parents have them and so on back down the line many generations. Parents cannot give to their children what they have never been given themselves. What we didn't receive in childhood can be made up in adulthood only by God who can heal those losses and wounds we received from Mom and/or Dad.

Healthy families

No family is perfect, but many families are healthy. Families function well primarily because of the maturity and emotional health of the primary caregiver(s). Whether co-parenting, single parenting or parenting as a couple, the more mature the parents are, the healthier the family is. Mature parents are able to make a full commitment to their responsibilities and the quality of their lives. Even though some of the challenges faced by single or co-parents are different than those faced by two-parent families,

The beliefs, values and rules of a family are passed down from one generation to the next through living life together daily, and this is how an unhealthy or healthy family of origin is perpetuated.

the overall spiritual, emotional and mental health of each parent is what determines the level of health within the family.

Mature couples are committed to their relationship, to the vows they made on their wedding day: to love one another for better or worse, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer until death parts them. They make a decision to work things out and they choose to stay together no matter what. Each spouse takes responsibility for the quality of their own life, knowing that this ultimately improves the quality of their shared life. Healthy parents know that having children is one of the biggest responsibilities they will ever undertake. They know that they are responsible for the overall emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual well-being of the family.

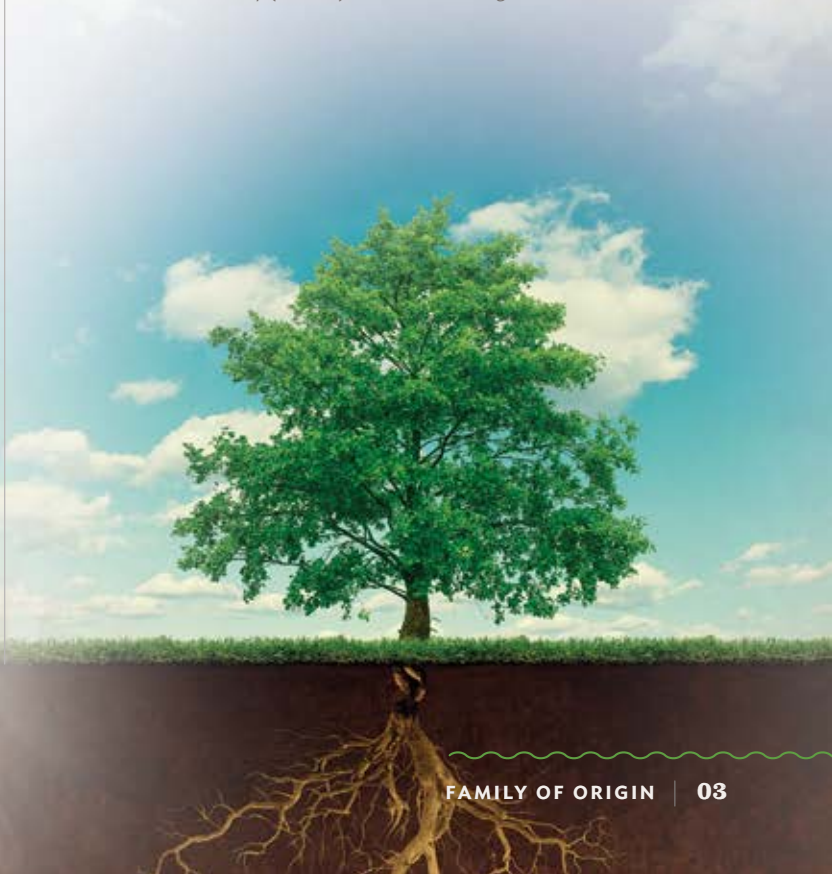
Healthy single or co-parent families are also led by people who choose to stay the course no matter how hard things may get. They take the responsibilities of life seriously and do not falter in their commitment to maturity in all areas. They work hard to provide a loving, stable, safe family environment for their children.

Christian parents, whether single, co-parents or married, do their best to raise their children based on the knowledge that each child is a gift from God, that each child is made in the image of God and has immeasurable value, and that the purpose of life is to love and be loved and bring glory to God. They model these truths to their children in the way they conduct themselves every day, in the way they relate to the world around them, to each other and to their children. They live out what they believe, and in this kind of environment children will be encouraged to

grow and develop into the unique persons God has created them to be. A child will learn that love is not perfect and that apologies and forgiveness are a part of life. They will learn that they can use their anger constructively. They will learn that they possess strengths and weaknesses, have likes and dislikes, have limits, and have gifts and talents. They will grow up with a strong sense of self and be able to relate to others with a deep sense of

connectedness and separateness. They will know that they are okay just the way they are, because they have received love from their parent(s) and from God.

© 2010 Focus on the Family (Canada) Association. All rights reserved.



Cutting your spouse's apron strings

By Sandra Lundberg

Genesis 2:24 says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”

Does this mean that we cut ourselves off from our families of origin? Not if they're reasonably healthy. Maintaining relationships with our parents usually is beneficial. But problems arise if factors like the following are present:

- One spouse relies too heavily on the parents to help in decision-making, leading the other spouse to feel insignificant.
- One spouse looks to the parent, not the partner, to get his or her emotional needs met, leading the partner to feel ignored.
- One spouse reveals details of marital conflict with his or her parents, leading the other spouse to feel betrayed.

Let's take a closer look at these and what you can do about them.

Decision-making dysfunction

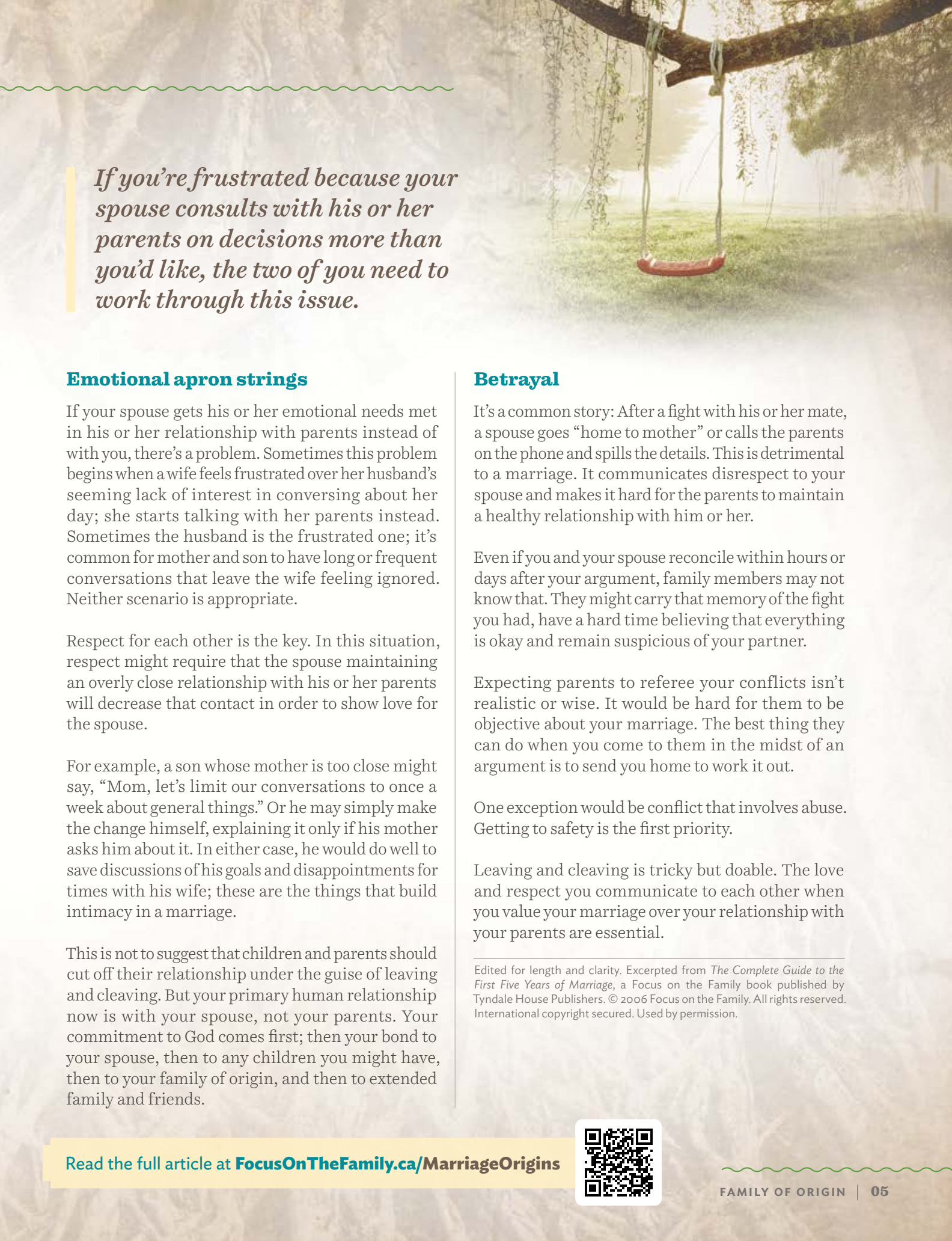
Couples need the freedom and autonomy to make their own decisions. Some parents are better than others in this area; many wait for their adult children to ask for advice, but others try to inject unsolicited wisdom. The latter are often deeply caring people who

want the best for their children, but their behaviour communicates a lack of respect and trust in the judgment of their child and his or her spouse.

Family history can make this difficult water to navigate. Some spouses are used to asking their parents for direction; others make decisions more independently. If you and your mate have different habits on this score, conflict may result.

If you're frustrated because your spouse consults with his or her parents on decisions more than you'd like, the two of you need to work through this issue. If you feel threatened by your spouse's behaviour, share that diplomatically but honestly. Talk about how the two of you would like decision-making to work. Would you prefer that the two of you make choices without getting input from either set of parents? Are there some decisions you'd ask one set of parents about, but not the other?

Be aware that asking for parents' advice can be a slippery slope. It may leave them feeling the door is open for them to give you input into other areas or even to “correct” decisions you've already made. Credit each other and your in-laws with goodwill toward your marriage unless they've demonstrated otherwise. Sadly, some in-laws don't seem to have a vested interest in the success of their child's marriage. If this is true of you, you may need to seek professional advice to determine how best to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries with your in-laws.



If you're frustrated because your spouse consults with his or her parents on decisions more than you'd like, the two of you need to work through this issue.

Emotional apron strings

If your spouse gets his or her emotional needs met in his or her relationship with parents instead of with you, there's a problem. Sometimes this problem begins when a wife feels frustrated over her husband's seeming lack of interest in conversing about her day; she starts talking with her parents instead. Sometimes the husband is the frustrated one; it's common for mother and son to have long or frequent conversations that leave the wife feeling ignored. Neither scenario is appropriate.

Respect for each other is the key. In this situation, respect might require that the spouse maintaining an overly close relationship with his or her parents will decrease that contact in order to show love for the spouse.

For example, a son whose mother is too close might say, "Mom, let's limit our conversations to once a week about general things." Or he may simply make the change himself, explaining it only if his mother asks him about it. In either case, he would do well to save discussions of his goals and disappointments for times with his wife; these are the things that build intimacy in a marriage.

This is not to suggest that children and parents should cut off their relationship under the guise of leaving and cleaving. But your primary human relationship now is with your spouse, not your parents. Your commitment to God comes first; then your bond to your spouse, then to any children you might have, then to your family of origin, and then to extended family and friends.

Betrayal

It's a common story: After a fight with his or her mate, a spouse goes "home to mother" or calls the parents on the phone and spills the details. This is detrimental to a marriage. It communicates disrespect to your spouse and makes it hard for the parents to maintain a healthy relationship with him or her.

Even if you and your spouse reconcile within hours or days after your argument, family members may not know that. They might carry that memory of the fight you had, have a hard time believing that everything is okay and remain suspicious of your partner.

Expecting parents to referee your conflicts isn't realistic or wise. It would be hard for them to be objective about your marriage. The best thing they can do when you come to them in the midst of an argument is to send you home to work it out.

One exception would be conflict that involves abuse. Getting to safety is the first priority.

Leaving and cleaving is tricky but doable. The love and respect you communicate to each other when you value your marriage over your relationship with your parents are essential.

Edited for length and clarity. Excerpted from *The Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, a Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers. © 2006 Focus on the Family. All rights reserved. International copyright secured. Used by permission.

Read the full article at FocusOnTheFamily.ca/MarriageOrigins



Nurturing a secure child with the gift of your affirmation

By Cara Plett

Are you withholding the blessing your child craves? Does your child intimately feel your genuine love and acceptance?

Picture this: you hold a magnificent gift for your daughter, one to enhance several core areas of her life – relationships, academics, career and faith. You clutch the gift, carry it and admire its beauty. But you bury it in your closet, unwrapped, unlabelled and never given. Your child senses the lack of the gift's benefits in her life, but struggles to diagnose her need. Confused, she explores fraudulent sources of emotional fulfillment. She dates chronically for fear of being alone. Her D- in history class offers camaraderie with her peers. And an alarmingly shrinking reflection in the mirror exposes her starvation diet. Why is this happening? She missed feeling unconditional love and acceptance in childhood, and her confidence and security suffer as a result.

It's not too late to excavate the gift from the closet and to present your child with the blessing God desires for them.

Five elements of effective blessing

In their book *The Blessing*, Drs. John Trent and Gary Smalley encourage and equip parents to actively

bestow the blessing today for a secure child tomorrow. Drawing from the biblical illustration of Jacob and Esau, Trent and Smalley invoke the Hebrew concept of blessing: treating someone as valuable. The bestowal requires action. And the action requires wisdom, says pastor and author Ted Cunningham. He writes in *Trophy Child* that while parents want their child to excel, a relentless “drive for the best” exhausts the child and parents. But the blessing shouldn't seem like a curse. To fend off fatigue, Trent and Smalley outline five key elements of effective and sustainable blessing:

1. Meaningful touch

Families today are often more digitally connected through technology than physically connected through touch. Jesus was busy during his life on earth too, but he made time to convey worth to little children: “He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them” (Mark 10:16). Admittedly, you aren't Jesus. And your teenagers know you aren't. If you have a resistant teen, plan to start small with a meaningful pat on the shoulder or a high-five.

Read the full article at
FocusOnTheFamily.ca/ParentingOrigins



2. A spoken message

In my family of origin, *I love you* was shown, not spoken. We weren't skilled compliment givers, or receivers. And sacrificial acts came more naturally than letter writing. But after my mom was hospitalized in critical condition, my family realized the urgency of saying today what we may not have a chance to say tomorrow.

Although children are intuitive, you can never assume they know you love them without saying it, just as you can't assume a child knows the contents of a gift they've not yet seen. To Trent and Smalley, withholding verbal affirmation is inexcusable: "If we can open our mouths to talk, we have the ability to communicate the blessing through spoken words. Even without speaking aloud, you can bless by writing a letter, or even a sticky note."

3. Attaching high value

My parents frequently remind me that I'm one of the three greatest people they know. Well into our adult years, my two siblings and I continue to hear, "You kids are the best!"

Cunningham emphasizes the biblical basis for esteeming your child: he or she has "intrinsic value because God created them in His image." With this in mind, value your child with genuine acceptance for who they are, not merely for what they do.

4. Picturing a special future

Maybe your parents teased, calling you a lazy good-for-nothing. Trent and Smalley warn that jest can reap destruction. Negative predictions, even in fun, have the potential to become self-fulfilling prophecies, they say. Proverbs 26:18-19 cautions against jiving too, comparing the phrase "I am only joking" to a fool throwing "firebrands, arrows and death."

You aren't prophetic, but you can offer your child "the hope and direction that can lead to meaningful goals," say Trent and Smalley. Be expectant. With small seeds of encouragement, and God's tender care, the tree of your child's life can bless you with fruit exceeding what you sow.

5. An active commitment

Trent and Smalley call this the mortar holding the other elements of the blessing together. Mortar isn't the most appealing image: rigid, gray and gritty. But it's appropriate. Conveying the blessing takes time and effort – it takes "being willing to stop what [you] are doing to minister to [the] needs" of your child, they explain.

There's no substitute for the sacrificial dedication required to continually affirm your child. But today's culture ruthlessly challenges this urge to persevere. Our products are disposable; relationships, noncommittal; and time, misused. But don't give up on your family! Along with the call to bless, Trent and Smalley also provide tips that will help you more intentionally live out your commitment to love and value your child. With many small actions and words, you can have a big impact on your child's heart!

Just as our character is manifold but unified, so too is the blessing. Objective, fill-in-the-blank love templates won't work. Why not? Because the blessing is successful only to the extent it's genuine and personalized. The meaningful touch, spoken words, high value, special future, and active commitment mix and match into customized combinations. What is your child's formula for fulfillment?

Cara Plett is an in-house writer for Focus on the Family Canada.

Edited for length and clarity. © 2013 Focus on the Family (Canada) Association. All rights reserved.

What is codependency?

By Dr. Russ Rainey

Jill told her counsellor about her efforts to save two failed marriages, both with husbands who struggled with substance abuse and who were abusive and unfaithful. And now her third marriage was playing out the same way.

In the course of their discussion, Jill opened up about her past: Dad had abandoned the family when she was seven, so she was responsible for her little sisters while Mom worked two jobs. “That’s a lot of responsibility for a young girl,” the counsellor gently affirmed. “Has anyone ever mentioned that having to take care of your family when you were growing up might be affecting your relationships as an adult?”

Codependency defined

By general definition, codependency is an adaptive coping mechanism used compulsively by those trying to find personal worth and value by meeting perceived needs of others. Bottom line: Codependency is a mixed-up motivation to help. Helping becomes a *have to* out of a sense of guilt and survival instead of a *want to* out of a spirit of voluntary service. But that goes against God’s instruction: “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Relationships should be *interdependent* (to be mutually responsible to each another), not

codependent (to be responsible for someone else). That doesn’t mean we ignore legitimate circumstances of children or those who are sick, elderly or disabled. Instead, it means we seek the Lord’s wisdom about our motives and whether our friend or loved one has a true need.

Causes of codependency

Codependency is too complex to pinpoint a single cause. However, it often starts in childhood. Children who grow up in a dysfunctional home often find themselves wanting or needing to help others because the adults in the family can’t or won’t.

In Jill’s case, her mother felt like she didn’t have a choice but to have Jill take care of the other two kids. With Dad out of the picture, Mom had to work more. And for any number of reasons, Mom didn’t build strong networks with other adults who could come alongside the family. Sadly, she didn’t realize the long-term harm that decision would cause Jill.

Over time, coping can become compulsive – the idea that “someone has to be responsible, so it has to be me.” And a child raised in that environment often becomes an adult who feels compelled to fix, rescue or control others.

So how do we know whether our help is well-founded or given out of guilt and survival? We have to pay attention to signs of codependency and be honest with ourselves about red flags.

Signs of codependency

You or a loved one might be codependent if you:

- Are in a relationship marked by addiction or abuse.
- Take responsibility for helping others at the expense of your own needs.
- Seek love and worth through helping but live in fear of abandonment.
- Endure mistreatment and live in survival mode.
- Excuse and enable others' ongoing dysfunctional behaviours.
- Fail to set or keep personal boundaries.
- Become emotionally dependent on fixing, rescuing and controlling others.
- Live with a lack of love, attention, security, fulfillment and identity.
- Experience hurt, fear, anger, guilt, loneliness and shame.
- Deny the reality and personal costs of staying in unhealthy relationships.

Next steps

Overcoming codependency doesn't happen overnight. But it *can* happen. Be honest with yourself, trust God's design for healthy relationships, invite wise and caring people to walk alongside you, and take it one step at a time.

- **Realize that codependency isn't a life sentence.** It's an adaptive coping mechanism – and you can learn a better way to relate!
- **Admit that your motivation for helping got mixed up early in life.** But remember: It wasn't your fault. You can choose to follow a new Christ-centred understanding of appropriate concern and help.
- **Understand that your attraction to needy people is often an unhealthy *need to be needed*.** But you don't have to follow those feelings like the proverbial moth to a flame.

- **Stop the vicious cycle in your relationships.** Don't keep doing what you've always done. Commit to no longer enabling others and losing your identity trying to fix them.
- **Give yourself room to grieve.** Don't ignore the losses you've experienced in codependent relationships.
- **Model future choices after Jesus:** He cared for others but made personal boundaries clear.
- **Provide logical consequences** for those who don't respect your boundaries.

Ask for help

Change is never easy – and we couldn't possibly cover every scenario and specific need in this space. That's why we encourage you to reach out for ongoing support and accountability from solid sources:

- **Christ:** Be intentional about personal spiritual growth. (Find a church home if you don't already have one.)
- **Support groups:** Become part of a recovery ministry like Celebrate Recovery (CelebrateRecovery.ca).
- **Professional help:** Find registered Christian counsellors or professional Christian life coaches who specialize in codependency and recovery. (Call our registered counsellors for a free one-time phone consultation. They can give you a list of qualified therapists practising in your area so you can have long-term support. Call **1.800.661.9800** Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Pacific time.)

Remember: one step at a time. Hold on to hope, lean on God's strength, rest in his unfailing love, and trust him to connect you with safe people. You can overcome codependency.

Dr. Russ Rainey practiced as a registered professional Christian counsellor for over 30 years.

Edited for length and clarity. © 2019 Russ Rainey. All rights reserved. Used with permission. Originally published at FocusOnTheFamily.com.



The impact of addiction

on the family of origin

By Focus on the Family Canada

Addiction is a prominent contributing factor in the development of unhealthy family systems. If a family is crippled by an addiction, no matter what that addiction might be, the whole family is shaped by it.

Addictions hold families hostage and the stronghold they have is difficult, if not impossible, to break without help. Addictions such as alcoholism, infidelity, pornography, sexual abuse and domestic violence all have a huge impact on the home environment.

The effect on children

For example, if a child grows up watching Dad hit Mom during a drunken rage, that is what the child learns is normal. They learn that anger is dangerous and to be avoided at all costs.

They eventually believe that they are the cause of the rage and, if they are the cause, then they are also the solution. They become hyper-vigilant, monitoring the emotional environment in order to “prevent” a drunken parent from raging.

They lose their sense of self trying to control what they have no control over. They become afraid and

stay afraid. In an effort to protect Mom from Dad’s blows, they may draw his attention to themselves and become the recipient of his verbal and physically abusive behaviour.

They may not like it, but they don’t know any different. For them, this is normal, and they believe all families are like theirs. They experience a deep sense of shame about who they are. This core feeling of shame leads to the belief that something is essentially wrong with them and it becomes the energy that fuels their own addictions. They in turn become parents and pass on to their children what they learned is “normal,” perpetuating the unhealthy family system.

There is hope

I believe that all parents love their children. I believe all parents want the best for their children and do their best at parenting. But sometimes their best is not very good and their parenting leaves deep wounds of rejection, abandonment and shame in the hearts of their children.

We can’t go back to childhood to reclaim the love we missed out on, but that doesn’t mean the emptiness can’t be filled and the losses restored. Even though we can’t change the way we were raised, there is hope for healing.



Even though we can't change the way we were raised, there is hope for healing.

But it isn't our spouse, a career, financial success, power or fame that will bring healing. Healing comes from an intimate relationship with God and relationships with those who truly love us, warts and all. It is a process that takes time and a willingness to face the pain that has been buried since childhood.

Breaking the cycle

We can break the generational cycle of unhealthy family systems so that we can create our own healthy family system, a system of relationships that affirm and encourage life. We were wounded in relationships and we will be healed in relationships – relationships with God and with others. Many people find strength from support groups, books, workshops and counselling.

Thankfully we have a God who wants to heal the hurt and fill to overflowing the empty places in us.

© 2010 Focus on the Family (Canada) Association. All rights reserved.

Find more articles and resources at
FocusOnTheFamily.ca/FamilyOfOrigin



Additional resources

BOOK

📖 *Setting Boundaries with Negative Thoughts and Painful Memories*
BY ALLISON BOTTKE (C03146B)

Find this title and more at
Shop.FocusOnTheFamily.ca



FOCUS ON THE FAMILY BROADCAST

- 🎙️ *"The Importance of Leaving and Cleaving"*
WITH TED CUNNINGHAM
- 🎙️ *"Establishing Healthy Boundaries with Your In-Laws (Parts 1 and 2)"*
WITH DRS. JOHN TOWNSEND AND HENRY CLOUD
- 🎙️ *"Forgiving Your Parents (Parts 1 and 2)"*
WITH LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS
- 🎙️ *"Leaving a Legacy of Faith (Parts 1 and 2)"*
WITH DAN SEABORN
- 🎙️ *"Redeeming a Marriage and Childhood Wounds"*
WITH RUSS AND TORI TAFF
- 🎙️ *"Overcoming the Father Wound (Parts 1 and 2)"*
WITH JOSH MCDOWELL

Listen to these and more at
FocusOnTheFamily.ca/Radio



We're here to help

We know that life can be overwhelming, and it can sometimes be difficult to know how to navigate the trials we face. Whatever you may be dealing with right now, we want you to know you're not alone. We are here for you with prayer and counselling support.

Every weekday our team prays together for the needs of families all across the country. You can email prayer@fotf.ca or submit your prayer request online at FocusOnTheFamily.ca/Prayer. Or if you'd like to receive prayer over the phone, call our team at **1.800.661.9800**.

We also offer a free, one-time phone consultation with one of our in-house counsellors. Our counselling staff are all committed Christians and registered (Masters level) counsellors with ministry experience. We can also refer you to a specialized counsellor in your area (fees will apply). Call us at **1.800.661.9800** or visit FocusOnTheFamily.ca/Counselling to learn more.

Need more help?

*Our collection of free PDF booklets offers
biblically based and psychologically sound advice for
mental health and relationships.*

Scan to



download

FocusOnTheFamily.ca/PDFBooklets



FOCUS
ON THE
FAMILY
Canada

19946 80A AVENUE, LANGLEY, BC V2Y 0J8 | 1 800 661 9800 | FocusOnTheFamily.ca

© 2024 Focus on the Family (Canada) Association. All rights reserved.

M00319M