

Roles Children May Assume When Family Violence Occurs

In our family, we can adopt or be given “roles” we willingly or unconsciously play while interacting with others in the family.

Roles that develop or are assigned in families affected by family violence reflect the unique ways each person adapts and copes with the confusing and potentially dangerous situation in which they live.

Key points about family roles

- A role may be imposed on the child or it may be assumed by the child
- Children can play more than one role
- A child may use the role as a strategy to cope, so it might not be turned off overnight once the abuser is gone
- Roles assigned by the abuser can lead to guilt, grief and other hurtful emotions, especially after they are gone

These are examples of roles played by children in some families characterized by family violence.

Caretaker	Acts as a parent to younger siblings and abuse victim. May oversee routines and household responsibilities (ex. meals, putting siblings to bed), helps to keep siblings safe during a violent incident and comforts them afterwards (ex. reassure siblings, getting tea for victim).
Victim's Confidant	The child who is privy to the victim's feelings, concerns, and plans. After witnessing abusive incidents, their recollections may serve as a “reality check” for the victim, if the abuser later minimizes or lies about events.
Abuser's Confidant	The child who is treated better by abuser and most likely to be told his justifications for abuse against the abused. May be asked to report back on victim's behaviour and be rewarded for doing so with, for example, privileges or absence of harsh treatment.
Abuser's	The child who is co-opted or forced to assist in abuse of

Assistant victim (ex. made to say demeaning things or to physically hit victim).

Perfect Child The child who tries to prevent violence by actively addressing issues (wrong) perceived to be triggers, in this case by excelling in school and never arguing, rebelling, misbehaving, or seeking help with problems.

Referee The child who mediates and tries to keep the peace.

Scapegoat The child identified as the cause of family problems, blamed for tension between parents or whose behavior is used to justify violence. May have special needs or be a step-child to the abuser.

Examining family roles is important because...

- It helps us understand how a child interprets and copes with violence (so we can intervene effectively)
- It helps us understand how different children in the same family can have dramatically different understandings of what happened in their homes
- It helps us understand how a child may think and feel once the abuser is gone
- It is a framework for understanding how tension can occur between siblings or in the parent-child relationship

For example, children who adopt pseudo-adult roles such as the “caretaker” may have difficulty adjusting when expected to assume the role of child once again. The “abuser’s assistant” may take up the role of abuser. The “scapegoat” child’s isolation within the family may be intensified by feelings of responsibility for the marital break-up. The “perfect child” may be impatient with and blaming towards siblings who misbehave or otherwise “triggered” abuse by the abuser.