

Looks Can Be Deceiving

“I hate it when my mom (or dad) does that, but I love them.”

“I don’t trust my dad.”

I feel guilty for feeling this way about my parents.”

“ I am really angry at my parents.”

“I just don’t care anymore, it will never change.”

These are some of the comments you may hear from children living with a parent or caregiver with substance-dependency. For these children, life can be very unpredictable; often, they survive by adopting various roles within the family.

To unaware adults, these children may be seen as the obedient overachiever, the class clown, the shy wallflower, or the angry defiant child. They may even be identified as having a substance-abuse problem. However, if you take time to listen, you may hear some common themes—lack of trust, shame, guilt, hurt, anger, and fear. These children often feel alone and confused. It is often difficult for children to separate the addiction from their parent.

Growing up in this environment may impair normal childhood development as well as have lasting effects leading into adulthood. Fortunately, developing a healthy trusting relationship with another adult can have a positive influence on children. Teachers, counselors, church members, and other adult family members all can play an important role in helping a child.

When helping a child, being available to listen without judging or criticizing the parent is very important. There are also community resources and Web sites that can provide helpful information.

So take time to listen.

Patricia O’Donnell, LPC, CAC-DP
Clinical Director, Drug and Alcohol Services
Diakon Family Life Services – Capital Region