

The Rescuer's Plight: Avoiding the Enabling Trap

By Chandler Scott McMillin

It was the final segment of an afternoon talk show, topic “Out of Control Kids”, featuring defiant girls, defeated mothers, the customary blonde host, and an audience serving as a sort of Greek chorus.

“I don’t care what your excuse is,” a lady in a print dress says disapprovingly. “No responsible mother would permit her daughter to dance in a strip club.” This garners much applause.

“I don’t give her permission,” the mother complains. “She does it behind my back.”

“It ain’t up to her,” shouts her daughter above the racket, belligerently poking her ample bosom with a two-inch fake fingernail. “She doesn’t tell me what to do. Nuh-uh. Nuh-uh.”

“Ooooooo,” moans the audience, outraged at such impertinence.

“See?” Mom says. “You can’t do anything with her.”

“But Andrea, you’re only fifteen,” the host reminds her.

“So what?” the kid yells. “So what? I can do what I want.”

“Boooooooo,” is the verdict from the disciplinarians in the crowd.

A young man in a turtleneck sweater has some stern advice. “Mother, you need to get control of your children.”

“But she won’t listen to me,” the woman repeats in a forlorn voice. “She just does it behind my back.”

“It sounds like,” the host intones, cutting to commercial, “it’s a case of the child being in charge of the home, not the parent.”

“Hmmmmm,” agrees the audience.

I’m thinking that’s obviously *not* the case. Andrea isn’t in charge of the home,

any more than she’s in charge (despite her protestations) of her own life. She’s a ninth grade dropout, a heavy drug user with one miscarriage, two arrests for shoplifting, and a string of older dope dealer boyfriends. She’s all appetites and impulses, unbridled and conflicting emotions, utterly rudderless except for the need to gratify her cravings and oppose authority in whatever form it takes. If her mom were to disappear, Andrea would have trouble making her own breakfast, let alone running a household.

Andrea’s mom, on the other hand, is raising three girls, two still in elementary school, waitressing fifty hours a week, paying out of pocket for child care, in hock up to her neck, her ex-husband six months late on support—this is a woman with the strength of a pack mule. She looks ten years older than she should. Two of her three daughters, by the way, are doing

Myth: “it’s a case of the child being in charge of the home, not the parent.”

well. Nonetheless, a bunch of strangers are willing to stand up and tell her that she’s a bad parent.

Worse yet, she agrees with them. Andrea’s mother is crippled by maternal guilt. She wonders if this isn’t all her fault. “If I’d been there more... if I hadn’t had to work so much... if we hadn’t gotten divorced...” An endless string of unanswerable questions engendering disabling self-doubt. She’s not an incompetent parent, simply one who is scared that any real attempt at change will make things worse for her and her family. She’s like the little Dutch boy standing



Mom might as well be on Pluto...

with a finger in the dike—afraid to move, and yet aware that eventually, she must.

To break the impasse, we must mobilize the parent and set limits on the difficult child.

Start with the revolutionary idea that all parties involved—Mom *and* Andrea—are doing the best they can with the tools they have.

Obviously, those tools aren’t sufficient. But rather than falling into recrimination and blame, we need to help this family find the resources to make their lives work.

Recall the characteristics normally associated with antisocial behavior in kids:

- » Poor control over impulses
- » Self-centeredness
- » Lack of awareness of the needs of others
- » Low tolerance for frustration
- » Inability to delay gratification
- » Irresponsibility toward obligations
- » Difficulty managing anger
- » Use of intimidation
- » Lying, conning, manipulation

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That's Andrea, all right. Mix in drugs, and expecting her to take responsibility for her own behavior is like appointing a five-year-old as CEO of a big corporation. She wants the job, but she can't do the job.

Her real talent is for preventing anyone else from doing it, either. That's the obstacle we must ultimately overcome.

Back to the question of why a parent would put up with (even protect) a child who disobeys her every wish, and then reviles her on national television: our society holds the parent accountable for the welfare of the child until the age of majority. The parent's responsibility includes educating and nourishing and caring for our children, and also for governing their conduct. Should we be tempted to forget, the law is around to remind us.

But what happens when the parent isn't able to govern the child? Andrea's mother wants to control her, and can't.

It's worth pointing out, as someone with twenty-five years experience working with difficult people, that I'm not at all sure I could control Andrea, either.

Certainly not without a lot of help. At the very least, I'd need the assistance of a structured treatment program, or an alternative school, or a residential facility,

or a bed at Juvenile Hall. Otherwise, it's impossible, because she'd be fighting me every step of the way.

Andrea's situation isn't hopeless. Believe me, I see kids every day who are a lot worse than she will ever be. But without resources, I defy anyone to manage Andrea much better than her mother has. And if I had to hold down a full-time job, fight money problems, and raise two other kids—well, forget it.

Of course, once they reach a certain age, can any of us really “control” a young adult's behavior, without twenty-four hour security? Besides, the more we try to exert control over an oppositional kid, the harder they will fight us.

That leaves parents firmly wedged between a rock and a hard place. Society insists they do the impossible, then holds them accountable for the inevitable failure.

It's a pretty good definition of Hell.

And it's a big reason why so many parents fall into **enabling** behavior.

That's a term borrowed from drug treatment to describe a pattern that emerges in the families of dysfunctional people. It's defined as *behavior on the part of others that protects the troubled individual from the consequences of his or her own actions*.

Protection comes in many shapes and sizes. Andrea's family exhibits most of them.

- » She rescued Andrea from jail and paid for a private attorney to defend her on her theft and drug possession charges.
- » She doesn't report Andrea's many violations of the terms of her probation to the probation officer.
- » She makes excuses for Andrea's behavior to the rest of the family.
- » She knew Andrea was cutting classes yet lied for her when the school called in hopes her daughter wouldn't get expelled (she quit anyway).
- » She permits her daughter to steal money from her (that eventually goes for drugs.)
- » When Andrea complained that the school was giving her a hard time, she defended her.
- » She pretends not to know Andrea is using drugs in the house to avoid a conflict that would upset the other kids.
- » She takes over many of the responsibilities that Andrea should have assumed, but can't because of her erratic emotional state.
- » The one time Andrea, drunk and stoned, assaulted her, she refused to file charges.

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Enabling is like an investment strategy that produces short-term profits but in the long run leaves you broke. At the time, it seems like the expedient thing to do. The downside emerges later.

It was easier for Andrea's mom not to file charges than to face the unpleasant prospect of testifying against her daughter in court. It was safer to lie to the vice-principal about Andrea's absences than to risk her daughter's expulsion from school.

It was simpler to bail the child out of jail than face her own anxiety about what might happen to her behind bars. It was less hassle to pretend to believe Andrea's lies than to make a fuss about some missing cash, and more expedient to do her chores than to argue with her.

But what do these experiences teach Andrea? Is she learning that she has lost control over drugs, or that drug use has made her life unmanageable? Has she come to understand that the value of staying in school and getting her degree? Is she experiencing the negative consequences of impulsiveness, bad judgment, or irresponsibility? Has she learned that no matter how angry she is, it is not OK to assault her mother? Does Andrea now know, as a result of her experience, that crime does not pay?

No. In fact, she's learning a different lesson entirely.

She's learned that getting in trouble isn't that bad, because your mom will

bail you out. She's learned that you don't really need to be responsible, or exercise good judgment, or meet your obligations, because Mother will cover for you. It's no surprise that Andrea doesn't see her drug use as a problem—it's mostly a problem for Mom.

I'll never forget the parent who stormed into my office one day outraged that her daughter had gone back to heroin an hour after being discharged from Intensive Care, where she'd spent three days in a coma after an overdose. "She slept through the whole experience," I pointed out. "It's you who learned about the dangers of heroin."

Consequences—what addicts sometimes refer to collectively as "pain and shame"—are what eventually penetrate denial and motivate the difficult process of change. Enabling behavior interferes with Andrea's awareness of those consequences, and reduces her motivation to change. Andrea will continue drinking and drugging, committing crimes, and having promiscuous sex that she doesn't recall, until, eventually, one of those activities will result in irreparable harm to her or someone else.

That's why we must address the mother's behavior as well as the child's. Andrea must give up drugs and alcohol and crime and doper boyfriends and compulsive spending and promiscuous sex. Mom has to give up enabling.

That's almost as difficult.

If we asked Andrea's mother for the motives behind her enabling, this is what we'd hear.

She's afraid the family will fall apart. Mom is the opposite of selfish; her kids are her life. Her proudest achievement is keeping the family unit going in the wake of a painful divorce from an alcoholic husband.

She's concerned about her other daughters. Like any good parent, she wants to provide a normal home life for all her kids. Andrea's behavior makes that a daily battle. She wants to minimize the damage done to the younger girls.

She feels responsible for Andrea's problems. Although she understands intellectually that she didn't cause Andrea's difficulties, on some primitive emotional level known only to female parents, she feels she should have done more to prevent them.

She fears the outcome if she doesn't protect Andrea. In her own words, "I can't stand the thought of my child lying in a gutter somewhere, beat up or raped or overdosed on drugs."

But are those concerns really valid?

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If Mom stops enabling, will the family fall apart?

It's hard to see how. Andrea is already violating her probation; what if her mother instructs her attorney to ask the court to place her in a structured treatment program, with regular drug tests and family counseling? That should draw the family together, not tear it apart.

If Mom stops enabling, will that harm the other girls?

You'd have to say the children are suffering now. With the help of a good counselor, the family should soon see a real increase in order and harmony.

Can Mom take responsibility for Andrea's problems?

Suppose Andrea's mother got down on her knees and confessed to God and country that she screwed up as a parent—would Andrea then stop doing drugs, dancing in strip clubs, committing crimes? Of course not. Besides, Andrea *already* blames her mom for all her problems. In fact, one of the real surprises awaiting the enabler is the day she discovers exactly how profoundly ungrateful the child is for all the "help" she has received.

If Mom stops enabling, will something terrible happen?

This is perhaps the strongest fear of all. The important thing to remember is that with proper guidance from a counselor, the consequences that emerge when parents stop protecting the child can be turned into powerful leverage to motivate Andrea to quit using drugs and change her behavior.



So what would Andrea's life look like if her mom stopped enabling?

- » The court might have required her to enroll in and complete a drug rehabilitation program.
- » Her probation officer would have been in a position to take action when Andrea returned to drug use.
- » She would have had to face the consequences of cutting school.
- » The other kids would have been involved in counseling to help them deal with the impact of living with their troubled sister.

In other words, Andrea would have had a powerful set of incentives to *change for the better*.



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