

Children and Religious Toxicity

Rachel Ramer

In chemistry, toxicity is the degree to which a substance can cause damage. We often think of this as a quick overload of chemicals or drugs, yet a slow accumulation of a toxin can equal long-term damage, often scarcely noticed by the person being poisoned.

Religious toxicity is similar, and children are particularly vulnerable. Children in homes where religious fervor takes precedence over people learn to adjust to toxicity, to consume it without self-protection.

I grew up in a toxic religious environment. For children like myself, the tendency is to spend a lifetime attempting to recover. Children develop skills similar to those in homes with chemical addictions.

The biggest “ah-ha” moment came when my sister and I saw similarities between children of alcoholics and ourselves, even though there had been no alcohol in our home. The work of psychologist Janet G. Woititz identifies these characteristics for adult children of alcoholics, many of which overlap the list from religious addiction.

Jeff VanVonderen has also contributed to identifying many *characteristics of religious trauma*.

- **Overly submissive behavior**—Cooperative children are pleasant to be around, but overly submissive children lack the autonomy to protect themselves. Even if their

home is generally a safe place, complete obedience sets the stage for possible abuse in present and future relationships. Unfortunately, some materials targeting religious parents encourage unquestioned obedience.

- **Trust issues**—Children are conditioned to accept what the religious community concludes over their own observations and inferences. They develop an inability to trust others outside their religious circle, but even more important, the inability to trust themselves.

- **Black and white thinking patterns**—While this simplicity is normal for children, cognitive and emotional growth means understanding nuance. A toxic religious environment sees nuance as a threat, which keeps children in this underdeveloped mindset far beyond their early years.

- **Minimized emotions or exaggerated emotions**—Religion is notorious for downplaying emotions as unimportant, even casting childlike expressions as childish and immature. At the same time, emotions supporting religious beliefs are weaponized against children, such as the use of shame and “righteous” anger.

- **Depression, lethargy**—Those downplayed emotions often express themselves in despair. Inner criticisms or excessive introspection are the norm. Children often second guess themselves and inwardly adopt the voice of their critics.

- **Isolation**—A highly religious

environment exaggerates protection and turns it into isolation. This can be a component supported by the rise of home education, although the two are not necessarily linked.

- **Indecisiveness**—Children with little autonomy find it difficult to make decisions when given the opportunity. This natural transition to adulthood is thwarted by ultra-religious control.

- **Struggles with reality**—The difficulty in trying to match toxic belief with experience creates a disconnect from one or the other. If they cling to the belief, they struggle with the reality of their experiences.

- **Fear of future events and hell**—Many children from religious homes have an underlying fear not only of what can happen in a current situation, but of the future.

- **Awfulizing**—Awfulizing takes on a life of its own and contributes to living “inside the box.” New ideas die on an altar of fear. The mind jumps quickly to the worst that can happen and the emotions follow. Positive solutions can’t be fully trusted.

- **A critical attitude toward others**—In Dorothy Law Nolte’s poem, “Children Learn What They Live,” she states, “If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.” A sense of superiority or inferiority (sometimes both) emerges.

- **Adult concerns**—Teachers confirm that students from overly religious homes as young as second and third grade sometimes argue

about doctrine. This mirrors my own experience when I told my school classmates where God stood on issues I had heard discussed in my home.

- **Guilt and shame**—Nolte also states, “If a child lives with shame, he learns to feel guilty.” This guilt expands beyond any wrongdoing to a general sense of being unaccepted. My sister and I had a tendency to say, “I’m sorry,” excessively, not as sympathy to bad news, but as a compulsion to counteract shame.

- **Secrecy**—Shame leads to keeping secrets. What is “unspeakable” in religious homes creates a ripe environment for hidden abuses. We witnessed this with the fundamentalist Duggar family of *19 Kids and Counting* fame, when the oldest son was convicted of possession of child pornography.

Jesus was addressing religious people when he told his disciples: “*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these*” (Matthew 19:14).

What Can Outsiders Do to Help?

A few years ago, I spoke to a brokenhearted grandmother whose daughter and son-in-law would not allow her to see her grandchildren. The reason? The grandmother was not religious enough. She attended church, but not the “right” church. She was a Christian, but they had their doubts she was a “true” Christian. As a grandparent, she had no legal right to see them. Sadly, some grandparents have to resort to writing letters to their grandchildren to give at a later date, hopefully before their own passing.

When I was growing up, adults in my world saw how my father created an unhealthy religious

environment for my siblings and myself. A few wanted to help, but most adults quietly ignored or even accommodated the situation. One brave person was an aunt, married to my father’s younger brother. They were missionaries in Brazil for many years, so I seldom saw her. On one of her few visits when we were alone together, she told me I could write to her anytime. She didn’t realize my father had already tainted my opinion of her as too liberal/outspoken.

A woman at church also attempted to intervene along with the pastor. But the church had accepted a divorced couple, so we left for a more conservative church with clearly defined marriages where women “knew their place.” Even at age ten, I felt a sense of hopelessness. No one could get through to my dad.

The orchestra director at school was aware of our religious upbringing. He never spoke against my parents, but he knew my father grumbled about some modern pieces the director chose for us to play. How many times did he bite his tongue when he found out our father would not approve of activities normal to most teenagers?

Now, I understand. These adults witnessed spiritual toxicity yet had no authority to address it. They contributed to our lives, but what if they’d done more?

Avoid Debating Religion in Front of Children

Effective communication uses the concept of *kairos*, a combination of timing and opportunity. Within a religious environment, many of us developed the skill to speak up for the truth but without knowing *when* to speak up. Assessing *when* to say *what* depends on the severity of the situation.


Toxic religious people often claim to be logical, which seems like an invitation to debate, but this is quickly a dead end. They’re not entirely unreasonable, and they have already built an intricate rationale for their ideas. Even if we can see flaws, they will reject dissenting views—and us along with those views.

When parents feel threatened, even by differing ideas, their children also feel threatened. Young children pick up the emotions of an exchange; older children will feel the urge to argue. They’ve inherited a filter—for now. We can consider the ages of the children involved and avoid saddling them with adult issues. They will parrot their parents’ beliefs. This feels safe to them.

Develop Relationships; Ask Questions

To combat the tendency of ultra-religious parents to isolate, we can look for mutual interests with both parents and children. Do they like to garden? Read mysteries? Play board games? Collect baseball cards? Look for ways to get them into the community such as visiting museums, zoos, or festivals.

Developing relationships is a long game with few immediate results. Unless we can document abuse and/or neglect (which should be addressed



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immediately), long term relationships with both parents and children are the best tools for effective influence. If this isn't an option, consider new methods to reconnect in the future.

As children grow older, opportunities arise to challenge black and white thinking. Use questions such as, "Have you heard of this other view [or example]?" "Have you thought about what that would mean for [a group of people, another situation]?" "I wonder why [a credible source] would say [the opposite]?" We can allow them to lead if they want to hear more. Usually, one or two children in a family will have what psychologist Daniel Goleman refers to as emotional intelligence, already assessing and experiencing doubts, enough to form questions.

If they're experiencing significant emotional pain, more direct statements are in order. Pain is often a turning point. If we've had a similar background, this is a good time to let them know. We can avoid attacking their parents, while not making excuses for the parents. My mother used to say about my father, "At least he's not an alcoholic." I was glad about that, but it too easily dismissed what we experienced.

Encourage Autonomy; Value Emotions

Someone else has been making their decisions, stripping them of opportunities to grow, to wrestle with difficult choices and to make mistakes. Many

religious systems reach far beyond childhood when it comes to restricting autonomy, even choosing spouses for adult children. Autonomy means they make their own decisions about beliefs, even if they return to the toxicity. We can provide a safe place for choice.

Because they've experienced the minimization of their emotions, children may find expressing themselves difficult. Emotional upheaval might emerge in the presence of a safe person. Guilt, shame, indecision, depression and fear are part of the mix. These may turn to anger as they become aware of the toxicity.

A word of caution: Their situation may trigger *transference* when they begin to trust us. According to the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, transference is "a patient's displacement or projection...of those unconscious feelings and wishes originally directed toward important individuals, such as parents."

This means we might become the unintended target of strong attachment followed by heated rejection. Therapists know how to address transference; most lay people do not and take unnecessary offense to this common dynamic. Clear boundaries minimize misunderstandings. Children from ultra-religious homes have a greater chance of a well-adjusted adulthood if we demonstrate this through relationships. □

Rachel Ramer is the host of "Lost the Legalism, Kept the Love" on Facebook.



In Memory of Larry Omasta

We here at Plain Truth Ministries lost a dear friend, co-worker and partner-in-Christ on March 30th, 2023. Lawrence "Larry" Omasta served as a part-time employee in our ministry for many years, helping each week with the incoming mail, processing of donations, praying over prayer requests, answering phones, as well as assisting with various research and special projects.

Larry was a loving and dedicated husband, father, grandfather, leader and Christ-follower. Prior to joining Plain Truth Ministries, Larry enjoyed a long career in the world of media that spanned over forty years. Having hailed from Western Pennsylvania, Larry was a life-long Pittsburgh Steeler fan, and we joked that he loved Jesus, his family, cups of coffee and his beloved Steelers—in that order!

With an easy laugh, Christ-centered faith and a great perspective on life, Larry, as PTM's resident octogenarian, will be sorely missed. Our thoughts and prayers remain with his family and life-long friends. □