

## Concern for a Sibling May Cause You To Develop A Problem

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

Siblings are very important in each other's lives: sometimes in obvious ways, such as being rainy day playmates or sticking up for each other. But often they can be influential in subtle or indirect ways. For example, when a person develops a problem could be an indirect means of communication to one or more siblings. It could be to protect a sibling or to connect with one. This is just a true for children as it is for adult siblings.

The Zeele family demonstrates how a girl's problem communicates several messages to her two brothers.

Six years ago, I saw the Zeeles in therapy when 15 year old Bobby had run away from home. Mrs. Zeele and her two other children shared the guilt they felt for contributing to his leaving, as well as their anger and sadness at him for walking out. In time, they came to a peace with his absence, and eventually, they established telephone contact, albeit irregular, with him.

Now Mrs. Zeele calls again. She starts with catching me up. Bobby had gotten involved with drugs and two years ago he snuck home stealing some of her jewelry. Recently, he moved back to town; mother wants the family to see him, but forbids him to come into the house.

Timmy, her second child, is now a senior. He is doing poorly, doesn't have many friends, and spend most of his time at his computer. He has no plans for after graduation, "but at least he's not in trouble," she signs.

"My real worry is Alicia. She just turned 16 and is hanging around with a weird religious group. "They are vegetarians, wear only black, shave their hair pray to who-knows-what god, don't do drugs, and believe in group sex as a religious experience. I cannot understand why my easiest child should cause me such trouble."

When she tries talking with Alicia about this group, her daughter screams to leave her alone or she'll run away. Since Alicia has always spoken warmly of me, Mrs. Zeele asks her if she will meet with me.

Alicia agrees, and during our first meeting she recalls our earlier sessions, "when I was such a little kid." She lights up, "I'm delighted Bobby's back home, even if he can't come into the house. At least I know where he is and can see him. It kills me, though, that he and Mom can't get along. I know he is heavy into drug dealing. I'm really worried about him."

She then talks about her middle brother. "Do you remember how Timmy and I used to fight all the time? Well, after Bobby left, we got real close. Now, though, he stays locked in his room. Mom thinks he is on the computer, but I know he's just getting stoned."

She pulls at the hole in her jeans, looking anxious about something. Then she says, "Since I joined this group I can't do drugs; it's not allowed. But I really worry about Timmy. I don't know if he's going to graduate this year."

Alicia is just as engaging and honest about her feelings as I remember. I ask, "How did you go from being the perfect kid and Mom's prize little girl to getting involved with this religious group?"

Her inflection changes as she talks in a monotone, repeating the mantra from the group. Then her voice comes alive again, "You know, it's about time I stopped being so good."

"It sounds like this group is a way to keep you from being so good, but it also keeps you from using drugs."

She looks surprised. "I guess that's true."

Later I ask what Bobby says about her being in this group. Alicia smiles, "Last weekend, I took off with the group for two days; Mom couldn't find me. She called Bobby to see if I was over there. They started talking about how to help me. They're worried I'll get pregnant; I'll become a religious junkie." She grins, "Mom invited Bobby over this Saturday to talk with me."

"I bet you're glad to have Bobby talking to your Mom again, to say nothing of having him back in the house."

She smiles wither whole body.

I ask, "What does Timmy say about this group?"

She answers in a more sober tone, "He's scared for me. Last night, he said he'd even stop drugs if I would get out."

"Wow! What did you say to that?"

Alicia is silent for a few minutes then says, "I had been thinking of making that same offer? It's odd, isn't it?"

Isn't that a form of blackmail, Alicia? You'll get out if he stops using?"

"Yea, but if it'll get him clean...." She cries softly. "I don't want him to get as bad as Bobby. It hurt so much when I lost Bobby. I couldn't stand to lose Timmy, too."

It's always questionable how much meaning to consciously attribute to other's behaviors, but it is possible that Alicia's joining this group is sending at least four messages to her brothers: equalizing, protecting, peacemaking, and dirty fighting.

By joining this group, Alicia sends an equalizing message to both brothers. It's as if she says, "You can like me now because I'm no longer Mom's perfect child; now I'm more like you two."

Her blackmail scheme sends a protecting message to Timmy. This message she said clearly: she'll get out if he'll stop using drugs.

Her peacemaking message is best demonstrated by setting the stage for reuniting Bobby and their mother, putting him back in his rightful position as helpful oldest child.

The fourth communication message is dirty fighting. Alicia is angry at both of her brothers: Bobby, he idol, deserts her when

he runs off; Timmy deserts her for drugs. She can't tell them she's angry for fear of losing them even more. Instead, she gets back at them by making them worry about her.

Alicia is probably not conscious of all of this. She seems to know being in this group is related to her anxiety about her brothers. She has set up a situation where her own recovery assures her brothers get better too.

A three month follow-up report: Blackmail works!"

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