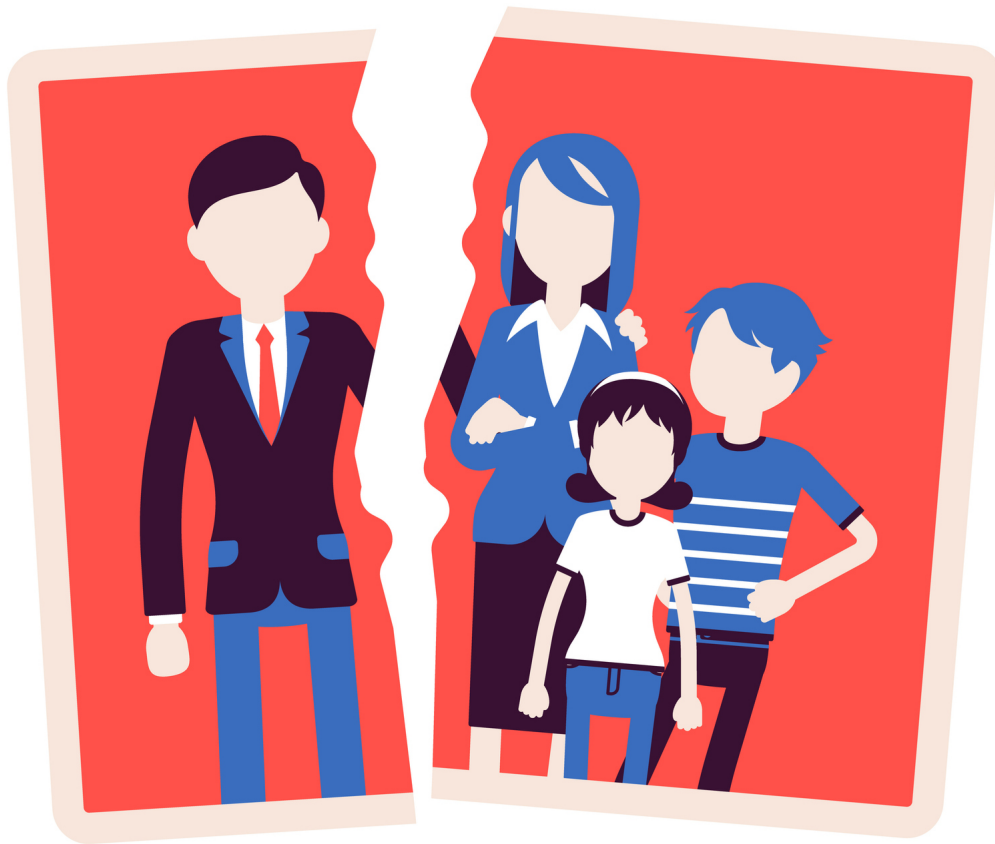


## AZ Health: When a Picture Does Not Tell a Thousand Words

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Families are struggling more today than ever. Parents' external need to fulfill their own self-esteem through the lives of their children has become a dangerous cycle to the physical and mental health of their children and destroys the stability in the family system. Working with families provides family clinicians like myself the opportunity to see behind the curtain of the perfect photograph that is often an illusion of what is actually an extremely abusive, dysfunctional family system.

Families that are hiding patterns of addiction and abuse often use the smoke and mirrors of visual perfectionism in many everyday things that become increasingly exaggerated an impossible to maintain. The expectation to appear perfect becomes a ritual of a never-ending goal that results in many forms of self-destruction. University attendance is a major distraction tool in the arsenal of these families. I've treated many young men who were esteemed through sports, only to end up self-medicating to endure the reality that they will never reach the expectation of the parents' pipe dream.

These kids typically take an extended timeframe to finish school while much of the progress is enabled by one or both of the parents. The more insidious the patterns of abuse and addiction, the harder the parents work to convince anyone and everyone how perfect their family and life is.

The kids these parents are raising become the disciplined soldiers of the system, taking on the responsibility to carry the message of perfection and protect the family secrets. Then it happens: The roof comes off in some unexpected event, at a minimum, at least one person in the family tells the secret to someone that matters. Now what: The Chief Enabler of the system, typically the most abused individual, clicks in to high gear to protect the family secret from being further exposed. That's her/his purpose and main job. They will use anyone and anything to carry out this mission.

This is where the family system is flawed yet perfect to withstand the exposure. Parents will literally label their own child a liar. Yes, these parents who have doted on the child(ren) as the most special perfect human now go to the lowest, most confusing place an offspring can imagine. The confusing distortion of this reality becomes an internal family system of who will survive battle.

Look at your family photographs; do they represent how you truly live? --Mitzi MacKenzie, MSW, LCSW, Mackenzie Family Advocacy, Adolescent & Family Clinician