

# Easy to get in, but tough to leave

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Parents may be powerless to help their children once they're "trapped" in a cult, but alert parents can help steer kids clear before it's too late, a spokesman for the Manitoba Cult Awareness Centre says.

"Once the kids get into a cult, get trapped in a cult, they can't get out," Gord Gillespie said.

And he said the Church of Scientology is the toughest cult to get people out of once they're hooked.

The church is so aggressive in "going after" its detractors, it sometimes frightens away people who want to help its members leave the cult, he said.

"But there is really quite a lot parents

can do," he said.

"They can teach their kids to be suspicious of overly friendly overtures from strangers. Tell them to be alert and ask questions.

"And also, parents should pay attention to their kids. They should be alert to any changes in their character or mood — they can be withdrawn and become quite defensive about where they're going and why."

Winnipeg psychologist Dr. Toby Rutner said if teenagers are looking for a sense of belonging and importance, and they aren't getting it from their families, they could be vulnerable to a cult.

"Maybe it's time to have a talk with that kid," he said.

"I think it would be appropriate to

check out whether you have an alienated teenager who feels no sense of importance or involvement."

Rutner, who's seen former Scientology members as patients, said people who leave any cult-like religion or organization can feel rejected and alienated.

"You can feel like a failure or a loser if you lose faith in the organization," he said.

But former Scientologists are often fearful as well, worrying other members will "come after them and harass them," he said.

"They (Scientologists) don't give them a handshake. They're made to feel that they're making a big mistake, and they don't know what's best for them, and we'll keep trying to get you back."

The church is alleged to use subsidiary companies, such as the Narconon drug rehabilitation program, to recruit members — who are encouraged to take a series of expensive courses and counselling treatments it claims can eventually help them "clear the planet." Achieving a state of "clear" — free of negative memories called "engrams" — is the goal of Scientologists.

Gillespie said church members often offer potential recruits personality or I.Q. tests, which are then interpreted to show the person taking the test needs counselling from the church.

Anyone who's worried a family member is involved in a cult can contact the Manitoba Cult Awareness Centre for information, he said.

AUG. 11/91