

Who Are These People?

4/24/2020

“He won’t hang out with me!”

“She won’t leave me alone!”

“I can’t believe you ate the last of the trail mix! I wanted that!”

“Everyone leave everyone else alone!”

“I just need 5 minutes to myself!”

Sound familiar? The physical distancing that has resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic has changed almost every aspect of our lives. Family dynamics are changing as family members are together more than ever before. You’re noticing things you really like about one another and learning new ways to relate. You’re also noticing things you don’t like so much and sometimes those things get blown way out of proportion.

Even if you and your family have gotten into a pretty good daily rhythm, you’re probably still experiencing some personality clashes. Family members are arguing about little things and you find yourself trying to mediate conflicts about things that are, frankly, nonsense. You’ve probably had at least a few moments when you’ve asked yourself, “Who *are* these people?!”

I was having a conversation with one of my great friends and we were talking about the biggest challenges her family is facing on a day-to-day basis. She brought up something that a lot of the families I work with are also facing- the mismatch in personalities in their homes.

We’ve all heard of introverts and extroverts. Introverts get their energy from having time to themselves. They can be social and may enjoy being around other people, but that uses up a lot of their energy. They need time alone to recharge. Extroverts get their energy from interacting with other people. They can do things by themselves, but that feels taxing for them. They need to be around other people and have meaningful interactions.

What happens when one of your kids is an introvert and the other is an extrovert? This is the situation my friend faces. When the kids were in school, the extrovert was surrounded by people all day and was able to interact with friends, teachers, and classmates. So, it wasn't a big deal if his brother, who is more introverted, needed some alone time after school. But what happened once he couldn't go to school? He started looking to family members to fill that role because they're the only ones around. This has led to frequent frustration on the part of both siblings because one is seeking interaction and the other is seeking solitude.

Another big issue is the fact that, as your kid's world shrinks, small things become much more important. Remember the trail mix example at the beginning of this post? That was a real example my friend gave of an argument between her kids. Normally, this would have been a small annoyance that would have been easily dealt with because it doesn't compare to the things that would have happened that day at school or during other activities. But, with nothing else going on, that trail mix became the thing her kids were ready to do battle over.

Now, you are the one who has to mediate The Great Trail Mix Battle of 2020. You've also been in the house all day. Your world has also shrunk, your patience is wearing thin, and you can't believe your kids are having yet another argument about something ridiculous. Then you realize they have eaten all the trail mix that you JUST BOUGHT TWO DAYS AGO!!! That's when you lose it, they're in trouble, and everyone's miserable. Over trail mix.

Guess what? It's not really about the trail mix. It's really about the clash between those personality differences and differences in the ways your family members handle stress. You're *all* under stress and it's affecting the way you relate to one another.

So, how do you help everyone navigate these clashes? First, you need to recognize what each family member needs. You can hold a family meeting where everyone gets to share what they need/want from the other family members. You can also share your observations about the times various family members, including yourself, are more likely to have a hard time. For

instance, after you've been on conference calls all day you may need some time to yourself. You're much more likely to say "no" or "not right now" when your kid wants to talk or play a game at that moment. Things will go more smoothly, and your kid will be less likely to feel rejected if they know you need some time to yourself right after you finish working for the day.

You can incorporate *everyone's* needs into your daily routine. Have time during the day that's designated as alone time for everyone and other time that's designated as family time or time that your kids hang out with each other. Conflict is going to happen no matter how well everyone gets along. Just remember- some conflicts don't require your intervention. Your kids can and will figure it out on their own. When you do need to get involved, here are some tips for helping calm things down:

1. Deescalate the situation: If your kids are yelling at each other, have them separate and take a break before discussing the problem to give everyone a chance to calm down.
2. Avoid taking sides: It is easy to accidentally take sides when your kids are arguing, particularly if you happen to agree with one of them. Taking sides increases the stress of the situation and is likely to lead to hurt feelings and often, a bigger argument. The child who's side you did not take walks away feeling rejected or picked on. The argument may be over, but a greater issue has been created.
3. Get to the root of the issue: Instead of getting caught up in the "he said, she said" details of the situation, focus on the underlying issue. Remember, it's not really about the trail mix. Your kids may actually be arguing because of annoyances earlier in the day that have nothing to do with one another, because they feel rejected or misunderstood by one another, or because they are feeling sad, irritable or frustrated by their situation. When you intervene, help them figure out the real issue so they can deal with it.

Overall, open communication will help you and your family navigate the personality conflicts that arise as you spend more time together. By talking honestly about your needs and about what's really going on, you and your family can be more understanding and compassionate toward each other, which will help you grow stronger together.