

Help Families Thrive with Type and Typology



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As a psychotherapist who integrates the insights of typology into my practice, having an awareness of type is invaluable in my work with families and family therapy. I have found that some of the conflicts and problems within family dynamics result from function-based miscommunication and typological differences, even while plenty of families seek my services to resolve significant mental health challenges. I have also found typology valuable in understanding and navigating my family of origin and as I started a family with my wife and children. Many insights about type and family could apply to any group or relationship, and some concerns are especially important for families. I've worked with a variety of families of many compositions and cultural backgrounds. While I have found that families differ in a great many ways, there are some common elements from one context to another. As Harry Stack Sullivan observed, we are "more human than otherwise," regardless of the beautiful variety of culture, personality, and human differences.

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work: Recognize the typological strengths and challenges of the family's members

I see a family as a special type of team. We often think about family as our biological relations, but “family” in this context is about a group of people working together to share the benefits and challenges of life. It includes people we have “found” and chosen, as well as our biological relatives. These families work together toward shared goals, such as survival, child-raising, religious fulfillment, societal contributions, personal fulfillment, and others.

An awareness of the typological preferences of each member of the family can support the family’s work toward their goals. Each member of the family contributes gifts, strengths, and efforts to the family. There is a significant benefit when family members recognize the gifts that each personality type offers . When families face stresses and challenges from within or without, having a working understanding of how each family member is likely to approach a situation or challenge helps the family make decisions that reduce unnecessary conflicts and maximize the use of each function and attitude. When they have decisions to make, families that integrate the benefits of the thinking and feeling functions, or introversion as well as extraversion, have a greater capacity to creatively make decisions with the best quality and outcome. Because every personality type also has its blind spots and inferior functions, recognizing the areas of challenge for each family member, and the importance of supporting their challenges, allows the family to support each other and avoid difficulty or conflict.

Here’s an example. In a family where there are typological differences between a parent and a child, the parent might recognize that without additional help, the child will struggle with certain tasks and responsibilities. Without understanding typological implications, the parent might assume that the child was being difficult or uncooperative when the child just needed extra help to learn how to do something that did not come easily. In these situations, typology brings greater insight and creative solutions to challenges that might otherwise be misunderstood.

Whole-Family Type: Recognize collective strengths and challenges

Not only do individuals within a family have their own individual type preferences and shadow functions, but as type theorist John Beebe observes, a system that’s made up of collaborating parts—a family—will have collective preferences and deficits regarding type

(Beebe, 2004). As families work together and cooperate, patterns start to emerge. The patterns and dynamics of the family come from a variety of influences, such as culture, language, religion, society, families of origin, and the type preferences of each member. When you combine the type preferences of all the family members, you can start to see where the whole family as a collective has its strengths and blind spots. For example, if the majority of the family members have preferences for thinking, the feeling function might be overlooked or under-considered when making decisions.

Here's an example. If family members largely share a preference for perceiving functions over judging functions, you might see a greater emphasis on spontaneity but a struggle with tasks that require more planning and structure. A family that understands the typological factors at play would be able to take the extra care needed to meet their goals and have greater patience with themselves throughout the process.

When family members recognize the patterns and preferences of the family as a whole, they are more likely to be able to identify the ways that the family will thrive, as well as the areas where the family may need extra support. Just like with individual type preferences, families have an inferior function. That does not mean that family cannot function. When we work in our inferior functions as individuals, we may need accommodations of extra time or effort to fulfill our vision and goals. Families also need these considerations and supports.

Accept and Support Differences: Unique strengths require unique support

Sometimes in families a function or attitude may be uncommon, perhaps preferred by only a single member. When people are less aware of type and personality, these differences can be seen as a problem to be fixed instead of an asset to be cultivated. Suppressing the differences causes stress for that individual—but it also robs the family of an important benefit. It can make it difficult for a family member with a unique type preference to feel the same belonging as everyone else. And if other family members find it difficult to use or appreciate that function within themselves, they may struggle to support their child, spouse or sibling.

Just like in other groups, when someone within a family has a unique perspective, the pressure to conform to everyone else can be intense.

Ethical use of type in families means recognizing these differences as a benefit to the creativity and thriving of the family

Families often need to learn to be comfortable with greater degrees of disagreement and to accept differences instead of requiring conformity.

Further Thoughts

Families are infinitely complex and varied. What works for one might not work for another, *and* what worked for a family at one time might not work for that family forever. The ability to thrive as a family team is a constantly moving and evolving goal. By working to understand one's own type preferences and the type preferences of family members, families can expand their ability to thrive amid many challenges and stages of growth. Awareness of family typology can lead to greater resilience for the entire family and its members, avoid unnecessary conflicts and miscommunications, and better support the growth and goals of members through beautiful similarities and beautiful differences.

Beebe, J. (2004). Understanding consciousness through the theory of psychological types. In J. Cambray & L. Carter (Eds.), *Analytical psychology: Contemporary perspectives in Jungian analysis* (pp. 83-115). Hove, UK: Brunner-Routledge.