

Matriarchs

One of the common types of family is the matriarchal family. The mother dominates the matriarchal family. In this family the father plays a peripheral or subordinate role. In this family Mother 'rules the roost', she 'runs the show', and she 'gets her way'. She is the mediator, judge, and conductor. She is the conduit of information. If anything is to happen, it must be processed first through her. She dominates conversations, she interrupts her husband, and she remembers everything. She is the final arbiter on most issues.

In matriarchal families young and adult children are fearful of making her angry or of causing her distress. She can dominate families with her power and occasional fury.

There are a few different types of matriarch. One is the Guilt-Evoking Mother who can equally exert power and control through her extraordinary ability to evoke guilt. Many adult children, even in their later years, can find themselves pandering and giving into their mother because of the power of her guilt. It can spread out into the corners of a family like tentacles. Guilt has such a corrosive effect on the independence and freedom of children. They are plagued by the sense that they have done something wrong, let their mother down, or, yet again, have failed to prove their love. For the vulnerable child it can become a terrible invisible crucifix to carry because guilt eats at the essence of self with the child burdened with a sense of having done something wrong. The guilty child becomes a people-pleaser.

The other type of matriarch is the Angry One who controls her family through her potential for anger and rage. She may not often explode, but when she does, all corners of the house will shake. She may have that tone in her voice, that shrill explosion of irritation that has teenagers running downstairs to do the job they never did or has father coaching the children "not to upset mother".

In the matriarchal family a husband can live his entire life feeling inadequate, like he has never quite lived up to her expectations, forever trying to make up for all the wrongs he feels he has done.

There are many roles for the father to fill in a matriarchal family. He may be the "Family Fool" or "Idiot". In this situation the father is seen as a kind of joke. The mother forever points out his incompetence and his weak response tends to prove his point. The children may gradually become mother's confidants and they eventually assume a higher status in the family than the father. For example, when one of the adult children come to visit, mother may instruct the father to give up his seat or to go off into the next room to watch TV. Dad, in these families, is set up as a 'bad example' with mother using phrases like "If you don't apply yourself and study hard you will end up like your father". He may be the Homer Simpson of family life, but without the wit.

Alternatively the father may play the role of 'The Detached and Powerless One'. In this family father becomes increasingly removed from the family. Gradually ostracized and undermined by mother, or else grow tired by her constant berating; this man gradually fades out of the picture. He may spend his time on the golf course, at the pub, or locked away in his room. He has little power, Mother may complain about his

ineffectiveness but will rarely acknowledge how she may have, over the years, worn him out. He may sit in the study reading newspapers or flicking through the TV channels. Once in a while he may rise up in protest and create some sort of scene but it is largely an impotent display of frustration quickly reconfigured by Mother. He becomes depressed.

Alternatively, he may be the 'Functional Companion'. This man may be an equal to his matriarchal wife but is quite comfortable leaving her run the show. In fact in many homes across Ireland you will find this configuration where mother rules the kitchen table and living room. She welcomes guests and brings a joy and life into the home. When she is not around things are lifeless. When she is home there is energy and talk in the house. However, father is more than competent in himself, and well loved by his children, he is pleased to let her be the emotional center of the family because he is also lifted by her enthusiasm and generosity. She brings the music of conversation and activity to the family. He stands by her and supports her willingly. She, in turn, loves him for this, and is pleased to support his freedom and independence. This, in many ways, is the traditional family at its best. Where power is yielded with gentleness, where hierarchies are clear but never enforced, where the kettle is always on, where mother is the heart-beat of the home, where the hard-working father loves her for it, and where he is her quiet hero.