

A silent witness's sound advice

Families come in different shapes and sizes, but it's a fair bet that most families have a silent observer. This is the person who may not contribute a lot to animated family discussions, but if you quietly ask their opinion later, they will have a fairly acute recall and assessment of what went on.

Silent observers are often thinkers rather than talkers. And where the black sheep of the family stands out because it is impossible not to notice them, the silent observer marks out his or her emotional territory by not being a loud "hey, look at me" character.

Sometimes the role of silent observer is taken on because a person is feeling a bit squashed by the noisy members of the family and feels they are not being heard. By seeing all and not giving a lot away, this person has claimed their own bit of family territory.

Sometimes in a family of three children, the middle child might become the silent observer. The eldest tends to be the leader, the youngest is the baby of the clan, so the middle child might take on the role of silent observer to be different from their siblings.

Any family member who can put up a different view is useful.

The rest of the family may feel more comfortable sticking to the family orthodoxy; for example, saying we always do this, we never do that; we always have Christmas dinner, not Christmas lunch.

But the silent observer can quietly challenge family rules and make the rest of the family dare to take on something new.

It's possible that the negative side of being a silent observer is that the silence may be a mask for a level of depression. The family member actually needs to be drawn out and encouraged to share their feelings.

Similarly, a silent observer may be someone who feels shut out a lot, so they observe silently because they just can't get a word in.

The positive side of having a silent observer around is that this person might be a reflective personality who takes everything in, then uses it creatively later.

A famous example of this kind of personality would be the 19th century English writer Jane Austen, a classic silent observer.

She gathered enough material from her silent observations of village life to write several books that are rich in observations of human nature and which are still read 200 years later.

Had Jane not spent her time expressing these observations in her characters, we would also have missed out on some wonderful films of her work over the past 40 years.

Silent observation is a necessary tool for a writer and is probably responsible for our rich variety of literature.

Within a family this person often will take their time observing and analysing. When they speak out, the family tends to listen. Their reflections can make that person into the family commentator, like the chorus in ancient Greek plays.

These are the people who sat to the side of the stage and who explained to the audience what was really happening between the characters on stage.

Like the Greek chorus, the silent observer can be an important source of feedback for other members of the family.

So long as the experience of being a silent observer is a positive one without negative connotations, it's a pretty important role for both the family and society.

Survival tips

- **Silent observers are often reflective personalities who have much to give the family**
- **Many famous authors have been silent observers who share their observations with us in their books**
- **If a silent observer is trapped in this role, rather than choosing it, it may be masking deeper difficulties, such as depression.**