

The Odd One Out

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In the movie *Matilda* (DeVito, 1996), the Wormwood family of four appear to be an average American household composed of a mother, father, son, and daughter. However, among the family members the youngest daughter Matilda is pointed out as the odd one out. The reason for this is that she has a different perspective of life, higher morals, and other interests than that of the rest of the family. In addition, Matilda demonstrates a level of intelligence far beyond what is developmentally appropriate. Despite the abuse she receives from her family, Matilda finds functional and dysfunctional ways to cope and thrive. Although Matilda's teacher attempts to intervene to improve Matilda's situation, the Wormwood's were a type of family that was resistant to change. Eventually an event creates an opportunity for Matilda to leave the family system and be adopted by her teacher, a single woman, Miss Jenny Honey. Resulting in the rupture of the current family system and the creation of a new one. Had the Wormwood's been willing to participate in family counseling perhaps what they considered to be Matilda's 'issues' could have been the starting point of identifying, addressing, and improving the family's dynamics of enmeshment, neglect, abuse, and materialism.

The Wormwood family is composed of a "nuclear family" during the 70-80's (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021, p. 6). Harry is the father, Zinnia the mother, Michael a tween male and Matilda a 6-year-old girl. The parents' ages are not mentioned but they are not young adults. The family lives in a suburban area, owns a home and at least two cars, indicating that their socioeconomic status is very good. All the family members are well dressed and groomed but use crass and crude language, except for Matilda. The family would fit in the families with school aged children stage of the family cycle; however, the parents do not express any particular concern over their children separating from them or their well-being at school (Capuzzi & Stauffer,

2021). Quite the contrary, they seem to be oblivious to their children and instead excessively concerned with money, material things, appearance, and their own lives. There is no family history provided, no mention of grandparents, aunts/uncles, in laws, or other extended family members. Due to this lack of external support for any of the members an environment it could be that enmeshment was promoted. Yet, the family does not display any type of affection towards each other, such as hugging or touching, the parent's just 'air' kiss. In addition, the wife complains of feeling isolated and not having anyone to talk to except the kids.

The father is a used car salesman, and his time is consumed so much with finances and working to produce income. The wife complains he never takes them anywhere and does not give her money for her leisure. He views children as a financial burden, he endangers their life with his reckless driving and uses them only as a means to an end (son taking over the business and daughter receiving packages). He shows a disdain towards Matilda since the day she is born and calls her a "mistake", although he never says why (DeVito, 1996, 22:17). The mother is a homemaker who is mainly concerned with playing bingo, having a good time and her looks. She is negligent, forgetting Matilda in the car as a newborn when they came home from the hospital and leaving her alone all day, totally unaware that she goes out by herself. She endangers Matilda by telling her to heat up food on the stove, unsupervised at 4 years old. She views kids as a nuisance. Zinnia views her daughter as a "snobby, disobedient kid", admitting that she always thought something is wrong with Matilda and never understood her (DeVito, 1996, 1:29). Both parents lack self-awareness and their gifted daughter's growth, and needs. The son Michael has similar interests as his parents, like watching tv and picking on Matilda. Even though he bullies her and his nickname's her "dip face", he is aware of her and even cares about what she is

doing (DeVito, 1996, 1:12). Perhaps he is jealous of his sister because he says if Matilda is adopted, he'll be an only child again.

The daughter, Matilda, is highly intelligent (able to quickly multiply large numbers in her head), has good hygiene, and spends a lot of time in her room reading. She says that since she was very young, she noticed she was different from her family and figured out that “whatever she needed in this world, she'd have to get herself” (DeVito, 1996, 4:41). This created a lot of loneliness and separation. She turned to reading to find comfort and company through the characters in the books. In addition, Matilda was frequently verbally abused. Her father accused her of being a liar, a cheater, as well as calling her a wart, earwig, and dumb. Her mother calls her an “ignoramus” and her brother twit (DeVito, 1996, 44:15). Her father also acted violently towards her, snatching a book out of her hands, and ripping it up in front of her. On another occasion he threatens to punish her to teach her a lesson and yet another time, he says he is going to beat her. In addition to this, he mentally abuses her by physically holding her head and making her watch a tv show against her will. Although Matilda found positive ways to cope through school, friends, and Ms. Honey, she also learned how to cope in negative ways. Her father taught her that it was okay to teach people lessons when they did bad things. Some of these things were gluing her father's hat to his head and putting hydrogen peroxide in his hair lotion (even though he never finds out it was her). She also torments the cruel school principal using her telekinetic powers to get back at her for being mean to Miss Honey when she was a child.

A central theme in the Wormwood home is money. Making money to buy things and go places. Even if the money is made illegally (by cheating others). There is an emphasis on living it up, having fun and living a carefree life. The parents have a poor view of education and do not deem it necessary or important. Therefore, they did not think Matilda was that gifted, and her

academic abilities did not impress them. This can be a common response from some parents. (Meckstroth, 1992) informed that “one-third to one-half of parents disagree with their school's assessment of giftedness”. The covert rules involving gender roles also played a vital part in their family values and made it difficult for the parents to understand the importance of education for their daughter (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021). Males are dominant and females are seen as sexual objects. Harry tells Michael he will inherit the business and starts training him. When Miss Honey proposes that they prepare Matilda for college in a few years, Zinnia says that “a girl does not get anywhere by acting intelligent” (DeVito, 1996, 35:55). Men are to be the breadwinners and women housewives. The father says, “this family does exactly what I say, when exactly I say it!” and expects to come home and find dinner on the table (DeVito, 1996, 19:09). Children are not valued in the home either. The adults are seen as being smarter and right no matter what, while kids are dumb and wrong, period. This demonstrates a lot of black and white thinking and very poor differentiation. Especially when the father tells Matilda “You’re a Wormwood! You start acting like one!” because she preferred to read than watch a tv game show like the rest of the family was (DeVito, 1996, 20:25). In this family being different meant being weird, criticized and rejected.

When Mr. Wormwood is discovered to be buying stolen car parts by the FBI, the family must flee and tell Matilda they must leave, she refuses. She proposes that Ms. Honey adopt her. Miss Honey is an orphan who also suffered abuse at the hands of her aunt, so she identifies with Matilda’s suffering and is more than willing to adopt her. At first there is a hesitation on behalf of the parents out of fear that they would have to pay child support and because they cannot understand why the teacher would want Matilda, but they eventually give in. Matilda and Miss Honey create a small family of their own. They ended up getting what they both always wanted,

a “loving family”, in which they were able to function in harmony (1:32). However, over time this could also develop into enmeshment due to their similar likes and values.

Although Matilda’s family thought she was the one with problems because she did not act like them, this expectation could help open a conversation with the family regarding how they interacted with her and one another. The counselor could also explain empathetically to the family how raising a gifted child can pose distinct challenges because they have different social, academic, and developmental needs than other children (Renati et al., 2016). In addition, Renati et al. (2016) states that the child’s giftedness can cause parents to question their own abilities and create stress for their siblings. It will also be vital to deal with the matter of enmeshment since this has led to a high level of isolation for all members of the family. Using an Ecomap could assist in highlighting the lack of external support they have and introducing resources the family could use, especially for the children, such as afterschool programs, or clubs to engage, stimulate, and nurture their own interest. This would be especially useful for Matilda because gifted children can suffer from inattentiveness and low social functionality (Eren et al., 2017). Initially Matilda obtained this through the library, then through her kind teacher and friends at school, despite the evil principal.

A primary issue to address with the family would be the mistreatment of Matilda. Although there was no evidence of physical abuse, depending on where they lived, Matilda’s parents could be reported for neglect due to their lack of supervision and not registering her in school at the appropriate time (City of New York, n.d.). The counselor would have to discuss this with the parents. The counselor could start by having the family define and describe what abuse would be like to them (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021). (Meckstroth, 1992) states that parents can feel “dominance roles are shifted in a family with a highly intelligent child especially when parents

feel intimidated that their child may "outsmart" them." As was the case with Matilda and her father. He calls her a cheater because she was able to add large numbers in her head. When she asks if he's going to punish her for being smart, he says not for that but because she's being a smart aleck. Forna & Frame (2001) stated that "parents of precociously independent gifted children may need to work more persistently at maintaining discipline and parental boundaries during the younger years". Since Matilda's parents were so absorbed in their own lives, they did not provide these things, which only served to fuel her independence and departure from the family.

Had Wormwood's been willing to receive family therapy some interventions that could have improved the relationships in the system. Using the Bowen Family System theory approach, the counselor could do a Genogram to get more information on the family history and explore with the family the reasons they think Matilda's ways of doing things are strange and the benefits of being different from each other (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021). Using the Structural Theory, the counselor could educate the family on boundaries to bring some flexibility to the rigid gender roles and rules in the home, then use enactment as an intervention, to provide ways to improve communication as well as member interactions (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021). In addition, the Cognitive Behavioral Approach of examining schemas to discover the root of the rigid rules in the home and using the intervention of role reversal could assist the family members in increasing their self-awareness, especially in regard to how they treat each other (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021).

The Wormwood family at first sight could be labeled completely dysfunctional. Yet, the family held certain characteristics of a functional family system such as commitment between family members, appreciation for one another, willingness to do things together, clear family

roles were defined, and communicated in effective ways, except for Matilda. Hence why they saw her as a disrupting member (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021). Most of the family members did not see anything wrong with the way they were living. However, there was no mention of religious beliefs, they did not encourage each other as individuals and did not deal with crisis in a good way, which are also part of a functional family (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021). Therefore, perhaps the family was partially functional and could use some improvement. Unfortunately, the parents were not open to receiving advice or input from other sources and since Matilda was not willing to conform to the existing family system, this resulted in her emotionally cutting herself off her family (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021). Although the purpose of family therapy is to preserve and improve the family system in the case of the Wormwood's it was not possible due to their lack of desire to acknowledge there was a problem and work on it.

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