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Episode Two: Parent-Child Fit

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Podcast:

SUSAN: I'm Susan Cain, and this is Quiet: The Power of Introverts.

Imagine you're a quiet teenager, someone who doesn't need or particularly want to hang out in big, unruly groups. Then imagine that this is your mother:

[debate heard in the background]

SUSAN: Arianna Huffington, entrepreneur, politician, one of the most high-profile women in America, is also the mom of 21-year old Isabella, a self-described introvert. How these two seemingly opposite people navigated Isabella's childhood amidst her mom's very public life is one of our stories today. But there's a twist to this story—something that will probably surprise you about Arianna Huffington:

ARIANNA: I'm actually an introvert who taught myself to be an extrovert because of the things I wanted to do in my life.

SUSAN: Today we're examining what psychologists call parent-child fit. It's the dilemma of what happens when a quiet child and her parents have different personalities or expectations. Like many

relationships, life with your son or daughter is a partnership. And it can take a little work to make sure that you and your child are compatible partners. On this episode of the podcast, we'll explore how to navigate the sometimes rough waters of parent-child fit.

We'll get back to Arianna and Isabella a little later. But first, here's the story that introduced me to the idea of parent-child fit in the first place. When I was researching my book, *Quiet*, I interviewed a child psychologist named Dr. Jerry Miller at the University of Michigan.

Dr. Miller told me about a case of a child he treated, a 7-year-old we'll call Ethan. Ethan's parents brought him in for treatment because the boy's younger brother had beaten him up, and Ethan didn't fight back.

His parents were ok with their younger son's aggression; what bothered them was Ethan's passivity.

Dr. Miller tried to explain to the parents that there was nothing wrong with their son, that this was just his temperament.

But his parents had trouble accepting it. Over the years they continued pushing Ethan to be more aggressive in areas like sports and academics.

Ethan, of course, didn't change. And his parents kept wringing their hands with concern over their son.

What was so heartbreaking about this story was Dr. Miller's observation that in another household, this very same boy— who is so low-key, studious and gentle--would have been considered a model child. The issue was only in the parents' expectations. And it's the parents' responsibility to notice when their expectations aren't syncing with who their child actually is.

KAREEM: Sometimes the fit is a natural one and that's great but it's not always a natural fit.

SUSAN: That's Kareem Ghalib, Assistant Clinical Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Columbia University.

KAREEM: When the fit is not natural it really becomes the task of both the child and the parent to try to adapt to one another's temperament so they can develop together. My advice to that extroverted parent would be to experiment with being a little bit quieter. If they give an introverted child a little more time and a little bit more space, more of that child's personality would come out to fill that space. And it's possible that the interactions would be that much more fulfilling for both the parent and the child.

Susan: That's what happened with my next guests, whom I wrote about in my book, *Quiet*.

I first met Cali Yost's daughters, whom we'll call Olivia and Sophie, in New Jersey, when Olivia was going into second grade.

I was really intrigued by their story because Cali Yost is, as you will soon hear, one of the more extroverted human beings on this planet, and she had two introverted girls.

At first, Cali really struggled with how to be the best parent that she could be to them. But her parenting style really evolved over time as she got to understand those girls.

Now, the girls are teenagers. I caught up with Cali to talk about parenting those quiet children.

Cali: Well, I should probably start out by saying that my parents were much more introverted than I was. There was a lot of, not intentional, shaming that happened when I was younger around my natural way of being like, "Oh can you just stop talking about that. I just can't talk about it anymore and..." So I was very aware as a parent that I didn't want to do that to my kids, but I hadn't yet become aware of the differences between us.

SUSAN: Cali began noticing differences between her and her daughters when she was a parent playground volunteer one day at Olivia's school.

CALI: This one moment really hit home for me.. I had done playground duty one day, and they put me pretty far away from the actual playground where everybody was up running around. And my daughter, Olivia, was standing with me by the basketball hoop shooting hoops by herself, and about five minutes into this, I said, "Honey, I'm good. You don't have to stay here with mommy. I'm fine by myself. Here, you go play." And she just kept shooting hoops. And I said, "No, really, I'm good." Because truthfully for me not to be up playing with all the kids, something had to be radically, radically wrong. Like I would never have been by myself.

SUSAN: Olivia also remembers that day on the playground.

OLIVIA: Everyone else was playing on the playground and running around and being crazy and not that I didn't want to do that I just... for some reason I felt more comfortable just throwing basketballs in the hoop by myself.

CALI: So I kept saying to her, "Is something wrong? Are you ok?" And she said, "Mom, is this weird? You're making me feel weird. I do this all the time."

OLIVIA: I think she was a little shocked because as an extrovert she would be the one playing on the playground running around and I think the fact that I was by myself kind of threw her off. But I just needed that time to recharge and rejuvenate in order for me to go back to class and not want to go home and go to sleep.

CALI: And I thought oh my gosh. I am shaming her. And that is not what I want.

SUSAN: It was around this time that I got to know Cali. We started talking about her daughters -- and how an extroverted parent can better understand introverted kids.

CALI: And I started becoming more aware about what a more introverted child need to feel good and whole about themselves, and how do I need to address myself as an extroverted parent to not make assumptions.

SUSAN: As I recall you had some worries about what it meant for your daughter that she wasn't in the social mix in the way that you were when you were younger. So what did you do with those worries?

CALI: I tried to clue into her level of happiness. So I would take a pulse check with her. Are you ok that you haven't done anything with your friends for the last two days? Is that what you want to do? And she'd say, "Yeah, I'm good." I'm like, alright as long as you're fine with it... Now, inside my own heart, I would just.... that sounds so lonely and awful and, right? I mean that was my own head.

OLIVIA: I actually think my dad really helped her understand what I was going through because my Dad is very introverted himself. I think my dad was probably like, "She's fine. This is normal. This is how I was as a kid. And it got better as time went on."

SUSAN: I know this dynamic well from my own life. I'm an introvert married to an extrovert named Ken and it's very natural for Ken to be the one who first thing in the morning says: "OK What are we going to do today?" Then he'll think of five different activities and say "Let's go!" Whereas my natural inclination is much more quiet. I want to sit on the sofa with the kids and talk about what happened with their week.

These are two completely different approaches to Saturday morning. One isn't better or worse - they're just different. I think that the kids benefit from being exposed to both of them and seeing themselves reflected in both of those styles.

But back to Cali and her girls. Olivia had been dealing with some

social issues at school...She was hanging around with two friends who didn't get along, and she was spending a lot of time worrying about how to manage the situation.

CALI: Well, I realized that.... and my other daughter Sophie, she does the same thing. There's an extra layer of thought that goes into the dynamics within the group and then with her that I don't think about. And my first reaction when this started coming up was to be like, "Oh, who cares. You know what, just enjoy it and have fun and..." And I realized that she then would keep talking about it and spend a lot of time on it. That's one of those moments where I had to sit down and say, "Ok, clearly this is something that I do not do, that she does, that I needed to spend a little time to understand." And so she needed to think it through before she went into that social situation.

SUSAN: Yes, yes.

CALI: She just had to have the plan and then she could go into it. She wasn't able to really, on the fly, make those social pivots.

SUSAN: And did you help her with the strategizing and what the plan was going to be? Or did she come to the plan on her own and you were the sounding board?

CALI: I think probably my initial reaction was to start to tell her what to do. And then I realized, ok, that's not really going to get her to the point where she starts to learn how to do it. And over the years, she's gotten a lot better, where now I think it's second nature with her.

OLIVIA: I mean I still have those times where I'm focused "Oh, what are they gonna think. What are they gonna say. What are they gonna do?" But then there's a lot, probably 75% of the time I'm just like "Whatever. I'm being myself. I'm doing what I think is best for me." And I think the ideas she instilled in me when I was younger really helped me.

SUSAN: Olivia has developed into more of an ambivert, which is something like the social equivalent of being ambidextrous. It means a person has the qualities of both an introvert and an extrovert. But Olivia's younger sister Sophie does not use the prefix ambi when talking about herself.

SOPHIE: Definitely an introvert.

SUSAN: Why do you describe yourself that way?

SOPHIE: Well, I have that circle of friends I can hang out with, but I've always needed that little bit of extra time to recharge, and I don't

mind being alone on a Friday or Saturday night just hanging out by myself or with my smaller group of friends that I like, love to hang out with.

CALI: Sophie was in junior school, and there were two things she wanted actually. She wanted to be student of the month and peer leader. And in the school, that process tended to favor the extroverted kids. And even though she was doing all the things that she was supposed to do in order to get these two distinctions, she just was not the natural person that they were looking at.

SOPHIE: I feel like my introverted tendencies slowed me down from being that person that's going out there to everyone all the time because of my fear of rejection but I decided to throw that to the wind--my fear of rejection--and just go for it.

CALI: She figured out that she needed to insert herself more deliberately so teachers saw her and the teachers that made the decisions around the peer leaders and around the student of the month. And she got both.

SUSAN: Some of you will remember the last episode, The Long Runway. We said that part of parenting is gently nudging your child toward uncomfortable situations. Watching her girls grow up, Cali concluded that parents need to stretch, too.

CALI: As a parent I just feel like that's my job. I just have to help them figure out what works for them. And I learn from them along the way. They have taught me and that's the other side of the magic: learning from them.

SUSAN: Are you girls aware of being your Mom's teacher?

SOPHIE/OLIVIA: Yeah, definitely.

SOPHIE: She says that we teach her something new every day and she's definitely become a lot more aware of how we have different personalities than her and she's definitely adapted.

SUSAN: That's so wonderful. Well, thank you Cali Yost so much. Thank you so much Sophie and Olivia.

SUSAN: So if you're a natural extrovert parenting an introvert, we've seen that making the fit work involves both teaching your kids AND learning from them. But what if the situation is a little more nuanced, and the parent and child's personalities do fit in some ways but not in others?

In a moment, we'll hear how introvert Isabella Huffington coped

with being in the spotlight with her famous Mom, Arianna. But first, a quick word from our sponsor.

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Podcast:

SUSAN: And now we're back! You're listening to Quiet, the power of Introverts. I'm Susan Cain.

Today, we're talking about how understanding your own temperament can improve your relationship with your quiet child.

Few of us would seem to share much in common with Arianna Huffington, the indomitable founder of the Huffington Post, among so many other ventures. Even her own daughter, 21-year-old Isabella, seems very different from her mother. Isabella is a strong introvert. And when I asked her where she would most like to conduct our interview, she chose her Mom's apartment.

ISABELLA: It's kind of like an oasis in the middle of New York. Sometimes you just need to retreat and it's so quiet and calm.

SUSAN: I just assumed, as many people would, that Arianna and Isabella were the quintessential extroverted-mom / introverted-child pair. So imagine my surprise when Arianna, like many other apparent extroverts, told me this:

ARIANNA: I'm actually an introvert who taught herself to be an extrovert because of the things I wanted to do in my life.

SUSAN: Really?

ARIANNA: Yes, going back to my childhood, my mother would tell the story of me for my fifth birthday party and telling her to send all the children away because they were interrupting my reading.

Gradually there were things I wanted to do in my life that necessitated being an extrovert, like public speaking. I taught myself to be an extrovert. But I realize more and more that if I don't honor the introvert part by having enough time by myself, enough time to meditate or to read or simply to be alone at home, then I pay a price in terms of stress and even in terms of my health, everything. But another clue was the fact that I felt practically every emotion in my life except two: loneliness and boredom. Because I'm perfectly happy being alone....as long as there are books and thoughts. When it was very clear that Isabella is a classic introvert, I completely honored that, but I wanted to make sure that she was comfortable with people and being able to express herself and so that was really my focus with her.

SUSAN: Arianna's a tremendously successful woman, so that means attending a LOT of dinner parties. And sometimes her kids get dragged along.

For any introverted child, this could be a stressful thing. I asked Isabella, if, given her mother's career, she was pulled into moments that might not be so comfortable for her.

ISABELLA: Now I'm so grateful I did because I think I would have been a recluse if it wasn't for my mom who really pushed me. But I think when I was 13 or 14, I would just get really frustrated. Like, am I not ok the way I am? Why do I have to go to this? And I'd go to these sit down dinners and it'd be fascinating people and I wouldn't say a word. And I thank God my Mom would be sitting there next to me to facilitate the conversation. But I remember one time you were at the other end of the table and it was like the most miserable experience of my 13-year-old life. I didn't say one word for the entire dinner. And it was up until, like, four months ago that that's what I thought sit down dinners were. So if there was going to be a sit-down dinner I was gonna leave. And then we finally went to one, and I was like, "this is ok."

SUSAN: Oh, so you always thought a sit-down dinner equals miserable experience for a kid...

ISABELLA: I'm 13 and everyone's a grown-up. I think with a lot of introverts we have these moments in our childhood, and we don't update the image of ourselves, so we keep being afraid of these things that are no longer scary. And I think if it hadn't been for her, I would have continued to avoid them because I wouldn't have made that first leap. And I think I would have missed out on a huge aspect of life.

SUSAN: I'm a Mom, too, and I know it can be hard sometimes to make these decisions of whether you push your children to do something that they're uncomfortable with or let them be. So did you ever second guess yourself when you were saying, "Isabella, come to

this dinner." What was that like for you?

ARIANNA: For me it was more about exposing them to different people and different experiences and then they could decide what they wanted to do with their lives. And we had that rule, for example, that they'd go to the opera once. And they both said, "We don't want to go to the opera." And I said, "Well, you've never been to the opera. How do you know?" And then we would agree that we would go once and then if they didn't like it, they didn't have to go again. Instead of assuming that they didn't like it because they never experienced it. So meeting people and going to particular dinners, I thought they would like the people or an event, was part of the same idea. And now we have this thing that we talk about where you can go to an event and you can leave after five minutes. You're not stuck there for the duration. And I think that's been easier for you.

ISABEELLA: Yeah, I did that for the first time a month ago. I went for five mins and I left.

SUSAN: Literally five minutes.

ISABELLA: Literally. I went there. I talked to the person I said I would go to. Then I said, oh I'm going to get a drink and then I was like, wait, I don't want to be here anymore. I mean, that's not the graceful way to leave. And I left, and I think next time I'll tell them I'm leaving. But I think it's just people knowing that you're there for them and that doesn't mean you have to be there for the entire time.

SUSAN: I asked Arianna if she experienced any pain watching Isabella navigate tricky social situations.

ARIANNA: Obviously if she absolutely did not want to go to something, however interesting or useful in terms of her learning and growing I thought it would be, I think I had to honor that. And then we would negotiate about the future rather than forcing a child to do something they absolutely don't want to do. And also, honoring how different children can be. And not expect the same things from one child that come easily to another child. That's probably harder sometimes as a parent.

SUSAN: Some parents may see their child not going out, and be tempted to project their own feelings onto that. But that child might actually be very comfortable spending Friday night alone. The key is to keep an open mind and to ask questions.

ISABELLA: I could tell her, I want to stay in this weekend and it wouldn't be like "well, you won't have friends. You're being antisocial." Ok, you're recharging. And I think that was so incredibly lucky because it taught me to ask myself what I want, not like, what should I do.

SUSAN: That was Isabella Huffington and her mother Arianna Huffington.

By now you can see just how important parent-child fit is. You don't need to have the same temperament as your child to have a strong connection. You just be aware of how temperament influences your parenting style and know that with a few small adjustments you can make your relationship great.

And now, it's that part of the show where I give you some concrete tips on how to get there.

SUSAN: Tip number one—and this is for both extroverted and introverted parents: Don't just accept your child for who she is; treasure her for who she is. It's so important for parents to learn to take delight in a child whose behavior might seem mystifying to them. If you're an extrovert especially, you might need to learn to see the inner riches of your child that might not always be expressed on the surface - but they are there. To get at them, just start paying attention to the circumstances where your child tends to open up, whether it's in a cozy conversation at the kitchen table, or getting ready for bed, or maybe while working on an art project.

Tip number two—for introverted parents in particular. Do not assume that your children have same problems you did as a child. Those of us who grew up introverted in this very extroverted culture of ours often had painful experiences of feeling like we were out of step with what was expected of us. But don't assume that your own painful experiences will necessarily be repeated in your children's lives. Instead, do your kids the favor of presuming strength and a happy outcome.

Tip number three—for all you introverted parents with extroverted kids. I hear so much from parents like you asking how can you be a better parent to your extrovert who needs so much more stimulation that you may feel comfortable giving. Now this probably means you're going to need to step outside of your comfort zone to give your child the experiences he needs--and that's OK. Just make sure you're able to recharge in your own way after these encounters. Honor your own preferences knowing that you will be much more present for your child if you give yourself the breaks you need without feeling guilty. Look for other adults in your child's life who might be able to fulfill those particular needs that your child has. Maybe this is your child's other parent, maybe it is a friend or a neighbor, but you don't have to do it all by yourself.

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SUSAN: If you're the parent of a quiet child ages 3 to 9, I'm so excited to tell you about a new online course we've created that I really think can change the way you parent your child. The course is beautiful and it includes all kinds of interactive features like, for example, a tool to help you decide when and when not to press your child out of her comfort zone. And scripts of how to advocate for your child with people who say he's too shy. And a chance to interact with other parents of quiet kids. To check out the course just visit learn.quietrev.com.

SUSAN: Quiet: the power of introverts" was produced by Kerrie Hillman in partnership with Andy Bowers and Laura Mayer of Panoply. The episode was edited by A.C. Valdez, mixed by Jason Gambrell. Our music was composed by Alexis Cuadrado. Special thanks to everyone at Quiet Revolution. I'm Susan Cain.

Next week on Quiet: The Power of Introverts: "The Great Participation Debate". We ask whether grading children on classroom participation put quiet kids at a disadvantage?

I am Susan Cain. Thanks for listening.