



Complex Relations

YOU CAN PROTECT YOUR MARRIAGE BY GETTING ALONG WITH THE IN-LAWS—BUT SET SOME LIMITS FIRST.

By Davia Bills and Jason Teich



When you get married, you're suddenly thrust into an existing family with complicated dynamics that you have to learn to navigate (with your partner's help). Conflicts will inevitably arise, and the main source of all this tension boils down to one little phrase: *in-law*.

"In-laws are often competing for your partner's time, love and attention," explains social psychologist Susan Newman, author of *The Book of No*. You may have plans with your spouse for just the two of you, and suddenly your in-laws need help with a task or want everyone to come over for the weekend. As partners try to figure out how to divide their time among all their new responsibilities, in-laws can feel neglected or even shut out of their child's life, which can be destructive for the entire family, Newman warns.

Other factors can also put a strain on a couple's relationships with in-laws. Resentment can build when in-laws intrude on the couple's life

together by visiting unannounced or doing chores without being asked. In-laws can be hurt when a couple eschews a long-standing family tradition in favor of their own goals and desires or when they disagree with the way that their child and his or her spouse raises their grandchildren—or even keeps their house.

Why should we care so much about how we relate to in-laws, who live separate lives, often thousands of miles away? A seminal study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* in 2001 examined the association between discord with in-laws and marital satisfaction. The findings? Participants' relationships with their in-laws predicted their happiness with their marriage. In other words, your relationship with your in-laws can influence your relationship with your spouse, creating problems between you and your partner that challenge your intimacy and strain your family life. For the sake of your and your partner's well-being, don't let that happen.

Here are six steps you can take to protect your marriage and deflate the tension before it turns too toxic.

1 Give In-Laws Alone Time with Their Child

Jealousy is very common in the in-law relationship. As Newman

points out, the son- or daughter-in-law has "essentially taken the in-laws' baby away." Giving your partner time with their parents apart from you shows understanding and helps appease that little green monster, which could otherwise damage your relationship.

2 Stay Away From Topics That You Know Will Push Buttons

From politics and religion to child-rearing decisions, avoid bringing up any subjects that you know are bound to raise tensions. Conflict can't be prevented completely, but you can do your part to identify the sore spots and quit needling them.

Get along with the in-laws, for a happier union.

3 Ask Your In-Laws for Their Help

"People want to feel needed," Newman says, adding that one of the best ways to bond with your in-laws is to seek their advice or expertise. Maybe your in-law knows a lot about being a homeowner and you're looking into buying your first house. Not only will your in-law feel proud to share their experience with you, but you'll also gain some valuable tips from someone who's been there and done that.

4 Say No—and Set Boundaries

The thought of saying no to your in-laws is terrifying. However, Newman warns, when you don't set boundaries, "you're essentially adding more tension to the relationship, because you're going to be quietly fuming." Couples often don't realize they have the power to say no and that most in-laws will adapt in order to stay close with their child.

5 Make Sure Your In-Laws Are Up-To-Date on Your Family's Current Events

It's tempting to put talking to your in-laws about major changes in your life on the back burner so you don't have to deal with their unsolicited opinions. But when your in-laws find out the big news in some other way,

they're going to feel betrayed that you didn't tell them first. The key is to let your partner take the lead. They know their own parents better than you do, Newman explains, and will have a better grasp of when and how to tell them. Plus, if your in-laws don't take the news well, being the messenger will just send unwarranted blame your way.

6 Remember That Your Primary Relationship Is with Your Spouse, Not Your Parents

According to Karl Pillemer, professor of Human Development at Cornell University, "In a conflict between your spouse and your family, support your spouse. You must present a united front to your families, making it clear from the beginning that your spouse comes first. In couples where this allegiance does not happen, marital problems swiftly follow. In fact, some of the bitterest disputes occur over a spouse's failure to support his or her partner."

You may have heard the saying that in-laws aren't losing a child but gaining one. This sentiment doesn't always reflect real life. But by keeping the suggestions above in mind, you can build happier relationships with your in-laws—and protect your marriage as the most sacred and important relationship in your life.

Your in-laws are the grandparents of your children. Encourage the relationship—but don't let them set your family's rules.

