



# In-Law Relationships

by Phillip J. Swihart

*What do I owe my in-laws?* That's an interesting question. Another way to phrase it might be, "As a son-in-law or daughter-in-law, what's required of me? What are my obligations, whether I feel like it or not, in relating to my spouse's parents?"

Put this way, it doesn't sound like a very warm or relaxed relationship. It sounds more like your in-laws are a burden in your life. Perhaps you feel caught between trying to please them (or trying to avoid offending them) on the one hand, and just wanting to be yourself or wanting your own "space" on the other.

The first principle that applies here is that, if you're a Christian, you owe your in-laws behavior that's consistently Christian in character—as you do anyone else. This doesn't ignore the reality that if your in-laws are "difficult" people, are controlling and manipulative, are emotionally or mentally dysfunctional, or don't share your faith, this may be a particularly hard challenge. The problem is that they're not just anyone. They're connected to your spouse through genetics, history, and complex psychological dynamics.

If you have disagreements with your in-laws, your spouse may feel caught in the middle between parents and you. You, meanwhile, have obligations to in-laws and spouse—and children, if you have any.

If you feel your in-laws are intruding into your married life, the old saying, "Good fences make good neighbors," may apply. In concert with your mate, set reasonable boundaries; ask that he or she firmly and kindly insist that your in-laws respect these limits.

"Honoring" one's parents (Exodus 20:12) does require showing them patience, kindness, gentleness, and respect. This applies to in-laws, too. You may not even like them, but you need to choose to act in a loving manner toward them. For instance, you might choose to adopt their tradition of having an Easter egg hunt, despite the fact that you don't want your kids to think the Easter bunny is real. Enjoying the family event is possible, even if you follow it with a reminder to the children about the real meaning of the holiday.

When you married, you also became part of another family with its own set of expectations. You need to recognize and respect those—within limits.

What are those limits? Here are three things that "honoring" your in-laws does *not* mean:

- It doesn't require that you submerge all your own feelings, desires, preferences, and needs in the service of "doing things their way."
- It doesn't mean you must permit them to disrespect, control, or manipulate you for their own selfish ends.
- It doesn't entail "obeying" all their "parental" requests or requirements—which, in some instances with some in-laws, may get pretty crazy.

Sometimes the most honoring response is to diplomatically but firmly say, "No." Letting in-laws split, manipulate, or control you by silently acceding to their nutty, neurotic, inappropriate demands isn't necessarily showing Christian love.

In-law conflicts grow more complicated when a spouse seems to side with his or her parents and against his or her mate. The mate may rightly feel outnumbered or "ganged up on."

This isn't so much an in-law problem as a marital one. If one spouse remains too dependent upon his or her parents, that needs to be addressed in a straightforward way. If one spouse is blaming the in-laws for a disagreement the couple is experiencing, that should be dealt with, too.

If you've become engaged in a quiet (or not so quiet) war with your in-laws—and maybe also with your spouse—about these tangled issues, don't let it erode your marriage further. Do the healthy thing and seek out a Christian therapist.

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## Myths and Realities of Extended Families

# Your relationship with your in-laws will probably change once you get married.

by Phillip J. Swihart

**Myth:** After marriage, my relationship with his parents will be the same as when we were dating.

**Reality:** In a family's eyes, being his girlfriend or fiancée is totally different from being his wife. Walking down the aisle is the first of many steps you will take toward becoming a part of your extended family. Having a healthy relationship with your spouse's parents may take work, but in time it can prove to be a fulfilling and loving connection.

**Myth:** Once we get married, my wife and I will be free of our parents' control.

**Reality:** Marriage is supposed to be an act of leaving and cleaving, yet it's often hard for parents to let go. In the first few years of marriage (and unfortunately for some couples, much farther into the future) parents are often prone to give endless advice — and to expect their children to follow their every suggestion or demand. Though at times this counsel may be solicited by a young, naive couple, if and when it becomes the beacon for all decision making, parents and their married children must recognize the need for boundaries.

**Myth:** Even though I don't like my in-laws now, I'll feel more like loving them after the marriage.

**Reality:** Love is a decision, not an emotion. And this holds true for in-laws. You may never feel like loving them. And they may never seem deserving of it. If you didn't like her folks to begin with, the wedding won't change anything. The only thing you can change is your attitude toward them. Start by extending respect, and give love a chance to grow. Remember, by loving her parents, you're loving her.

**Myth:** I won't have to deal with my in-laws much after the wedding.

**Reality:** Starting your marriage with this misconception is a recipe for frustration. In-laws are closely connected by more than DNA. You're looking at family reunions, grandparents wanting to spend time with grandchildren, the responsibility to care for aging parents and visits in each other's homes. By readying yourself for the possibility of frequent interaction with extended family, you're in a better position to transform your attitude.

**Myth:** My in-laws will be totally annoying, intrusive people who will attempt to ruin my marriage.

**Reality:** Not everyone's mother-in-law is the stereotypical, nosy matriarch portrayed on television sitcoms. And even if you find that your in-laws are overbearing, it's worth it to your spouse (and your marriage) to find their good points and love them for who they are: the people who gave life to your mate. Rather than a complete nuisance, in-laws can be a great blessing: last-minute baby-sitting, heart-to-heart talks, time-tested advice, unconditional love and more. Though you may experience the occasional bump in the road, in-law relationships can ultimately be a great addition to your life and family.

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## Getting Along With Your In-Laws

**Getting along with your in-laws may not be easy, but these practical tips will help you make the best of it.**

by Phillip J. Swihart

In-law relationships need a touch of civility. Consider the story of Stephanie, who complained, "My mother-in-law never approves of the way I do anything. The last time Joe and I visited her it happened again. Just trying to be nice and helpful, I washed all the pots and pans after dinner. No sooner had I finished than she washed them all over again!"

Stephanie is not a newlywed. She has been married to Joe for 15 years. That whole time, she and Joe's mom have silently struggled with being civil to each other. When Joe's mom comes to visit, Stephanie really tries to get the house clean and comfortable for her. But after arriving, her mother-in-law pulls out the cleaning supplies and spit shines the bathrooms and kitchen. Stephanie assumes she's doing this because she thinks Stephanie is a slob and lives in filth.

After the last pots-and-pans fiasco, Stephanie spilled her frustrations to Joe's older sister, Connie. "I know your mother hates me and thinks I'm a slob and a bad person. I can't seem to do anything to please her."

Connie replied, "Stephanie, it's not about you. It's about Mom's compulsion to have everything spotless. I grew up with her. I know her. She was like this before you and Joe even met. When she rewashes the pots and pans, it's not condemning you — it's simply that she had different (and what most would consider absurd) standards of what is acceptably clean. Let it go. There are bigger hills to die on."

While Stephanie couldn't really forget it and totally let it go, she did begin to look at her mother-in-law in a

different light. She began to try to find ways to help that didn't involve meeting her mother-in-law's high standard of cleanliness — like running to the grocery store for milk or dropping off the dry cleaning and laundry. Stephanie will probably never have a close relationship with her mother-in-law, but these days they are much more civil to each other.

## Civility Tips for Relating to In-Laws:

- Be proactive. Do what you can to build the relationship.
- Don't compete with other family members.
- Refocus your perspective by looking for the positive.
- Accept reality.

As you keep civility a high priority in your extended family relationships, it becomes easier to focus on another effective way of dealing with anger and frustration — remaining calm. What 1 Corinthians 13 says about love can also be true for civility. This really works: Try reading the love passage and substituting the word civility or civil. If you can succeed in remaining civil, you also up your chances of remaining calm even when you are so upset you could just spit nails.

## The ABCs of Family Civility

Adapted from Pier Forni, *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*.

- Smile. People respond better to those who are positive.
- Be considerate. Ask yourself, "Is what I am about to say going to encourage and build up the other person, or tear him or her down?"
- Practice restraint and don't yell or raise your voice.
- Have the courage to admit it when you are wrong. Avoid ridicule and don't humiliate or demean the other person. You can express your anger without attacking the other person.
- Accept kindness from others and let others be nice to you.

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# What if an In-Law Doesn't Accept Me?

**These steps will help you deal with those sticky in-law situations.**

*by Phillip J. Swihart*

Heather and Steve have been married almost four years. They love each other very much, but relationships with their in-laws have always been strained.

Heather feels Steve's mother is overly critical of how Heather parents the children. She also gets upset over her mother-in-law's statements about how Steve works much too hard; she sees them as attacks on her choice to be a stay-at-home mom.

Steve has great difficulty connecting with his father in-law, who seems to live for sports. When Steve and Heather visit his in-laws, Steve is especially disturbed to see Heather share her father's sports mania — leaving Steve feeling like an outsider.

It's normal to want to be accepted by your in-laws. But feeling that you *need* to be accepted can bring complications, causing you to be uncomfortable and unnatural around them.

Unrealistic hopes cause problems, too. Many parents are initially over-protective of their own child, or have expectations that no spouse can meet in the beginning.

Often new husbands and wives assume they'll be loved and accepted by in-laws on the merit of having married the in-laws' child. This may be the case, but it usually takes time to establish trust and respect. Just as it takes time to build other close relationships, gaining acceptance into a family doesn't happen instantly.

After all, you're stepping into a family with a long history of established bonds. Don't be too hard on yourself and expect too much. If your relationship with your own parents is wonderful, the one with your mother- and father-in-law may never measure up. If your relationship with your parents isn't good, you may be too needy and demanding in trying to make up for it.

The number-one factor in resolving problems of acceptance by in-laws is your spouse's support. As with all close relationships, it's an art to support your spouse without jumping into the fight or feeding his or her discontent.

Let's say that Heather and Steve have just returned from an extended visit with his parents. She declares: "I never want to stay with your parents again! Why doesn't your mother like me? She told me that she had you potty trained by age two and that you obeyed her without question."

In this case, Heather is being a little overdramatic and overly sensitive. How can Steve support her without reinforcing her exaggeration or condemning his mom?

He could say something like this: "Honey, I'm so sorry that you feel hurt by the things my mom says. But I know you're a terrific mother, and she'll come to see that, too. She also seems to remember me as much more perfect than I was. I can remember plenty of frustration and grief, but it's probably good that she doesn't remember all the tough times. I'll always support you in finding a time to share your feelings with my mom. I really think she likes you and can't help but love you as time goes on."

Or imagine that Ken has the complaint. "I don't want to spend more than one day at your parents' house ever again," he says. "I always feel like a third wheel. I know your dad hates the fact that I don't enjoy sports. You and he seem to be in your own little 'sports world.' What am I supposed to do, spend my time helping your mom in the kitchen?"

Heather might respond by reassuring Ken along these lines: "I'm so sorry that I haven't been more sensitive to your feelings of being left out during those times. You're right — sports has been the major thing dad and I share. I know even Mom has felt a little left out when we obsess about it. Let's see if we can think of ways to connect when we're at my parents — all of us, including my mom. I know my dad primarily cares how I'm loved and taken care of, and there's no question about those things in my mind. Please give me a little sign if I forget it next time."

When it comes to dealing with an in-law who doesn't seem to accept you, here are the main principles to remember:

- Learn to support your spouse without getting hooked into taking sides.
- Encourage your spouse to share his or her feelings directly with you.
- Keep a sense of humor.
- Show your spouse that he or she is number one in your eyes.
- Don't take things too personally.
- Remember, building a relationship takes time.
- Forgive, forgive, forgive.
- Remember that you're loving your spouse by honoring his or her parents.

One more idea: When confronted with what feels like a no-win situation involving an in-law, use the "drop the rope" theory. Imagine a rope, the kind used in a tug-of-war. If you find yourself provoked, see that rope in your hands. You can choose to continue yanking on it — or drop it. Dropping it may sound as though you're giving in or giving up, but it's actually very empowering. It's also much more effective than tugging back and forth.

For Ken and Heather, a solution may look something like this:

- They discuss the things their in-laws say and do that tend to trigger anxiety and anger.
- They agree to act as "buffers" for each other against possible hard spots.
- They commit to forgiving any offense quickly.
- They plan to give the relationships time to develop.
- They start working as a team.
- They can even see some humor in learning to drop those "invisible ropes."

As a result, each of them feels more loved and supported. That helps them enjoy getting to know and appreciate each other's parents.

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## What If an In-Law Tries to Run Our Lives?

**Relating to a controlling in-law is one of the trickiest problems a marriage can face.**

**by Phillip J. Swihart**

Since we no longer have a traditional rite of passage in which a young person officially enters adulthood, marriage often ends up serving that role by default. Sometimes, though, even marriage doesn't trigger an appropriate emotional separation from a parent.

If parent and adult child are enmeshed in an unhealthy way, there can be runners of that vine throughout the marriage—gradually choking it to death. A prime example: the married daughter who still allowed her mother to balance her and her husband's joint checking account!

It helps if both sets of parents give the new couple their blessing—thereby affirming the newlyweds' independence. While this may seem unnecessary with today's career-delayed first marriages and blended second or third marriages, it's a valuable gift for any husband and wife.

If you believe an in-law is trying to run your life, consider how the following principles might help.

## **Honor—But Don't Necessarily Obey**

Scripture directs us to honor parents (Deuteronomy 5:16; Matthew 15:4). Their wisdom, years of sacrifice, and role in the family are reasons to respect them in our hearts and our actions.

*Obeying* parents, however, is clearly time-limited. If we're still trying to obey Mom and Dad, we're not leaving them and cleaving to our spouse. While it may be difficult to defy their spoken or unspoken wishes, there may be times when it's necessary.

Take, for example, the question of where to live. Some parents attempt inappropriate—though sometimes well meaning—control over their adult children in this area. Promises of houses or land ("Adjoining ours, of course!") or simply taking the children hostage emotionally ("You can't move our grandchildren away from us!") can result in significant generational strain. This and other issues must be dealt with quickly and directly, lest the marriage suffer the consequences.

## **Maintain Mutual Respect**

Healthy parents have many opportunities to do this. Decisions about grandchildren, finances, careers, and many other important issues are chances to honor adult children's autonomy.

The need for respect goes both ways, of course. Healthy sons- and daughters-in-law attend responsibly to their new duties, making sure issues like money and child care aren't dumped in their parents' laps—on purpose or by default.

Sometimes spouses need to ask for their parents' respect—even if it's uncomfortable to do so. If a controlling parent is sharing private information without permission, raging verbally, or otherwise acting inappropriately, it's up to the adult children to ask the parent to observe safe relational boundaries.

## **Check Your Assumptions**

Especially when a first child marries, it's common for all involved to have immature expectations. Visions of "one big happy family" can quickly turn to disillusionment, as each generation operates from its own perspective.

Assumptions lead to misunderstandings. Parents shouldn't assume that because they've always liked a particular brand of car, their kids will want to buy the same. Husbands and wives shouldn't assume Mom and Dad will do all the cooking at Thanksgiving.

## **Be Open to Mediation**

When things break down on either side of the generation gap, a third party may be helpful. While not trying to provoke a feud, spouses should solidly back each other and respond as a team. Mediation should be God-honoring and principle-centered, and should support the marriage.

For mild or short-term conflict, one side might let the other choose a trusted minister or other third party that all can agree on. In the case of more complex, severe, or ongoing conflict, the services of a professional counselor will be valuable.

Some participants may see mediation as embarrassing or meddlesome. Encourage them to view it as a chance to cooperate for the good of the entire family. If total agreement isn't reached, that's okay; the goal isn't a merger of the generations, but a partnership between them.

Dealing respectfully but firmly with a controlling in-law takes fortitude, especially on the part of the son or daughter whose parent is the offender.

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# **Cutting Your Spouse's Apron Strings**

**Is your spouse too dependant on his or her parents? Are your in-laws too involved in your marital life? If so, here's help.**

*by Phillip J. Swihart*

"Julie, you'll never believe it!" exclaimed Susan. "Tom wants his parents to come live with us!"

"Whoa, Susan," Julie replied. "Slow down. Tell me what exactly is going on here. What did Tom say?"

Susan took a deep breath. "Well, the other night we were talking about our finances, and the kids, and how things are really tight right now. He thought it would be a good idea for his parents to move in with us to share some of the expenses. Maybe we could even charge them rent, or the kids could stay with them instead of going to day care. Julie, I just can't believe it!"

Julie wondered why Susan was so upset. After all, having extended families live together wasn't exactly a new idea. "In Bible days, multiple generations lived together all the time," Julie said. "Just because we don't usually do it here, I don't quite understand why you're so freaked out."

The resentment in Susan's voice was clear. "Well, it would be just one more way for his mom and dad to try to influence our decisions."

"Oh! The issue is about boundaries and leaving and cleaving."

"Oh, yeah," Susan said with sarcasm. "We have a real problem with the 'leave and cleave' thing."

Susan and Tom aren't the only couple to have a problem in this area. Genesis 2:24 says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." The King James Version calls being united "cleaving." This refers to God's invention of a unique bond between husband and wife that's not to be compromised by their relationship with their parents.

Does this mean that we cut ourselves off from our families of origin? Not if they're reasonably healthy. Maintaining relationships with our parents usually is beneficial. But problems arise if factors like the following are present:

- One spouse relies too heavily on the parents to help in decision-making, leading the other spouse to feel insignificant.
- One spouse looks to the parent, not the partner, to get his or her emotional needs met, leading the partner to feel ignored.
- One spouse reveals details of marital conflict with his or her parents, leading the other spouse to feel betrayed.

Let's take a closer look at these and what you can do about them.

1. **Decision-making dysfunction.** Couples need the freedom and autonomy to make their own decisions. Some parents are better than others in this area; many wait for their adult children to ask for advice, but others try to inject unsolicited wisdom. The latter are often deeply caring people who want the best for their children, but their behavior communicates a lack of respect and trust in the judgment of their child and his or her spouse.

Family history can make this difficult water to navigate. Some spouses are used to asking their parents for direction; others make decisions more independently. If you and your mate have different habits on this score, conflict may result.

If you're frustrated because your spouse consults with his or her parents on decisions more than you'd like, the two of you need to work through this issue. If you feel threatened by your spouse's behavior, share that diplomatically but honestly. Talk about how the two of you would like decision making to work. Would you prefer that the two of you make choices without getting input from either set of parents? Are there some decisions you'd ask one set of parents about, but not the other?

Be aware that asking for parents' advice can be a slippery slope. It may leave them feeling the door is open for them to give you input into other areas, or even to "correct" decisions you've already made.

Credit each other and your in-laws with goodwill toward your marriage unless they've demonstrated otherwise. Sadly, some in-laws don't seem to have a vested interest in the success of their child's marriage. If this is true of you, you and your mate may want to recommit yourselves to "leaving and cleaving." You may also need to seek professional advice to determine how best to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries with your in-laws.

2. **Emotional apron strings.** If your spouse gets his or her emotional needs met in his or her relationship with parents instead of with you, there's a problem. You may even feel as if your spouse is having an affair.

Sometimes this problem begins when a wife feels frustrated over her husband's seeming lack of interest in conversing about her day; she starts talking with her parents instead. Sometimes the husband is the frustrated one; it's common for mother and son to have long or frequent conversations that leave the wife feeling ignored. Neither scenario is appropriate.

Respect for each other is the key. In this situation, respect might require that the spouse maintaining an overly close relationship with his or her parents will decrease that contact in order to show love for the spouse. For example, a son whose mother is too close might say, "Mom, let's limit our conversations to once a week about general things." Or he may simply make the change himself, explaining it only if his mother asks him about it. In either case he would do well to save discussions of his goals and disappointments for times with his wife; these are the things that build intimacy in a marriage.

This is not to suggest that children and parents should cut off their relationship under the guise of leaving and cleaving. But your primary human relationship now is with your spouse, not your parents. Your commitment to God comes first; then your bond to your spouse, then to any children you might have, then to your family of origin, and then to extended family and friends.

to your family of origin, and then to extended family and friends.

3. **Betrayal.** It's a common story: After a fight with his or her mate, a spouse goes "home to mother" or calls the parents on the phone and spills the details.

This is detrimental to a marriage. It communicates disrespect to your spouse and makes it hard for the parents to maintain a healthy relationship with him or her.

Even if you and your spouse reconcile within hours or days after your argument, family members may not know that. They might carry that memory of the fight you had, have a hard time believing that everything is okay, and remain suspicious of your partner.

Expecting parents to referee your conflicts isn't realistic or wise. It would be hard for them to be objective about your marriage. The best thing they can do when you come to them in the midst of an argument is to send you home to work it out.

One exception would be conflict that involves violence. Getting to safety is the first priority. Taking time to be apart and see your parents can give you an opportunity to think and establish a plan to repair the marriage. It's not helpful to just go home to Mom and Dad to vent, however.

If you have an "apron strings" problem in your marriage, keep the following tips in mind as you talk with your spouse about it.

1. Pray for wisdom and insight about what to say and how to say it.
2. Tread lightly when it comes to criticizing your in-laws. Your spouse knows more negative things about his or her parents than you do, whether or not they're expressed. Even repeating a complaint your spouse has made about his or her parents could be taken as an offense by your mate.
3. Approach your spouse when you're both rested, fed, and healthy. Right before falling asleep at night is not a good time to have this conversation.
4. Remember that you're a team. Because you're committed to each other, you can work through this even if you don't agree on the details — like your in-laws' intent, how to best meet your spouse's needs, or exact limits to place on parent-child conversations.
5. If parents need to be confronted or informed, agree that their own child — not the son- or daughter-in-law — will do the talking. Protecting your marriage is a priority; the newest addition to the family doesn't need another reason to be dissected by in-laws. Each spouse needs to know that he or she will be protected by the other, even if husband and wife disagree and the in-laws are meddling.

If, after following these steps, you and your spouse are at an impasse about your in-laws, get the objective input of a therapist.

Leaving and cleaving is tricky, but doable. The love and respect you communicate to each other when you value your marriage over your relationship with your parents are essential.

After Susan and Julie talked, Susan realized why she felt threatened by the idea of her in-laws moving into her home. It was because she believed her mother-in-law wanted more contact with Tom than Susan was comfortable with.

As Susan and Tom talked about it, she became less defensive. Tom was able to listen more easily and understand her heart. In turn, his own heart softened. He began to evaluate how much time he spent with his mom — and what he could do about those apron strings.

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## Holidays and the In-Laws

**There are no specific right and wrong ways for families to spend the holidays together, but there could be better ways.**

*by Phillip J. Swihart*

How have you dealt with special days like Christmas, Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, Easter, Memorial Day, and birthdays? Most of us might think only in terms of the way we grew up, perhaps with Mom and Dad, and expect these occasions to be celebrated the same way.

The only problem, now that you're married, is *whose* mom and dad's celebration of the holidays you're going to adopt. An added challenge confronts blended families, who may have a host of combinations of relationships and traditions to consider.

One husband and wife, like many others, found themselves in a quandary. Where should they go for Thanksgiving? In an effort to respect the desires of both sets of parents and a grandmother, they ended up rushing from house to house. The result: They didn't enjoy the food *or* the time together.

Sometimes practical considerations minimize this conflict. If family members live far apart, the question of where to spend the holidays may be answered when travel costs are taken into account. Often, though, the solutions

to spend the holidays may be answered when travel costs are taken into account. Often, though, the solutions aren't quite so clear.

Premarital counseling may be the best place to start addressing this question; it's frequently covered in that setting. Whether you discussed this important area of family relationships before you were married or are just now beginning to deal with it, here are some key concepts that can help you decide how and where to spend your holidays:

1. Sit down with your spouse and share—orally and in writing—how each of you feels about holidays and how they're spent. Include major national holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and other occasions that are special to you. If it's your family's tradition to take a drive to see the changing autumn leaves, for instance, don't hesitate to mention it. The same goes for marking the start of fishing season, the last day of school, or the Super Bowl.
2. Explain how you spent the holidays as a child. Which aspects did you enjoy? Which would you like to change? If the two of you were raised in different countries or cultures, what holidays could you learn more about? For example, a spouse who grew up in England might not realize the significance of Thanksgiving and Independence Day to a mate who was raised in the U.S.
3. Consider how your parents and other relatives may wish to have you involved. Perhaps a Christmas Eve service together is important to the wife's parents, while Christmas dinner is central to the husband's. Try to be open to the desires of family members—but not controlled by them.
4. Agree on how you as a couple would like to establish your own holiday traditions. Work for balance and fairness. For example, you might decide to spend Christmas morning with your parents and Christmas evening with your spouse's (if both live close by). The following year you might spend the whole day at home as a couple—or, if you have children, with them.
5. Be open to changing your plan as needed. Flexibility and variation can help to avoid hard feelings when the in-laws' expectations aren't met. For instance, you might invite relatives to gather at your place instead of agonizing over which ones to visit. You might even take a vacation during the holidays to add variety and break the cycle of expectations.

Despite the usefulness of these steps, holiday observances still can be an emotional minefield for couples and in-laws. Here are some cautions to keep in mind:

1. It may be a lot easier for you and your spouse to change what you want for the holidays than for parents to adjust what's been important to them for many years. Share openly with them some of your ideas and hopes for holiday times, letting them know that you value being with them.
2. Develop realistic expectations of how the holidays should be spent. Wishful thinking generally leads to hurt feelings and disappointments. Personality differences, physical limitations, and philosophical disagreements don't disappear just because a particular date on the calendar has arrived. On the contrary, these factors often become more pronounced under stress—and most holidays provide plenty of that.
3. Holiday gift-giving can be a source of conflict and hurt. While it's better to give than receive (Acts 20:35), most people seem to prefer a balance of the two. Exchanging presents can easily get out of hand, creating hardship for family members who can't afford the expense. Try creative options. For example, you might give Christmas or birthday gifts to immediate family members, exchange names for other relatives, or give single gifts to family units.

There may be no specific right and wrong ways for families to spend the holidays together, but there could be better ways for you to approach holiday traditions and expectations. To keep those days worth celebrating, remember these tips:

- Aim to make holiday times enjoyable and memorable.
- Balance the development of your own traditions with those of the homes you came from.
- Keep the focus on time spent together rather than amount of money spent.
- Invite Christ to be your honored guest in all your plans and celebrations.

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## Advice for an In-Law

### Healthy in-law relationships contribute to the success of marriage

by Phillip J. Swihart

"Parents and their married children can resolve differing points of view in a mature and gracious manner," says Dr. Howard Hendricks of Dallas Theological Seminary.

Parents will find the following guidelines helpful in avoiding such conflicts, keeping their in-law relationships strong and healthy and contributing to the success of their children's marriage:

1. **Don't give advice unless the young couple specifically asks for it.** Even if they ask your opinion, be careful how the counsel is given. Do not preach or lecture. Instead, simply suggest solutions, giving the couple freedom to accept or reject them.



2. **Don't offer financial aid unless the young couple explicitly requests it.** It is important for the couple to establish their independence - emotionally and financially. As difficult as it may be to watch your child and his or her spouse face financial struggles, realize that those trials are valuable for them as they develop their life together.
3. **Keep your personal questions to a minimum.** Remember, a couple's primary allegiance should be to each other, not to either set of parents. The new couple needs privacy in order to develop a meaningful relationship.
4. **Respect the couple's confidence when they confide in you.** Don't repeat what they have told you to friends or other relatives, or you may lose their trust — and rightfully so.
5. **Don't expect the new couple to live according to your standards and values.** Your child and his or her spouse are individuals starting their own home. They need to develop their own family traditions, independent of those observed by their parents.
6. **Let go of your offspring, giving the couple room to live their own lives.** Rather than living through your children's lives, find activities of your own. Don't expect the couple to spend excessive amounts of time with you. Only by letting go will you be able to build a healthy relationship with them.
7. **Treat the couple with respect, and don't belittle them or their decisions.** They may have a lot to learn, but they need to learn these lessons themselves. Allow them to make their own mistakes, and don't adopt an "I-told-you-so" attitude if they fail.
8. **Don't expect your in-law to call you "Mom" or "Dad."** He or she may feel most comfortable using your first names. Accept the decision gracefully — don't make a major issue out of it.
9. **Take a genuine interest in your new in-law as a person.** Try to find out about his or her interests. Attempt to relate to your in-law in a meaningful way and on his or her terms.
10. **Don't treat your in-law as a rival who has stolen your child's love.** Welcome the new addition into your family - you'll multiply the love, rather than divide it.

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## Dr. Bill Maier on In-Laws

### Dr. Bill Maier addresses the issue of in-law relationships.

*Answered by Phillip J. Swihart*

#### How Do We Establish Boundaries With a Controlling Relative?

Dear Dr. Bill: I am 34 years old and have three children. My mother has always interfered in my life. I don't enjoy her visits and I often find myself making excuses for her not to come. What happens is that my mom comes to "observe" how our family is doing, and she totally undermines the authority my husband and I have with our own children. After her visits, my mom will call with very critical comments about my husband and everything we're doing wrong. I disagree with what she says, and feel very hurt and angry by her comments. The problem is that my children love their grandma and still want to see her regularly. I don't know how to explain the problem to them. Please help.

Unfortunately, the people who are the closest to us have the most potential to hurt us. It sounds like your mom has been criticizing you and attempting to control you for years, and you have just about had it. My guess is that if we took a close look at your mom's own life story, there are reasons why she is so negative and controlling. Perhaps she was emotionally abused as a child, or she has experienced deep pain and disappointment in her life. As her daughter, it might be helpful for you to gain some insight into your mother's past, in order to develop some empathy and understanding for her.

But even though there may be valid reasons for her difficult disposition, she has no right to treat you with such disrespect. It's high time for you to start setting down firm boundaries in your relationship with her. This isn't going to be easy, and will involve a lot of strength and courage on your part. You will need every bit of your husband's support and encouragement.

I suggest you sit down with your mom when both of you are in a good mood, and discuss with her how things are going to be different in your relationship from this point forward. Let her know that you love her and appreciate her love for your children, but that her constant criticism of you hurts you deeply and that you are no longer going to accept it. Explain that unless she can make a genuine effort to change her attitude and behavior, she will no longer be welcome in your home. Given what you've told me, I'm guessing that your mother may react in anger, or she may play the martyr role and attempt to make you feel guilty for your words. Stand your ground and refuse to be manipulated.

As far as your children's access to their grandmother, that's a difficult decision that you and your husband are going to need to discuss thoroughly. While your kids may love their grandma, is it truly in their best interest to be spending a great amount of time with a woman who is so controlling and demeaning? As your kids get older, I think we can both predict that her criticism and negativity will begin to affect their self-esteem.

Unless your mother is willing to admit her faults and make some significant changes in her life, I believe you may want to consider limiting the number and length of her visits. Perhaps her desire to see her grandchildren will motivate her to examine her attitude and her behavior.

Let me recommend an excellent book on this topic which I think you will find very helpful. It's titled **Boundaries: When to Say "Yes," When to Say "No," To Take Control of Your Own Life**. The book is written by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend, two Christian psychologists who I greatly respect, and who have been guests on this program in the past.

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## How Do We Stop In-Laws From Dropping In Uninvited?

Dear Dr. Bill: My husband and I have been married for seven months and we currently rent our home from my mother-in-law who lives within driving distance of us. The problem is that she comes over all the time without calling first — even though we've asked her to call first. My brother-in-law does the same thing. What should we say to our family about this situation without offending them, yet giving us the space we need?

Ah yes, the old "uninvited relatives dropping by" scenario!

You're in a rather unique situation because you are renting your home from your relatives. If they are giving you a great deal on the rent, that further complicates things.

You didn't mention in your e-mail *why* they come by. Is it to do maintenance on the house, do yard work, or get tools out of the garage? Because they are the landlords and you are the renters, they certainly have a right to do those things, provided they give you a reasonable amount of advance notice. On the other hand, if they are simply dropping in unexpectedly to chat or hang out, that needs to be addressed differently. And because we're talking about your in-laws, your husband is the one who needs to bring it up.

Hopefully, this can be solved with a good-natured, non-defensive family discussion. I suggest your husband start the conversation by telling his mom and brother how much you love them and appreciate the opportunity to rent their home. But he should explain that as newlyweds, you are trying to establish your new life together, and as such, you need a certain amount of privacy. Let them know that they are always welcome to come by, but that you would prefer it if they would let you know ahead of time.

If they react defensively or in anger, then there are some deeper boundary issues going on that may not be so easy to address. If that's the case, or if they continue to drop by unannounced even after you make your wishes known, then you've got a decision to make. If you're renting a great house at a great price, you may decide that it's worth putting up with their intrusiveness. On the other hand, you may soon decide that living in an apartment on the other side of town is looking better and better.

Let me recommend a Focus on the Family resource that you may find helpful. It's called **Fixing Family Friction** by David and Claudia Arp. The book also has some great suggestions on how to handle sticky family situations during the holidays.

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## Next Steps and Related Information

### Additional resources addressing challenges in marriage

*Phillip J. Swihart*

#### Popular questions on this topic:

- **What are my obligations to my in-laws?**
- **We're newlyweds, and my in-laws visit unexpectedly. How do we ask for privacy without offending them?**
- **My mother-in-law is extremely controlling and is critical of my parenting. What can I do?**
- **What can I do about the strained relationship between me and my in-laws?**
- **My spouse puts his parents' needs ahead of mine. How do I help him see that his attachment to his parents is hurting our marriage?**

#### Related Resources

- **Peacemaking for Families**
- **Boundaries in Marriage**
- **Night Light**
- **The First Five Years of Marriage**

#### Related Articles

- **Marriage in the Melting Pot**
- **Remarriage and Blended Families**
- **Devotional: External Relationships**

