

## **The In-law Relationship**

**By Barbara Ashcroft B.A. M.ED.**

*When you pick your spouse, you're also choosing your in-laws. No matter how close you and your spouse are, he or she is still somebody's son or daughter, brother or sister. Many couples manage nicely to have great relationships with all in-law members, but there are others whose lives seem to be completely at the mercy of in-law approval. Setting boundaries to protect the quality of the marital relationship while maintaining healthy relationships with in-laws is a must for all married couples.*

### **Understanding the Dynamics**

It is important to reflect on the underlying feelings and emotions of both the couple and the in-laws. When a young person leaves his family home and marries his spouse from another family, there is both sadness and joy. It is difficult for some parents to let go and to accept the fact that their once dependent child is now beginning his own family life and needs the freedom to experience life independently with his new spouse. At the same time the new spouse may often feel somewhat intimidated, overwhelmed and jealous by the history and closeness of her new husband's family. These are natural emotions and need to be recognized as normal by all family members. Everyone now has new roles and it takes time to figure out what's reasonable to expect in these new relationships.

What is clear, however, is that a couple's primary allegiance must be to each other. A couple's relationships with their parents must change from one of supervision and authority when they were children to one of a more adult egalitarian nature. Loyalty to each other as a couple must come first in order for them to establish a solid and loving base for their own lives and a new family. The couple's parents must give them a chance to find their own way without placing expectations and guilt on them. Leaving home and cleaving to a spouse includes the following changes:

- Independence
- Shift in loyalty
- Shift in confidant role
- Creation of marital boundaries

### **Healthy Adult Relationships with Parents**

When children marry, their parents are no longer the dominant human relationship in their lives. Married adult children should not be totally dependent upon on their parents for approval and affection, financial assistance and advice. There may be occasions where they ask for advice, but they, as a couple must learn to make their decisions independently after seeking input from many sources. Parents may ask questions that are very general such as, "How are things going?" but they must refrain from passing judgment and dispensing a litany of advice every day. Too many marriages break down from outside meddling and interference. Once a spouse feels that the other is listening more to her parents than to him, there isn't much chance for loyalty and teamwork in the marriage. The marriage needs boundaries for its protection and survival.

## **For Couples to Consider**

**Get your loyalty straight**-Your spouse must be the first and primary person in your life.

*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one. (Matthew 19:5)*

Couples need to establish an identity that is independent of their parents. They need to learn to rely on each other. If a wife has a problem with a mother-in-law, the husband needs to intervene and sort out the conflict. Similarly if a husband has a problem with his in-laws, the wife needs to speak up on behalf of her husband. When a couple stands up for each other, and works as a team, the marriage strengthens.

**Establish clear boundaries**-Couples need to discuss the role they want their in-laws to have in their life. They really need to start out clarifying this before they are inundated with unwanted or long stay visits, or unexpected daily drop-in's. It's easier to state your preferences if you have clearly thought this out ahead of time. This is not selfish and does not mean that there is no contact, but a couple's privacy and quiet time together is essential. Establish family and in-law times that you can live with. Couples need to start their own family traditions.

**Resolve conflicts privately**-Every couple will have **minor** disagreements from time to time. These small problems should be solved privately without involving parents and other family members. Once another family member gets a negative picture of their son or daughter's spouse, ongoing and future relationships may become strained. They also don't know when you've made up and may hold grudges long after the incident has been solved.

**Discuss cultural differences**-Various cultures have different expectations of their adult married children. A cross cultural marriage requires the couple to have a clear understanding of each culture's traditions. Again though, the important factor is that the couple acknowledges the traditional past, but at the same time sets out to develop their own special customs and practices. No one family should dominate and dictate the new couple's family style of celebrating.

## **For In-Law Parents**

- It's best not to give unsolicited advice. Wait until the couple asks for it. Even then use a gentle suggestion tone as opposed to an authoritative and judgmental one.
- Let go of your adult children. Respect the new spouse as an addition to your family. See this person as someone your son or daughter has chosen to share her life with and who makes her happy. Take a genuine interest in your child's spouse. The new spouse is not your rival and you are not in competition for your child's love. There is plenty of love for both relationships.
- Respect the couples' privacy and need for independence. This is most important for their relationship to grow and mature.
- Be cautious when providing financial assistance. Too much assistance will keep the couple forever dependent on you and this does not help them become responsible for their own debt.

### **The Mother-Daughter-in-Law Relationship**

It is often this relationship that has the most potential for conflict. Mothers have spent years nurturing and raising their sons, and may be very critical of a son's new spouse. They are hoping that the new person in his life will continue to give that same loving care that they did. They may also have a difficult time sharing their son's love with someone new.

Daughter-in-laws may often feel threatened and insecure around a mother-in-law if they feel that they are constantly being judged and evaluated. They may feel jealous of the strong bond that their husband has with his mother. There is no need to fear this. His relationship with his wife is different from his relationship with his mother.

Mothers and daughters-in-law are not in competition for the son/spouse's love, but are both an integral part of his life. Most mothers just want to hear from their sons and see them occasionally to know that all is well. A phone call and/or a short visit will usually go a long way to satisfy this need. Wives should have no fear that this little contact will lessen his love for them. It will, in fact, enhance their relationship in the long run. Mother-in-laws, as well, need to respect their son's new wife and value the unique gifts that she brings to his life. She has her own personal style and flare. That's why he chose her. If she makes him happy, then the mother-in-law should be very pleased. Respecting and honoring your son's choice is the best gift a mother can give her son. Love always wishes the best for the other. It is not possessive.

### **A Final Few Tips for Couples**

- Help your in-laws feel wanted, without allowing them to take over. Negotiate and plan for family celebrations that work for you. Show interest in their work and accomplishments. Value their differences while maintaining your own life style.
- Communicate constantly with each other if a feeling of resentment begins to creep in about in-law interference. Clearing up a potential long term conflict at the beginning will save years of tense meetings.
- Keep your in-laws in the loop about the **positive** events in your life. A quick phone call, or E mail or short visit lets them know that you are thinking of them and reassures them that you are doing well. It is amazing how well this works.
- Remember that occasionally your spouse may need some private time with his family. This will never detract from your relationship, but is often necessary for one's emotional well being.
- Find common ground and ways to pull together with the in-laws. Develop bonds by looking for similar interests and performing small acts of kindness.
- Remember that the better your relationship is with your in-laws, the better your marriage will be.

### **References:**

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Book

*A Wife's Guide to In-laws: How to Gain Your Husband's Loyalty Without Killing His Parents* by Jenna D. Barry

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