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How to Set Boundaries with the In-Laws



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Newlyweds Expert

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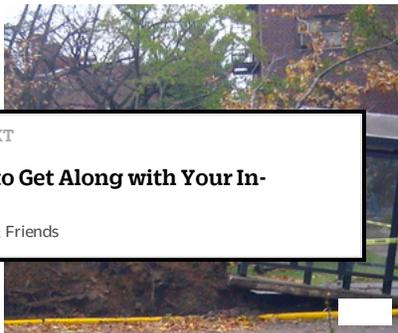
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Establishing a good relationship with [the in-laws](#), even under the best of circumstances, can be a challenge. Often, in-laws step over the line without meaning to or knowing what they are doing. They have a certain kind of relationship - and level of comfort - with their own child and forget that he or she has a spouse now. As a result, one of the first difficult conversations that you have to have as a married person usually is about [setting boundaries with the in-laws](#). Here is a step-by-step guide on how to approach this subject without hurting anyone's feelings or damaging any relationships:



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1. Talk to your spouse.

Most relationship experts agree that children should be the ones to start the conversation with their parents, even if their spouse is the one with primary concerns. When spouses go to their in-laws on their own, it sometimes comes off as criticism or picking a fight. So, to start, you have to tell your spouse what problems you are having with his or her parents. Then, spouses can discuss the issue before the child brings up the concerns. "Parents and children have longevity; there is a certain ingrained genetic bond that keeps them more connected," writes Lisa Bahar of Marriage and Family Therapy, Inc. in Dana Point, Calif, in an e-mail. "It's a bond that is undeniable."

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2. Stay positive.

When someone is doing something annoying or hurtful, you might find yourself feeling hate. Or you might just think less of them. Try not to do this when embroiled in any kind of [conflict with your in-laws](#). It can take you down an ugly slope, and it can cause problems in your marriage. "Assume the best," writes Debbie Pincus, family therapist and founder of the Relationship Center, in an e-mail. Believe that your in-laws have good intentions and try to stay positive. You might not have the best relationship with them, but it doesn't have to be the worst either.

3. Be present - or not.

When your spouse finally talks to your parents about boundaries - may they be rules about having to call before popping in for a visit or keeping opinions about your child rearing to themselves - decide whether you should be with everyone. Some spouses think this is a good idea, and it can be fine. But you have to be quiet and let your spouse do the talking. Again, you want children to deal with their own parents to keep the peace. If you think your presence will make your in-laws feel like they are under attack, then stay home. You can ask them - at a later date - if they had any questions for you if you think that's important.

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4. Avoid criticism.

You should never say a bad word about your in-laws, especially to your spouse, because it will just hurt his or her feelings. Your spouse also should be careful about the language used when discussing boundaries. Being respectful is of the utmost importance. For example, say "Mom and dad, I love when you visit but those 6 a.m. knocks on the door are not working for us. Could you stop by sometime after 10 a.m. in the future?" instead of "Don't you dare come to our house before 10 a.m. ever again."

5. Establish rules.

You should not come off as a dictator. But you should offer up some guidelines for the future, so you can avoid the conflict you're all facing now. A popular one for newlyweds and in-laws is the call-ahead rule. If one of you is going to visit the other, then you call ahead to see if it's all right. Or maybe you want to set boundaries about [the influence the grandparents are having on the kids](#), say if they're giving them sugary snacks to which you object. In these cases, say something like, "To avoid any confusion or hurt feelings, let's just make some family ground rules. One might be that we call ahead, etc." Remember that sweetness is more effective than criticism and finger pointing. So, be kind, gentle, and thoughtful in [the language you \(or your spouse\) uses](#).

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6. Listen carefully.

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Part of **good communication** is listening to what the other person has to say. "First you need to listen and validate what the other party says in order to create healthy boundaries," writes Thomas Gagliano, MSW life mentor, author, and speaker, in an e-mail. "You don't have to agree but let them know you heard them." You might even want to repeat back what they've said to you to make sure you're really paying attention and understanding their position and concern. This is, after all, a two-way street.

7. Take action.

Think about your concerns. Sometimes, taking action will speak louder than any words. Then, verbalize your actions in a way that avoids offending anyone. April Masini, the relationship guru of AskApril.com, offers this example for those **planning to miss Thanksgiving** with the in-laws:

Say: "We're going to miss you this year, but we're so excited to be visiting our friends in Montreal instead. We'll call you Thanksgiving morning — promise!"

Don't say: "I know this is going to really get to you, so don't be depressed, but — I'm so so so so so sorry — we can't spend Thanksgiving with you this year. I'm so sorry..."

The point is that you don't want to tell your in-laws to be upset; let them determine how they feel for themselves, suggests Masini. To be clear, you should take action, verbalize it if necessary (for example, you'd have to RSVP for Thanksgiving), and be clear and kind in your explanation. And peace - or at least not war - should reign.

Our Expert Recommends

- [How to Get Along with Your In-Laws](#)
- [In-Laws with No Boundaries](#)
- [What to Do If You Hate Your In-Laws](#)
- [Real Mother-in-Law Problems and Solutions](#)
- [When the In-Laws Want to Parent Your Child](#)
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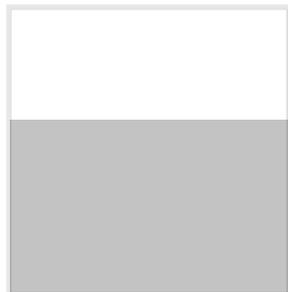
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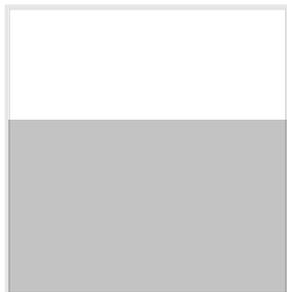
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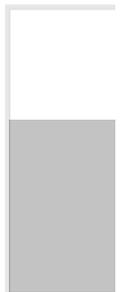
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