



Dealing With In-Laws



THE CHALLENGE

“When we were going through a difficult time, my wife told her parents about it. Then her father called me to give me advice about the situation. I wasn’t very happy about that!” —James.*

“My mother-in-law will often say, ‘I miss my boy so much!’ She talks about how close they were, which makes me feel guilty for marrying him and causing her all this heartache!”—Natasha.

Is it possible to keep an in-law problem from becoming a marriage problem?

* Names in this article have been changed.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Marriage creates a new family unit. The Bible says that a man who marries “will leave his father and his mother and will stick to his wife.” The same is true of a wife regarding her parents and husband. When she marries, the Bible says, the two become “one flesh.” They are a new family unit.—Matthew 19:5.

Your marriage comes before your parents. “One of the basic tasks of a marriage is to establish a sense of ‘we-ness’ between husband and wife,” writes counselor John M. Gottman. “Creating or renewing your sense of solidarity with your spouse may involve some rending and tearing away from your primary families.”*

Some parents may find it difficult to adjust. One young husband relates: “Before getting married, my wife would always put priority on her parents’ wishes. After we were married, her mother saw that someone else came first. That wasn’t easy for her to accept.”

Some newlyweds may find it difficult too. “Having in-laws is not like having friends you chose,” says James, quoted earlier. “It’s as though someone said, ‘You have two new friends, whether you like it or not.’ Even if they drive you crazy, they’re family!”

* From the book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you and your spouse are at odds over an in-law situation, work to resolve issues in a spirit of cooperation. Follow the Bible's advice to "seek peace and pursue it."—Psalm 34:14.

To help you do that, consider the following scenarios. Each is presented from the perspective of either the husband or the wife. However, the challenges really apply to either gender, and the principles discussed can help you resolve a number of in-law issues.

- **Your wife says she wishes you had a better relationship with her mother. But you find her mother difficult to deal with.**

Try this: Discuss the problem with your wife, and be willing to make concessions. The issue is, not how you feel about your mother-in-law, but how you feel about your spouse—the person whom you have vowed to love. Come away from the discussion with one or two specific ways that you could improve your relationship with her mother, and then follow through. As your wife notices your efforts, her respect for you will undoubtedly grow.—*Bible principle: 1 Corinthians 10:24.*

- **Your husband says that you are more interested in pleasing your parents than in pleasing him.**

Try this: Discuss the problem with your husband, and try to see it from his point of view. Of course, your husband should not feel threatened if you are simply giving due honor to your parents. (Proverbs 23:22) Still, you might need to reassure him—by your words and actions—that he comes before your parents in your life. If your husband has that confidence, he will be less likely to feel that he is competing with your parents for your attention.—*Bible principle: Ephesians 5:33.*

- **Your wife goes to her parents for advice rather than to you.**

Try this: Talk with your wife, and reach an agreement on where the boundaries should be set. Strive to be reasonable. Is it *always* wrong to talk to a parent about a concern? When might it be appropriate? If you both agree on reasonable boundaries, this issue does not have to be a problem.—*Bible principle: Philippians 4:5.* ■

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Let each one keep seeking, not his own advantage, but that of the other person."—1 Corinthians 10:24.

"The wife should have deep respect for her husband."—Ephesians 5:33.

"Let your reasonableness become known."—Philippians 4:5.



Focus on the Positive

"Having a good relationship with your in-laws is important. They are the ones who cared for and raised your spouse, and no matter what their imperfections are, you need to be thankful to them. You can also learn a lot from their experience. If you focus on your in-laws' positive qualities and imitate those, you can become a well-rounded person."—Jessica.