

ALL IN THE FAMILY

GETTING ALONG WITH THE IN-LAWS

by Dr. Valerie Correa

Congratulations! You are getting married. You have found your partner for life and are in the midst of celebrating this union. Not only are you and your spouse becoming a family, you are integrating your families together. When we find our mates after our long hard search, we are often unaware that we are also choosing to commit to their family. Our spouse's family becomes our family. This expansive group doubles the joy, but it also increases opportunities for conflict. It is difficult to meet and negotiate the needs of two people in a marriage. With in-laws, you increase the difficulty factor exponentially.

Here are some tips to balance the "ins and outs" of the in-laws so you do not become the *outlaw* of the family.

Express respect for all members of your partner's family. They were the greatest influence on your spouse's development. Their personalities, quirks, beliefs, rituals, and behaviors formed the world that your spouse grew up in. Family members are cultural translators, and can help you to become fluent in the language of your partner. You can earn their respect by treating them, your spouse and even yourself well. Know that family members will be protective of your spouse, have grief over losing their more central position in his/her life, and try to preserve a family history. Understand the intentions behind these behaviors and you will become more respectful during conflict.

You and your spouse are changing the formula of the family, and everyone is adjusting and shifting

their positions. You and your spouse need to come together and sort out your preferences for family contact. Decide how much time you want to spend together with family and apart, and determine boundaries of communication: what is shared information and what is private, etc. Discuss your vision for your future. You may not agree 100% on all of these issues but the more you present a united front and communicate your expectations, the more clarity you give others in how to respect your needs as a couple.

Traditions, rituals, and holidays are all forms of family meaning-making. These events help shape your identity as family. It is important as a couple to decide what traditions are meaningful to each of you. Collectively, you decide what traditions you want to continue as part of the family legacy and what new traditions you want to create on your own. Again, if these preferences are communicated with respect and acknowledgement of shared histories, most family members can adapt with you. If traditions and rituals seem dismissed or rejected out of hand, expect family members to feel a sense of loss and hurt.

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If you have children or are planning to have children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins have titles because they do have inherent roles within the family. As a couple, discuss what expectations are around these roles in regard to certain issues such as discipline, safety, influences, etc. Discuss your histories and also your dreams of a future family. Again, if you discuss your vision together, these expectations will be clear to other family members and will help to determine how they should behave. Remember that some individuals have their own dreams of the role they inherited that may conflict with yours. It is important to acknowledge others for who they are rather than who you would like them to be.

Remember you belong to a greater family. Ask them to support you and care for your partnership. They can become your greatest marital supporters. Remember that this culture clash may make you want to defect from your family country from time to time, but we all know that a sense of "home" comes from a sense of family. Enjoy the journey!