

Navigating complicated relationships with your in-laws

I often joke with my clients about running a support group titled “How to deal with your in-laws” and the first topic would be: setting boundaries. While we laugh at the idea, the truth is that navigating your relationship with your partner’s parents is often complex. There are some of us that have hit the jackpot when it comes to in-laws, while others are juggling a new baby or second child and the feelings and intensity that comes with your extended family. Here are some common themes.

Common In-Law Themes

Unrealistic Expectations in the Early Days: If you are pregnant and expecting your first child, there is heightened excitement in the family, especially if your baby will be the first grandchild (cue the opening scene from Lion King). With that excitement, there might also be unrealistic expectations from family members. For example, my family sat in the waiting room of the hospital until two in the morning waiting for my son to be born so maybe I shouldn't be the one giving advice!

Try This: What I tell my clients is to think about what is best for you and always remember you can change your mind. If you want family to visit, make sure you are meeting your needs and not the needs of others. Another option is to [set expectations and boundaries](#) before the baby is born, such as not having any visitors at the hospital or telling family when they can come and how long they can stay. This is where setting boundaries often starts and allows you to make decisions about what is best for you and your family.

Visitors vs. Helpers: One of my favorite and most important questions to ask when it comes to this topic is: Are they helpers or visitors? (Stolen from [NAPS](#)). You will learn this right away if your in-laws are helpers if they come to visit and offer to hold the baby while you shower, or show up with meals for the week, or jump right into folding laundry. Others will visit and likely hold the baby for a little while, take some pictures and then be on their way.

Try this: As your kids get older, you start to notice if your child gets excited when their grandparent(s) show up at the door. Do they (if able) get down on the ground and play and read a book? Is it abundantly clear that your child is loved and felt special in their presence or is there something else going on? If the answer is no and you notice things about their interactions that you don't love or feel, make a mental note of that and see if it continues. If they are coming by to say they came by, then maybe you start to think about your visits and how it makes you feel – and perhaps you let those feelings lead the way when inviting or accepting visitors (or helpers!). Again, the focus is about what is best for you and your family.

Unsolicited Advice: This starts the second you tell people you are pregnant and with in-laws, it may sound something like ‘when I was pregnant...’. Whether it’s commentary on how you choose to feed your baby, how much help you have (or don’t have) compared to when they had children, what schools you pick, there’s a comment and opinion about everything from nearly everyone. I tell my clients to accept opinions from only a select few trusted friends or family. Everyone else? I have a great game [Sarah Harmon](#) taught me.

Try this: Everytime you get unsolicited advice from someone outside your inner circle (the five people who choose to receive advice from), put \$1 in a jar. Then, when the baby is born you can go out with your partner or treat yourself. I’ve shared with clients as a way to almost radically accept that unsolicited advice is coming and maybe you chuckle when it happens because it’s going towards a spa day! You can do this until your kids are 18 because the comments and advice will likely come from in-laws especially when the relationship is challenging as they try to ‘help’ you raise your child.

Can you radically accept your in-laws?

When you think about radical acceptance, it’s about practicing a conscious effort to honor your feelings and oftentimes mourning a loss. In many ways, when we radically accept a situation, we are mourning the loss of something we either had or wished we had. For some of us, that’s a relationship with a mother-in-law. There can also be feelings of anger and sadness about not getting the relationships we had hoped for in our partner’s family when getting married. Mourning that loss and accepting what is can be liberating.

There are times when mental illness factors in and it’s accepting what comes with that. With my clients, at times there are symptoms of a personality disorder such as narcissistic personality disorder. A close friend of mine, who is a mom of three, was recently talking to me about her relationship with her mother-in-law and she shared the following: “She’s a narcissist...I feel like when I realized that everything made sense and was easier to understand that it’s truly not us (her and her husband)”. So, regardless of what struggles you encounter with your in-law relationships, practicing radical acceptance for who they are while also protecting yourself with firm boundaries is success – and something worth working for.

If you need support with your family relationships or setting boundaries, request a [free consult](#) and get the support you deserve.