

how to have
conversations
with your spouse
about their parents

A GUIDE FOR NAVIGATING DIFFICULT TOPICS



We get it...

Dealing with your in-laws isn't always easy. Your in-laws may be very different from you. They have a "never waste food, eat what's prepared" mentality. You have a healthy food conscience. They have traditions they'll die before they break. You're looking to form your own traditions. They're spontaneous. You like to prepare. The relationship can cause anxiety, stress, and tension in your marriage.

Talking with your spouse about their parents can be full of landmines waiting to blow up in your face. You want to have a solid, healthy relationship with your in-laws. But you also want to create your own thriving marriage and family.

You and your spouse can get on the same page regarding how your family and marriage will operate. You can work together to develop and maintain healthy in-law relationships. This guide will give you some tips on ground rules for discussing your in-laws, setting boundaries, and addressing possible offenses that may come. In the end, we're here to help you have peaceful and productive conversations with your spouse. We also want to help you know when you need to gracefully bow out of a tough conversation.

Things to Remember

- ◆ *You're talking about your spouse's family. These aren't conversations your spouse looks forward to. Be sensitive.*
- ◆ *Managing this relationship will be ongoing. You'll grow. Your family may grow. People change. Situations change. One conversation will not solve every problem forever.*
- ◆ *Your marriage is the PRIMARY relationship. One Team. Same Team. That's a point you both must agree on.*

A Few Guidelines

Chances are, if you've tried to have a productive conversation with your spouse about their parents, you know the importance of having a few ground rules. There are some basic guidelines that are helpful if both of you will follow them in every conversation! These might include:

Focus on behavior and actions, not Mom or Dad.

Use “I-statements” as much as possible.

“I feel (emotion) when your parent does (behavior).” Instead of, “YOUR mother always (behavior).”

Respect one another.

Never let your emotions get in the way of respecting each other's thoughts, emotions, and desires.

It's okay to take a break.

Accept that there are times you may need to pause the conversation and revisit it at a later time.

You and your spouse should talk about and agree on these rules before you start your conversation.

The Must-Have Convos

Let's get ahead of the defensive, high-stress discussions surrounding in-laws that happen in the moment, when tensions are high. **Instead, schedule a time with your spouse to talk through these common issues:**

Boundaries

Setting boundaries with your in-laws can help you and your in-laws understand your levels of comfort, establish your own family structure, and actually cultivate healthy relationships between everyone. Setting boundaries and sticking to them lets your spouse know they are the priority and that you'll do whatever it takes to protect the marriage. **Here's how to start the conversation:**

SAY

Hey, honey. I noticed that your mom stopped by yesterday without giving us a heads-up. It made me a little uncomfortable because we were in the middle of some great family time (or I had some other things I was trying to get done yesterday). I don't want to stop your mom from coming over, but I would really appreciate it if she could respect that spontaneous visits don't work well for us. Would you talk to her about calling and asking if it's a good time to drop in or asking us when is a good time? What do you think?

Pro Tip:

Focus on the action itself and what works best for the family. Present solution but also ask for your spouse's input.



The Holidays

Holidays are a special time. In-laws may have their own holiday expectations that may or may not mesh with what you and your spouse have in mind. If you and your spouse don't discuss how you will spend the holidays, then tension, division, and anger can cause significant rifts in your marriage. Agreeing on how you will spend the holidays can help you look back on your holidays with joy and happiness. **Here's how to start the conversation:**

SAY

Babe, Thanksgiving and Christmas are coming. I want us to enjoy the holiday season. Can we talk about what we want to do this season? Your family and my family may have expectations of us, but I want us to make sure that we are using our time in a way that helps us look forward to the holidays and not dread them.

Other Possibilities:

- *Stay home*
- *See everyone the day before or the day after*
- *Alternate years visiting each other's families*
- *Host the holidays and invite both families*



Negative Comments About You (daughter-in-law or son-in-law)

When an in-law says something negative about you, especially behind your back, it can destroy trust. This can make it difficult to be in each other's company. The other spouse can find themselves trying not to take sides between their parents and their partner, which can be tough. Talking about it lets your spouse know you have their back. It provides peace and security in marriage. **Here's how to start the conversation:**

SAY

Sweetie, I heard your mom tell your sister that she thought I was being controlling. I don't think she meant for me to hear it, but it really hurt my feelings. When she says things like that, it makes it difficult for me to want to spend time with her. Can we talk about how to deal with this? It makes it hard to trust her and I don't want to feel like that.



Parenting

You and your spouse have an idea of how you'd like to raise your children. At times, in-laws can move beyond supporting to meddling and being critical of your parenting. Talking to your spouse about your in-laws' role with your kids can help you be on one page when it comes to dealing with the in-laws regarding parenting. **Here's how to start the conversation:**

SAY

Hey love, can we talk? Does it bother you that your parents don't seem to follow our wishes regarding our kids? It makes me feel like they don't respect us as parents. I'd like to figure out a way to address it so they can enjoy their grandchildren without us worrying about them critiquing everything we do as parents.

Give Me A Break

Talking about in-laws can be really touchy. There are times when the conversation stops being useful. It's becoming too personal. Someone has become defensive. Emotions are too intense. Or you're just at a standstill. It happens. Not every issue gets resolved with one talk.

Stepping back from talking and resuming the conversation at a later time might be the best course of action. This can keep you from verbally attacking one another and saying things that are damaging to the relationship.

If you find yourself needing to park the conversation and pick it up later, let your spouse know:

SAY

We're not getting anywhere right now. I'm a little too emotional right now. I care about this marriage too much to say something that'll damage it. I need to park this conversation and pick it back up later.

Pro Tip:

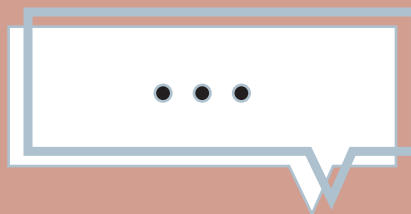
Take the initiative to park a conversation and pick it back up at a certain time. But don't accuse your spouse of being the reason.



Bonus Questions For A Fun Convo!

It's ok if not every conversation about your in-laws is focused on an issue! In fact, it can help both you and your spouse appreciate each other's families if you spend some time learning more about them. **Here are a few questions you can use to get to know your spouse's family a little better:**

- ◆ ***What's your favorite memory with your parents?***
- ◆ ***Do you see any of your parent's personality qualities within yourself?***
- ◆ ***What's one thing I can do to show your parents that I want to be a part of your family?***
- ◆ ***How have your parents shown their love for you?***
- ◆ ***Name one tradition from your family that you want to carry over into our family.***
- ◆ ***What's your favorite thing about your mom? Your dad?***
- ◆ ***What's your favorite thing about my mom? My dad?***
- ◆ ***How can you and I make sure we keep open communication between ourselves about each other's parents?***



For more relationship resources, visit

FIRSTTHINGS.ORG