

Creating Healthy Ties with In-laws and Extended Families

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I. Newly Married Couples Should Leave Their Parents and Cleave unto Their Spouse

1. Genesis 2:24—Leave father and mother and cleave unto wife.
2. Elder Marvin J. Ashton—clarifying meaning of Genesis 2:24
 - a. Children shouldn't abandon parents.
 - b. Parents shouldn't domineer children.
3. President Spencer W. Kimball—
 - a. Married children should confide in and counsel with their spouse.
 - b. Establish own household separate from parents.
 - c. Counsel from outside sources should be considered prayerfully together.

II. Helping Newly Married Couples Create a Marital Identity

1. First task of a newly married couple is to separate from the families in which they grew up.
2. Parents must give the newly married couple time to adjust and allow them to be independent.
 - a. They should help define and protect boundary of new couple.
3. President Spencer W. Kimball—comments on Genesis 2:24
4. Married couples should discuss how they will protect and maintain their own boundaries.
5. Parents can help by genuinely not pressuring their grown children to be at every family gathering, even though they will be missed.

6. Enmeshment—a process in which parents and children feel they always have to be together and to not be so is a personal affront
 - a. If married children are having enmeshment difficulties with their parents and in-laws, they might want to
 1. First, express love to the parents for all they do.
 2. Explain that they have a need to further strengthen their couple identity.
 3. Explain how the expectations for being with the family are getting in the way of their couple relationship.
7. Closeness—Parents who are secure in their relationships with their children understand that married children can be emotionally close without always having to be present.
8. Triangulation is created when communication either builds a stronger relationship with the parent than with the spouse or excludes the spouse.

III. Accepting Differences

1. Demonstrating humor, exercising patience, overlooking small irritations, and looking for the positive can help in dealing with differences.
2. Difference is something that can be anticipated and even looked forward to because of its potential for creating growth in family members.

IV. Including New Spouses in the Extended Family

1. A primary issue for new spouses is how parents and other family members include a new person in their family system.
2. Research shows that lack of marital approval, in-law blaming or triangulation, intrusion, forcing loyalty issues, holding grudges, and refusing to redefine one's role as a parent are related to poor in-law relationships and jeopardize the marriage of a child.
 - a. Eighty-percent of couples in failed marriages had not gained the approval or support of parents to marry.
3. Strong marriages are built by what couples choose to do once they are married and by what parents and siblings on both sides do to support them.
4. It is important for parents-in-law to find ways to personally build relationships with their children-in-law as individuals.
5. Stronger bonds are formed when in-law children call their in-law parents Dad and Mom.
6. It is wise for parents to see their child's new in-laws as complementary rather than competitive replacements.
7. The more an individual can learn the unspoken rules in the prospective spouse's family, the easier it will be to feel included.
8. In cases of abuse, spouses may need to counsel together to determine how much contact, if any, is appropriate.
9. Adult married children can improve relationships with their in-laws by setting boundaries that help ensure their marriage is strong and happy.
10. Gloria Horsley listed six things every in-law should avoid:
 - a. Giving advice

- b. Criticizing
- c. Pinning down specific reasons they are missing a family event
- d. Criticizing or taking over discipline of grandchildren
- e. Trying to control everyone and everything, including children's beliefs
- f. Communicating unclearly and indirectly

V. Summary

1. Parents-in-law will do well to:
 - a. Accept differences
 - b. Encourage marital identity by helping develop and maintain the marital boundary of children
 - c. Only offer advice when it is sought
 - d. Be accepting rather than critical
 - e. Work toward developing a personal, positive relationship with a son- or daughter-in-law, creating opportunities to spend time one on one
2. If in an estranged relationship, forgiveness may be necessary.
 - a. Improved relationships will require time and effort.

Outline and presentation adapted from:

Hart, C. H., Newell, L., Walton, E., & Dollahite, D. (2005). *Helping and Healing Our Families: Principles & Practices Inspired by the Proclamation to the World*. SLC: Deseret Book.