

it's all relative

Tips for engineering a successful in-law meeting

BY HILLARY QUINN

THE RING'S ON YOUR FINGER, the wedding's on the horizon, and you and your fiancé are madly in love. It's only natural to want everyone around you to be in a state of bliss, too, especially your parents, who will be gaining a son—not to mention an entire set of in-laws—in the process. But those initial introductions can be stressful. What if your parents take an instant dislike to his? What if nobody talks? Here, how to ensure your families have a first encounter of the smooth kind.

keep it casual

If your parents didn't already meet while you were dating, then an official introduction is inevitable. The formality of this meet-and-greet is entirely up to you. Just bear in mind that sitting around a stiff, elegantly appointed dinner table can be intimidating and cause awkward silences. A better bet is to invite everyone to a more relaxed meal, like a Sunday brunch, a late-afternoon barbecue, or a potluck dinner—settings that are causal and more conducive to easygoing conversations. "The venue you choose also depends on how comfortable you and your fiancé are with your entertaining skills," points out Shoya Zichy, a New York-based relationship coach and author of *Getting Along With Your In-Laws* (available at www.leadershipq.com). "Ideally, you want to put yourselves in a situation where everyone's best qualities come out."

Sarah Mullins and her fiancé, Alex Taylor, found that a low-key lunch at a French restaurant near their Seattle home was the perfect place for their first parental gathering. "We mixed up the seating so that everyone had a chance to chat with someone new," recalls Mullins. "It was so exciting listening to everyone really relating." Whatever setting you choose, Zichy cautions against wrapping the meeting around a holiday. "Those occasions are already too charged."



talking the talk

Once you've got the cast of characters gathered, it's your job to get the party started. A guaranteed ice breaker: pointing out what the individuals have in common. Say something like: "Mom, did you know that Louise has a great interest in oil painting?" or "Louise, my mom teaches elementary school art." Gina Shaw and Evan Bergstrom, of Hoboken, New Jersey, found that this technique worked well when their parents first met. "It was a few months before our wedding," recalls Shaw. "Our mothers hit it off immediately because their favorite topic was their children. The fathers took a little bit longer, but finally bonded over football."

"You have to become a facilitator," says Zichy, "and that also means managing conflict in a group or helping to prevent it in the first place." Try to steer the conversation away from traditional hot buttons such as politics, religion, sex, and money. If you see discussions taking (Continued on page 258)

name calling

Will it be Mom, Mother, Marge, or Mrs. Smith? The best way to find out what your mother-in-law would prefer being called is to ask her directly. "If you sense that being direct will make your future mother-in-law uncomfortable, have your spouse find out what her preference is," says Zichy. The flip side of this occurs when your mother-in-law asks you to call her Mom and you're uneasy doing so. "Tell her you'd prefer to call her by her first name," advises Forward. "If she's hurt, say, 'I'm sorry, but it just doesn't feel okay.'" Being honest is the best way to avoid years of "ummm" at family dinners.

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a dangerous turn, cut them off at the pass. "It's usually pretty obvious if people are headed toward discord," says Susan Forward, a psychologist and author of *Toxic In-laws* (HarperCollins, 2001), who suggests saying something like, "I think it's better that we don't discuss this subject because nobody's mind is going to change and feelings will only get hurt. Besides, there are so many other things we can talk about."

On the other hand, you don't have to pretend that differences are nonexistent. "If you can show how everyone's life can be enriched by learning about other traditions and religions, then you can enhance the conversation," says Forward. For example, if your families are of different faiths, ask questions about one another's religion. "It's best to get it out in the open and talk about it," advises Forward.

family feud

Occasionally, no matter how hard their kids try to massage a meeting, parents simply won't hit it off. In fact, ill-will between in-laws can occur even before they actually meet. The reasons can vary from preconceived prejudices based on socioeconomic status, religion, or politics to hearsay like, "I understand that Jim's dad really likes his beer." If you're faced with this situation, you or your groom should speak up and put in a good word for the person on the defense. For example, if your parents complain that your groom's mom and dad seem blue collar and unsophisticated, you might point out that even though Jim's mom never had a career, she's a devoted mother and local volunteer. "You can easily change perceptions of one another," says Zichy. "It's amazing how much power a third party has."

Sometimes, however, all your efforts are futile, in which case you need to simply make the best of an unfortunate situation. "When my husband proposed to me, his parents were very upset," recalls Donna Rakin, of Newton, Massachusetts. "They hated the fact that my parents were divorced, that my father had remarried

not once, but twice, and that I was Jewish." When it became clear that Donna's in-laws weren't going to come around, she decided that a prewedding gathering of the parents was out of the question. "The moms met at my bridal shower, which was strained but polite," she explains. The fathers, however, weren't introduced until the wedding. Each family sat at separate tables with their own clergy, who had officiated the interfaith service. "We were determined to enjoy our day, so we didn't push his parents to be in pictures they didn't want to be in or make a fuss when they left the reception early," says Rakin. "They made their choice, we made ours."

Courage of conviction and team spirit is the best way to cope with unfriendly families.

Forward agrees that courage of conviction and team spirit is the best way to cope with unfriendly families. "The one alliance that must stay firm is between you and your partner," she explains. "If your in-laws see that you are divided, they may move in and grab the reigns. But when you present a united front, it's extraordinary how much control you gain."

stepparent solutions

It's hard enough organizing a successful meeting between two sets of parents. So it's not surprising that adding stepparents to the mix can raise tension levels to a new high. Some counselors advocate including the whole gang at the first family gathering—just be sure to ask everyone ahead of time if they're comfortable with this scenario. Other experts, like Forward, believe that an all-inclusive meeting is too stressful. "When it comes to ex-spouses, there can be a lot of emotional heat," she points out, "which could create havoc during a dinner with the in-laws." Her solution? "Plan two separate events. It will make things a lot easier for everyone involved." ♦

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