

Let's Talk About It

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When In-Laws Get in The Way

Question: Dear Sir: To what extent should mother and father in-law, and all other in-laws get involved in a relative's marriage? I believe that they should keep out of it. What do you think?

Answer: Dear friend, you are correct. In-laws are not to interfere in their relative's marriages. The Bible clearly states that children should leave their parents and cleave to their spouses. The newly weds are to create their own castle with their own rules, traditions, and practices. Whenever there is interference from the outside, there is bound to be confusion.

A PARENTAL PROBLEM

To understand this subject let me explain certain principles of parenting that are for the purpose of raising children to become self-reliant. First of all, one of the first responsibilities of parents is to teach a child to think critically and independently. From an early age a child should be encouraged to think and act on his/her own. This first step towards developing an independent thinking child is the parent listening to and respecting the questions (though simple and frivolous at times) of the inquisitive child. Second, it is by giving the child simple assignments and responsibilities that he/she is held accountable for. As the child age increases, so should his/her responsibilities. Thus, by the time the child reaches adulthood, he/she would be thinking and acting independently.

We must be reminded that the parenting relationship is the only relationship designed by God to come to an end. God never intended for parents to continue giving instructions and guidance to their adult child. When children become independent adults, it means that they are no longer dependent on their parents emotionally, financially, or intellectually. They are to act and think separately and apart from their parents. As children move from dependent adolescents to independent adults, parental role changes from parenting to mentoring. However, we must note carefully that the parenting role is by default and the mentoring role is by selection. That is children have no choice who their parents are, but they do have a choice who will be their mentors. Ideally, if parents raise their children in the right way, they will become the primary mentors for their children.

Sadly, however, many parents are raising their children to depend on them. Some parents act as if their children cannot think and do things without their input. This is sad.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE

Let me share with you what I believe are the differences between a parent and a mentor.

A parent gives unsolicited advice and counsel. A mentor gives solicited advice and counsel. A parent provides physical protection (house) and food for growing children. A mentor has no responsibility to provide physical protection or food. A parent is by default a baby sitter, teacher, nurse and doctor to his children. A mentor is a retired volunteer, available, if needed, for support and assistance to the independent adult children in their parenting role. A parent has no choice regarding his/her tasks and functions. A mentor can choose whether or not to get involved.

PARENTS MUST LET GO

I took the time to explain how parents can help their children become independent. However, the simple truth is that parents must let go of their adult children whether they are married or not. They must push them out of the house as the eagle's pushes their baby eagles out of their nests to fly. Married sons need to cut the navel strings from their moms. Married daughters need to cease making unnecessary telephone calls to mom. Parents must stop probing into the private lives of their children. They must give their children the space to do what they were able (the parent) to do—build their own nest. They must allow their children the privilege of failure and the rewards of trial and error.

What about the other relatives? Other relatives and in-laws can be a pain in the neck to many marriages. They should also keep their distance.

WHAT IF THERE IS A PROBLEM

What if parents or in-laws suspect or know of a problem the couple is having? Should they get involve? They first must give the opportunity for the couple to volunteer or request their involvement in the situation. They man not enter their lives without permission. If the parent or in-law notices that the couple is in misery, pain, or deep frustration, the in-law can gingerly state what they observe and give their concern. The principle is do not force your way into the privacy of the home.

On the other hand, where there is serious emotional and physical abuse this is the time when loving relatives can play a significant role. Remembering that safety of the victim is of utmost priority, relatives can wisely give their help, protection and advice.

Yes still, because of the over-involvement of in-laws in a marriage, couples have great tension, problems and pain. Therefore, in-laws are to be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

HOW TO LIVE?

How can a couple live and grow as a single unit, away from mom and dad and in-laws? Here are a few points to consider: 1) A couple needs to understand the autonomy of their new marital unit and their need to act and think without in-law's involvement.

The problem is when one spouse is always sharing family business with someone else. This should never happen. 2) Ideally, newly weds should live away from parents and in-laws. They should live in a different house, and if possible at a considerable distance from in-laws. 3) A couple is not ready for marriage if they cannot afford to live separately from mom and dad. Marriage is for well-adjusted, independent thinking, emotionally and financially mature adults. 4) A couple needs to set up impregnable barriers so that inquisitive in-laws may not break through. How do couples build this barrier? By honoring and respecting for each other. By daily nurturing and caring their relationship. By their closeness and support for each other when they are with relatives and friends.

IN-LAWS CAN BE VALUABLE

Although in-laws should not interfere in their relatives' marriages, yet if there is need for help financially or emotionally, parents and in-laws can give the best help and advice. An objective, loving parent or in-law can be the best asset for a growing young couple. Sometimes young couples may not want persons outside the family to get involved. This is okay. However, the in-laws must not force open the door of involvement but just be ready to assist when needed.

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