

Mother Nurture

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Issues with Relatives

I've got hassles with my extended family. My husband's parents were pretty strict, so that's his inclination, but I'm trying to raise our children in more of an attachment parenting kind of way. So I get a lot of unwanted advice and comments about me "spoiling" our kids, etc.

Oh dear!

When children come along, relatives can be an incredible blessing or something of a curse – and sometimes both at the same time.

Happily, there are lots of ways to keep things on a good footing with the relatives.

Have confidence – Remember that you and your husband have the final say about how you'll raise your children. The bottom-line is that you can limit access to your child if you have to – which is a big threat to most relatives. Similarly, if need be, you can get off the phone quickly, change the subject if a conversation gets awkward, keep visits short, or intervene in an interaction between your child and a relative that's starting to go off the rails.

Be open-minded – Who knows: maybe they know something after all. You can listen without committing yourself, without giving away your right to do something different. You could try something new with a child and see if it works; if you think of it as simply an experiment, it won't seem so serious or tense. Hey, if it works, you'd want to know that, and if it doesn't, then you can say you tried it.

Become knowledgeable about parenting – Knowing the facts behind optimal parenting practices will put you on solid ground if there's a disagreement with your partner or his family. Rather than getting into a wrangle in which it's your opinion against their, you can calmly mention that researchers have established XYZ facts – which are the basis for your parenting style – and then move on to another topic.

Stick up for your child – and yourself – Definitely do not let relatives treat your children in any way that crosses a significant line. For example, if you were spanked as a child but you don't want that happening with your toddler, make that known to any relatives who are babysitting.

With your mate, it could help to establish some groundrules for how you'll deal with the relatives. Like agreeing to never bad-mouth each other. Or promising not to make firm commitments – from new parenting practices to holiday visits – without consulting each other first.

How to make family visits work

There's an old saying that fences make for good neighbors. Boundaries help people stay connected.

So, if need be, it's alright to put a time limit on visits. You can always find a face-saving explanation. For example, if the in-laws are coming over for the afternoon, you can let them know that you're going to have to leave the house at 6 pm for some kind of meeting.

Or let's say you are traveling to visit your husband's family, but you're concerned about it all getting a little overwhelming: set up your own transportation so you can get out of the house, arrange in advance for activities that will give you some breathing room (like a trip with the kids to a local attraction), and make sure you have a private room you can slip away to. Sometimes, staying in a motel nearby makes for the happiest visits.

How to get through an awkward situation

If things start getting tense:

- Try to stay calm and civil. Help yourself by imagining that a camera is recording you and will be played back later for all to see. Remember that how you conduct yourself can muddy the waters and undermine the high moral ground where you want to take your stand.
- Establish that differences are OK, that there are lots of ways to raise healthy happy productive children. You might say something like: "Sure, you may be right, I know lots of people have raised their children that way. It's that Bob and I have decided to do it a little differently."
- Narrow the issue. For example, rather than getting into a big debate about discipline, wayward youth today, and on and on, just say: "Oh, Bob and I certainly believe in discipline, in raising respectful well-behaved kids. It's simply that we're confident we can accomplish that without spanking them."
- Affirm your desire and intention to support your children in having a good, long relationship with their relatives.

Keep a sense of perspective – Keep in mind the big stakes on the table: a cordial relationship with the relatives that lasts for years and years – so try not to get upset, rigid, or argumentative about small issues. Let's say that it really matters to Grandma to get a hug, even though she smells funny to your two-year old daughter. Maybe it's alright to do everything within your power – including promising her a chocolate cake! – if she'll put up with that hug.

Think of encounters with the relatives as visits to another culture or country: local customs prevail, and it's usually not a big deal to observe them for a little while. Take the long view: most upsets with relatives work themselves out over time; often, a few years later, no one can remember exactly what everybody was so hot and bothered about!

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