

One big happy family...

Relationship therapist James Earl on avoiding conflict with the in-laws this holiday season.



Complaining about your mother-in-law sounds like the beginning of a tired old comedy routine, but there are some really good reasons we may find things difficult with our partner's family of origin. Understanding these reasons, and in particular what can lead to tension, will help us reduce conflict and hopefully have a great holiday break together.

It is quite common nowadays that two partners meeting for the first time may both have children from a previous relationship. We refer to a 'blended' family. But, ALL couple relationships are a type of blended family – because a couple represents the meeting of two families of origin. And, if we assume – as we should – that each family is different, with its own rules, roles, aims and outlooks, we can see that we all have a real job of 'blending' when we come together.

We have all probably made the mistake of organising a party where

we invite two groups of friends from very different parts of our lives (for example, childhood friends with friends from university or current colleagues). The mix is rarely successful – because you feel you are being a different version of yourself with each group. Two families coming together is a version of this same problem.

To illustrate the differences, ask yourself this question: what was your family's motto? Most families don't actually have an explicit motto, of course, but it is amazing how people often recognise their own family's

guiding rule. For example, 'just try your best'. Or 'don't make a fuss'. Or... (can you fill yours in?). What would your partner say was their family's motto? Maybe you can recognise it more easily than they can!


In addition to a motto, every family generally assigns roles to its members. For example, Sophie is the clever one, Jonny is the joker, and Fred is the – well, Fred never sticks to anything.

When we go back home as adults, we tend to maintain our adult identities for an hour or two, but after a short while we get sucked back in to these former roles – much

to our own chagrin and often to our partner's bemusement. It's as if the family is trying, unconsciously, to re-establish the old order. If we have spent a period in our adult lives getting out from under the weight of these earlier mottos and identities, it can be quite an effort to stay ourselves. We may be shocked by the way our partner is being treated, or how they are behaving.

Ask your partner before the visit: what role did you get assigned? What roles do you think your sibs took? In my family, what do you think my role was?

In some families, the impetus to return to an older order of things may lead to the outside partner being perceived as some kind of threat, leading to a degree of passive hostility. There are always unconscious dynamics in families, which can lead to negative behaviour that is, apparently, inexplicable.

All this can be amplified in a more conscious way if, for example, there was a family narrative about the type of partner they wanted for their child. An expectation which you may not fulfil (sorry!).  jamesearl.com

Keep the peace

The rules of behaviour that follow from all this must be adapted to every unique family situation, but we can pick out broad principles.

- 1 ALLOW** your partner to b*tch about their family, but please don't join them in the complaint. ('I can criticise my mum, but you can't.') Instead, real empathy is to listen and 'walk with' your partner.
- 2 ANTICIPATE** a degree of culture-clash (this is, after all, normal as we've seen). Talk about it with your partner, in the ways we've mentioned, before and after a visit.
- 3 ACCEPT** that any hostility from the other family probably says more about them than it does about you. So think: ducks, backs.
- 4 REMEMBER**, you don't need to be best buddies with your partner's parents or sibs – just polite and warm-ish. Anything more is great good luck.

5 EMPHASISE that you and your partner are the main players in any family set-up, and that you can – if need be – see the extended families as bit-part players. So write your own script as a couple and don't let families have undue influence. While you should feel able to disagree with a partner, it's not a good idea to take sides with mum or dad against them. At least, not in company!

Enjoy the holiday season, and may your 'blended' families be happy and harmonious!

