

STAY ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE (IN)-LAWS

You can't choose your FAMILY. And you can't choose his either. Here's how to LOVE, comfort, honour and not kill... your in-laws BY **JO USMAR**

Whether you've been together for five minutes or five years, you're going to have to deal with your partner's parents at some point. Sigh. And we know from our personal experience, and watching *Meet The Fockers*, that just because two people raised the love of your life it doesn't mean they're not raging loons with strong opinions on how you should dress/speak/make mashed potato.

Yep, it happens to us all, even the celebs. According to recent reports, there were in-law wars going down with Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes as they headed towards divorce.

"In-laws have the frequent access of close family members, but without the shared history," says psychologist Dr Jessamy Hibberd. "Plus there's such pressure to get on with each other that emotions can run high and it's easy for people to feel hurt."

It's no surprise then that research found that 60 per cent of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships are described as "uncomfortable", "infuriating", "depressing", "draining" or "simply awful". Eek. Seems we all need survival tips on how to lay down the law with the in-laws...

Wedding WOES

Breaking the (in)-law It's two weeks before your wedding and his mum's turned up to show off her outfit for the big day. Her fancy, white outfit. Fume. "Oh, you're wearing a white dress too?", she exclaims. "I had no idea." And on top of that, you're still suffering with engagement party flashbacks – her husband necking all the free champers while flirting with your best mate. If they behaved like that on the warm-up, what's the big day going to hold?

In their defence "Weddings are big events where two families are forced to come together and this can be pretty stressful," says Dr Hibberd. "And his mum's also having to come to terms with the fact she's been replaced as the most important woman in her son's life."

In-law-proof plan "Have a dinner party for both families before the wedding," suggests Dr Hibberd. Sit members from each family in alternate seats to mix things up, and pop place cards that have three random facts (nice ones) about them in each setting. It'll encourage bonding. Oh and take her shopping. Sharpish!

Whadda cow, she knows I'm vegan



Money TALKS

Breaking the (in)-law Your man's folks are minted and always pay for everything, leaving you feeling indebted. They also buy you flash prezzies when all you can afford to get *them* is a jumbo box of Celebrations. Then there's your flat deposit they helped out with. Of course they don't mention any of it. Well, only at every other family gathering.

In their defence A recent survey found that eight out of 10 first-time house buyers in London are being forced to ask their parents for financial help.** Damn you, recession! And when money changes hands, things can get complicated. "People sometimes think that when they've given you their money, they have the right to dictate how it's being spent. This assumption of control can then spill over into other areas of your life," warns Dr Hibberd.



Roast beef
darling, your
favourite!

Not-so-great GRANDPARENTS

Breaking the (in)-law Hurray – you’ve got kids! Everyone’s excited. Perhaps a little *too* excited. Suddenly your in-laws are in your house. Every day. Yep, they’re there dishing out endless advice, and looking surprised whenever you do something that’s not how they used to do it. Cue constantly gritted teeth.

In their defence According to research, one in four grandparents look after their grandkids while the parents go out to work***. So it can be hard for them to recognise boundaries if they’re used to playing a big role.

In-law-proof plan It’s time to become the boss, and treat your in-laws like employees, with the nicest benefits of course. Every month, sit down and work out which days they’ll be at yours, and set boundaries that suit everyone. As well as scheduling the timetable, review the rules for the children, stressing that they must be stuck to, while taking on their feedback for dealing with your brood. You can even reward the in-laws with bonus kid time, if you want to use a merit system that is. Gold stars all round.

Sleepless SLEEPOVER

Breaking the (in)-law You’re staying with his parents. Oh, but you didn’t take your shoes off when you came in. Forgot to use a coaster. And laughed loudly at a snap of his dad with a mullet. None of which went down well. Whoops.

In their defence “It’s tricky when you’re thrown into an alien family home, where they don’t do things your usual way,” says Dr Hibberd. “But you’re in their domain, so you have to follow their lead.” Sorry.

In-law-proof plan That said... “You and your other half *have* to be a partnership, so he can’t just revert to being a kid in his parents’ house,” adds Dr Hibberd. Get him to train you up in the ways of his childhood home. Act out the most problematic of scenarios – such as not sitting in “dad’s chair” or mistaking the female dog for a boy – before you visit, so you’ll play the role of “perfect daughter-in-law” so well Emma Stone will be jel of your acting skills. **f**

In-law-proof plan Only borrow money for a specific purpose, thus avoiding awkward “hope that money came in useful?” questions. Also, draw up a repayment schedule so you all know when it’s being settled. For free help, visit Financialadvice.co.uk, where qualified financial advisers will answer all your questions while helping you come up with a plan that doesn’t involve any guilt-tripping.

Food for THOUGHT

Breaking the (in)-law His mum whips up a massive bowl of pasta for dinner even though she knows you’re gluten intolerant. Then when you return the favour and cook for them, she sighs “sympathetically” saying: “It’s so hard to stop roast

chicken drying out,” before leaving her plate virtually untouched. Very polite. Not.

In their defence “Food is a core part of family life, so criticising someone’s cooking can feel very personal,” explains Dr Hibberd. For many people, especially women (as it harks back to traditional gender roles), being able to cook for their boyfriend or family is a display of their ability as a homemaker. Therefore, rejecting his mum’s food can really upset her.

In-law-proof plan His mum probably thought you were talking about a new-fangled dance craze when you mentioned gluten. Be clear, ahead of time, about what you can and can’t eat. Buy a specialist

cookbook and knock up some gluten-free treats to show her what your diet does include. After a few recipes she’ll be purring like Mary Berry.

MODEL MOTHER

If none of the above works, download the *Voodoo Mother In Law* app (69p, iTunes), and stick virtual pins in the old bat.