

## **Bicultural Families and the In-Law Connection**

Jokes and stories about “communication” with the in-laws in every culture and language go back generations in most families. In culturally homogeneous families, shared language and culture help mitigate the conflict from individual family member’s quirks and prejudices. Without a unifying culture and language, bicultural couples raising multicultural children have special challenges in their relationships with the in-laws.

While you and your spouse are creating your own balance of language and blended culture, your in-laws are competing with you for cultural influence on their grandchildren. Why? In many instances in-laws feel threatened because you as the daughter or son-in-law are culturally different even if they like you very much. In-laws do not have the relationship of trust and commitment with you that you and your spouse have with each other. In-laws are not in charge of and may have only limited influence with your children on the decisions which are culturally and emotionally dear to them such as; the language spoken at home, religious training, holiday celebration and food preparation. In-laws can be upset and want someone to blame. It is easier to blame their child’s spouse than get into conflict with their own child.

You and your spouse are charged with the task of gracefully absorbing comments and judgments which may seem unfair and unreasonable. Yes, you are in a cultural power struggle with your children as the prize. No, you cannot talk your in-laws out of their feelings about “the right way” to do things no matter how brilliant your philosophy and rationale about blended culture and bilingual families.

What will help facilitate a more harmonious relationship with your in-laws? Understand that there is a grieving process, often unconscious, as your in-laws watch grandchildren growing up with what they consider “foreign” even “unacceptable” customs and influences. You will see evidence of grieving in their judgments, and hurt feelings. You can’t alleviate their grief but you can avoid getting caught in the middle between your spouse and his/her parents. Strategize with your spouse and have him/her interact with your in-laws when there is conflict on cultural or childrearing issues. That will focus the real conflict back to their disappointment that your spouse is choosing a bicultural life style rather than their cultural life style. Support each other as a united couple. Try not to be defensive while being clear about your decisions as a couple. Consider creating as many opportunities as possible for your children to hear the stories, customs, and music and see the family pictures and art directly from your in-laws. The opportunity to pass on some of their cultural legacy to grandchildren can mitigate their irrational fear that all their traditions will be lost. Children through their openness and love in their relationships, have a way of bringing healing to conflicts.

There are times when a parent or in-law will have intense grief; losses or trauma which result in depression, mental health, or substance abuse problems. If you suspect this is the case with your in-law, seek the advice of a licensed mental health professional for problem solving and interventions.