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### What to do when you're in love but your partner's parents aren't in love with you

Relationship experts said that when parents disapprove of a partner, it can sometimes say more about their own long-standing beliefs and expectations than about the partner.



Parents' judgments of their child's partner can be shaped by their own life experiences or unresolved emotional wounds, relationship experts said. (Illustration: CNA/Samuel Woo)

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27 Dec 2025 09:30PM | (Updated: 29 Dec 2025 11:34PM)



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At the time, we had been dating for a year and while my brief encounters with his parents had been polite enough, I could sense they were not fully welcoming.

Initially, I chalked this up to me being oversensitive, but then I started to wonder if there was something I had done unintentionally to offend them.

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As I waited for his response, a part of me still hoped that I was overthinking the situation, but instead of receiving some reassuring words from my boyfriend, I was hit with a laundry list of what was wrong with me.

I can still feel the sting of him rattling off, without a pause, everything his parents disliked about me.

It seemed they could not understand what he saw in me, found it hard to reconcile that we did not share the same religious values and thought that I was just "not at his level".

In the days that followed, I was at a complete loss as to what to do or how to even feel about the whole situation.

Were they being biased in their assessment of me or did they have some valid points? Was there still a future here? Should I find a way to win them over or leave them be?

Even though these questions weighed on me, I didn't spend too much time mulling over them. We broke up almost immediately, concluding that the relationship was unlikely to work out given the lack of acceptance from his family.

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It took me months, however, to process the snock, which then turned into self-doubt and a sense of injustice.

If I were to be in a serious relationship in the future and take the next step with my partner, and find myself in such a situation, how should I navigate it and handle it delicately?

## WHY DISAPPROVAL HAPPENS

Relationship experts said that when parents disapprove of a partner, it can sometimes say more about their own long-standing beliefs and expectations than about the partner.

Ms Jean Chen, director of Relationship Matters, which provides family counselling, said that this tends to occur when there are significant differences when it comes to things such as religious beliefs, cultural outlook or spending habits.

For example, parents might feel upset that their son or daughter has to handle chores instead of leaving the task to a domestic worker, or if their grandchildren are raised in a certain way, such as referring to grandparents by their first name rather than "grandpa".

Ms Winny Lu Aldridge, couple and family therapist at Just2Hearts Counselling, said that parents' judgments can be shaped by their own life experiences or unresolved emotional wounds, especially if they have been through challenging relationships and they worry that their child might face similar hardships.

"In my experience, most parents genuinely want the best for their children," she added. "Their instinct to protect (their child) can be very strong, and this often shapes how they assess their child's partner."

Agreeing, Ms Chen of Relationship Matters cited an example of a mother who was abused in the past being more guarded towards her daughter's boyfriend and watching out for signs that he is treating her right.

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Aside from these past experiences, Ms Lu also said that parents may respond with disapproval out of fear of losing emotional closeness or influence when a new partner is introduced.

"Changes in family roles can trigger anxiety, and hostility may be a way to cope with that sense of loss," Ms Lu explained.

In some cases, disapproval can also be triggered by parents feeling disrespected or unappreciated by their child's partner.

"For example, if a wife pulls a long face about the endless number of toys that her mother-in-law has been buying for her children, her mother-in-law might feel unappreciated and retaliate in kind by being unaccepting or hostile," Ms Chen said.

Ms Lu said that such tensions can worsen when trust and emotional safety are compromised, with neutral or non-verbal cues such as facial expressions or silence being easily misinterpreted.

"When people expect criticism, they tend to hear it even when it is not intended. Over time, sensitivity during any interaction heightens."

Beyond the more obvious causes, there can also be deeper, less straightforward factors at play.

The experts said that family dynamics are complex and often beyond anyone's control, meaning that parental disapproval can sometimes arise for no clear reason.

## KEEPING LOVE AFLOAT

As with any relationship, clashes are inevitable, but it is the way they are managed that makes the difference.

Empathy, patience and a united approach from the couple helps to minimise tension with a partner's parents.

not belonging or not being valued.

Children often find themselves in the middle, having to balance loyalty to their partner with respect for their parents.

Ms Chen from Relationship Matters said that it would help to navigate this delicate position by first acknowledging and soothing hurt feelings on both sides with empathy, without immediately offering any new insights.

"It wouldn't be helpful to share objective views straight away as insights are hindered when one is overwhelmed by negative feelings," she said.

For instance, if a wife feels upset by her mother-in-law showering the grandchildren with toys, Ms Chen said it would help to first acknowledge the mother-in-law's love and intentions with empathy.

She cautioned against the wife immediately sharing her perspective on the need to minimise clutter, in order to create space for a calmer conversation on that later.

Many times, there are reasons behind such actions from the elders, Ms Chen said. For example, the mother-in-law might have hoped to give her grandchildren what she couldn't give her own children, or to find joy in their smiles to counter sadness she is experiencing.

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Ms Lu from Just2Hearts said that spouses or couples in a relationship can help by being supportive partners when adjusting to their parents' expectations and temperaments. This would involve listening carefully, validating their partner's feelings and staying calm instead of reacting defensively when friction occurs.

For the person being rejected by the partner's family, the experience can be deeply destabilising, triggering fears of not belonging or not being valued.

If the partner they look to for reassurance focuses instead on justifying their parents' behaviour, it can push them toward isolation, which only worsens stress and resentment.

However, the responsibility does not rest on one person alone.

"Couples need to see themselves as one united team," Ms Lu said. "When partners feel aligned, they can approach the parents together with clarity and respect, reducing misunderstandings and preventing either partner from feeling isolated."

Respecting your partner's family members does not have to come at the expense of your relationship. Setting boundaries can make room for both, ensuring that family ties are honoured while the couple's bond is given space to grow.

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## WHEN LOVE ISN'T ENOUGH

The harsh reality is that love alone cannot always heal the rifts around it.

Experts said that recognising when it is time to call it quits can sometimes be the healthiest choice to make especially before marriage, when fewer complications are involved.

A key warning sign that the family dynamic is unlikely to shift is when a partner consistently prioritises their parents' expectations over the relationship, avoids setting boundaries or asks you to endure rejection.

"Over time, patterns matter more than promises. Choosing whether to stay depends on whether there is real hope supported by action," Ms Lu said.

Agreeing, Ms Chen cautioned that if little or nothing changes before marriage, it can be healthier to walk away, because relationships often become harder to leave once deeper commitments are made.

While there is no definite mark for how long is "too long", prolonged emotional exhaustion may indicate that it is time to reconsider the relationship.

"Ultimately, a healthy relationship should feel like a place of safety, dignity, and mutual care," Ms Lu said.

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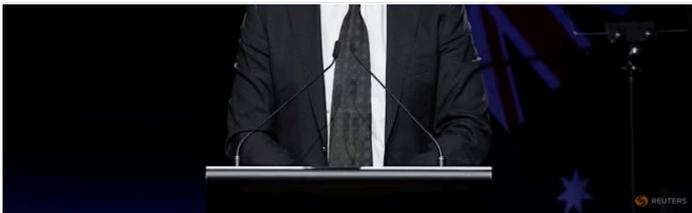


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