



Boundaries with In-Laws and Extended Family

An explainer, family expectations map, and boundary plan · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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At a glance

- In-law and extended family relationships can bring great support and great stress.
- Many conflicts come from different, unspoken expectations about roles, time, and decisions.
- Couples who agree on boundaries together, and present them as a team, tend to do best.

Why these relationships are complex

When you join a family through marriage or partnership, you also join its history, traditions, and expectations. In many cultures, including South Asian and other collectivist families, extended family may play a central role in daily life, decisions, and raising children. This can be a source of love and belonging, and also of tension.

Common pressure points

- How often to visit, call, or host
- Advice or criticism about parenting, cooking, or housekeeping
- Living arrangements, including joint family households
- Financial support or expectations
- Decisions about holidays, religion, or traditions
- Feeling caught between your partner and your parents

Thinking in systems

Family systems theory suggests that families work like an interconnected system, and that change in one part affects the whole. A useful idea is "differentiation": staying emotionally connected to family while still being able to make your own choices.

What the research says

Bowen family systems theory describes how families function as emotional units and how differentiation of self supports healthier relationships (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Gottman's research found that couples do better when partners show loyalty to each other and present a united front in family conflicts (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Tool: Our Family Expectations Map and Boundary Plan

Complete this with your partner when you're both calm.

Topic	My family's expectations	Your family's expectations	What we want
Visits and calls			
Holidays and traditions			
Parenting advice			
Money			
Living arrangements			
Decision-making			

Our boundary plan

The boundary we agree on:

Who will communicate it (usually the partner whose family it is):

What we'll say:

How we'll support each other if there's pushback:

Strategies to try

- **Each partner handles their own family.** Boundaries are often received better from one's own child.
- **Stay respectful.** You can honour elders and still decline requests.
- **Talk privately first.** Disagree with your partner in private, not in front of family.
- **Appreciate the good.** Notice and name the support extended family provides.
- **Pick your battles.** Not every difference needs a boundary.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Rehearse a united-front script.** Agree on exact words with your partner so you're both saying the same thing.
- **Find a cultural bridge.** Is there a respected elder or family member who understands both sides? Sometimes they can help carry a message gently.
- **Plan time-limited visits.** Agree on an arrival and departure time in advance, so visits feel manageable.
- **Write an appreciation note.** Expressing genuine appreciation can reduce tension and make boundaries easier to hear.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What did I learn growing up about family loyalty and obligation?

Where do I feel caught between my partner and my family?

What kind of relationship do I hope to have with my in-laws long term?

What do I need from my partner to feel supported?

When to reach out for support

If family tension is straining your relationship or your wellbeing, individual, couples, or family therapy can help. Our team understands cultural and intergenerational dynamics and offers therapy in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). The seven principles for making marriage work. Crown.

Kerr, M. E., & Bowen, M. (1988). Family evaluation: An approach based on Bowen theory. W. W. Norton.

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