

Relative peace

Be pleasant,
be cool and be prepared
for small talk at
family holiday gatherings

By Zach Dunkin

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As many as 2 million newly married couples will spend the upcoming Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays with their in-laws for the first time, and they will discover what millions before them have already found:

1. It can be a hassle.
2. It can be stressful.

3. They will not be able to make everyone happy.

But it doesn't have to be that way, say the experts.

"People really get freaked out visiting the in-laws over the holidays, but it's only about four or five hours and maybe an overnight at most, says Dina Koutas Poch, author of "I (Heart) My In-Laws" (Henry Holt and Co., \$14). "So, just be your best self and try to enjoy it."

Sheri Stritof, who draws on 44 years of marriage, says to "keep the visits reasonable and well-planned. And realize the holidays probably won't be perfect."

Both Poch and Stritof, who shares marital advice with her husband, Bob, on about.com, agree on one thing: Anticipate any problems with the in-laws and head them off as quickly as possible.

"The earlier a couple sets boundaries with their in-laws and with their parents, the better things will be through the years," says Stritof.

Newlyweds Jason and Gretchen Bracey already have established the parameters. The late-20s couple owns Jay's Flooring, and Gretchen says running a company only adds to the time issues of working in family commitments over the holidays.

"We kind of just set what we are going to do and we follow it, and if we get any disputes against what we want to do, we stick to our guns," says Gretchen, who shares holidays with Jason's parents in Chesterton, and her family here. "We have to be compassionate to each other's family's needs and wants."

In handling what Poch refers to as "The Holiday Scramble," she likes the commonly used "rotation" process — a holiday with one side of the family one year,



Photo provided by Bracey family

MAKING IT WORK: Jason and Gretchen Bracey set guidelines for holiday visits. "We have to be compassionate to each other's family's needs and wants," Gretchen said.

A HOLIDAY HOW-TO

Here are some tips for handling the in-laws over the holidays:

- ◆ Learn from your partner ahead of time which subjects to avoid discussing and which guests and their habits to be aware of:
- ◆ Tell a story that emphasizes your partner's fine qualities, which is a reflection on the in-laws' parenting.
- ◆ Don't pretend to be an expert.
- ◆ Don't criticize, over-clarify, or interrupt your significant other in front of his family.
- ◆ Don't take sides in family disputes.
- ◆ Come to an agreement on how you want to handle the in-laws before they call you. Create your plan and propose it to the in-laws rather than being forced to react to their proposal.
- ◆ Focus on YOUR family's needs, and celebrate the holidays with your in-laws and other relatives in ways that work for you.
- ◆ Host the holiday yourself, with both sides of the family on your terms, so you don't have to choose.

— Dina Koutas Poch,
author of "I (Heart)
My In-Laws"

Relative

◆ Over river, through woods, to Grandmother's house they go.

From E1

the other side the next. But she also suggests considering the importance of a particular holiday to a family, plus the age and health issues of certain family members.

For example, Gretchen Bracey has an 80-year-old grandmother — her only living grandparent — who loves to cook Thanksgiving dinner.

"Jason's parents don't make a big deal out of Thanksgiving, so we go to my grandmother's on Thanksgiving Day and travel to his parents that weekend.

"As for Christmas, we'll spend Christmas Eve at one place, then drive to the other on Christmas Day."

Just as important in setting boundaries with the in-laws early on is to be upfront with each other (husband and wife) about what your expectations are from the trip, says Stritof.

"Recognize each other's limits. When we were younger, we used a password to signal when one of us had reached a point of saying, 'Get me out of here in five minutes!'"

Poch also promotes the password idea in her book, but goes one step further by suggesting some "alone time."

"Just take a small, small timeout from everybody with your spouse or significant other," advises Poch, who has been married for two years.

"It could be something very small, like going outside for 10 or 15 minutes or going for a short walk or offering to go to the store to get some milk.

"You're there because you are in love, and you are there to enjoy your significant other. So, if the in-laws or your family are driving you crazy, the two of you should get out of the house, decompress for a second and you'll come back feeling better."

Of course, choosing when and where to spend your holidays is only the beginning. How you use



Bob and Sheri Stritof, marriage guides at About.com, urge early anticipation of problems with in-laws.

that time — meaning how you act, how you dress and how you talk — can be tricky, especially to newcomers.

It takes only a minute to make an impression, but a lot longer to correct a wrong one. Poch suggests initially avoiding tattoos, piercings and skimpy clothing.

Conversation? Newbies should stay away from politics or religion until they learn a little more about the in-laws' beliefs. Ease into their conversation style, advises Poch.

Then, of course, you'll be meeting new family members you've never met before or reacquainting yourself with aunts, uncles and cousins you see infrequently, which often requires some ice-breaking and name recollection.

Debra Fine, author of "The Fine Art of Small Talk" (Hyperion), says that to ease the task of recalling names, she prepares by finding out who is going to be there.

Fine says it takes effort on both sides to turn small talk into a genuine conversation. She suggests setting a dialogue in motion with something like, "So, bring me up to date . . . or what's been going on since . . ."

"Those broader questions are handy devices to get people talking," says Fine. "You are more likely to get a sentence out of someone instead of a one-word answer. Dig deeper. Show sincerity."

You might even want to "plan" a conversation.

"I make it my job to have two to three interesting things in my head to talk about in case we run out," says Fine.

"Conversation has to do with making the other person feel comfortable. Try to make people around you feel comfortable instead of worrying about being uncomfortable yourself."

Poch suggests getting some "form of information" about the people there and discuss it with them. "It shows that you care and have an interest in them."

Stritof suggests reducing the anxiety of conversation altogether by planning an activity, going on a "field trip" or playing non-competitive games. Finally, check your own expectations at the door, says Poch. "Families have certain rhythms, certain ways of doing things, and you don't want to upset that rhythm."

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