

CONNECTIONS



BJ Mann is a Family Mediator in private practice in Rochester who helps people reduce conflict and improve relationships.

My parents are coming for an extended visit for the holidays and do not get along with my husband's family who live nearby. Instead of being happy, I am stressed about how everyone will get along.

Holidays are filled with expectations that often trigger old behaviors and patterns. It is terrific that you are willing to look at new options to avoid the same old experience. The main sources of conflict and stress are missed expectations. Your parents are imagining the holidays a certain way and so are your in-laws and, of course, so is everyone else. The most effective way to manage this stress is to take the lead in clarifying expectations **in advance**. I call this "emotional planning," and it can really help make things go more smoothly.

"Tom, with everyone getting together this holiday, could we talk for a few minutes about what you'd like to happen during the week? For example, do you want to spend some time alone with your Dad? I know it sounds silly, but who will carve the ham?"

Ask him to be as specific as possible and share your own concerns and wishes. Discuss activities that might bring the two sets of in-laws closer together. Focus on strategies that you can agree upon, and then you can build on this when you have a similar conversation with your parents and

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your in-laws. Maybe your Mom wants to take you and your daughter shopping, or your Dad wants to go over the book he is working on with you. When those needs are met, they may be more cooperative about sharing you with your in-laws. You might want to reassure them that you love them and miss them and wish they lived closer, but you're still going to have to pay some attention to Tom's parents and hope they understand. That's the perfect opportunity to make some special plans just with them.

Be clear about your own intentions. You are trying to have a relaxed and joyful holiday. You are not trying to teach folks how to behave, or persuade them to be reasonable (according to your definition) or to even like each other. Rather, it is to invite them to clarify what would work for them in advance so there will be no surprises or resentments.

In the end, you cannot manage "who likes who" -- you can only inquire if there are things that people might be willing to do to make everyone's visit easier. When the holidays are over, I bet you'll notice a change, even a small one that everyone can build on in the future.

My teenagers will be back from college for the semester break and just do not understand that I need them to help around the house. I'm a single Mom and I know they are busy too but I feel overwhelmed and taken advantage of.

I can imagine that you are worried that what you hope will be a fun time with your kids may become tense and resentful. One sure way to improve the time together is to have a conversation with your kids before they return home.

It's hard for anyone to be cooperative when the request for help is "in the

moment" of criticism. For instance, if you come home from work and the sink is filled with dirty dishes, it's pretty certain that some angry words might be exchanged. I call that an ambush! Mom starts shouting and kids tune out or offer what sounds like lame excuses.

The way to avoid ambushes is to have these conversations in advance and clarify what "help" looks like. Speak with the kids and share that you are looking forward to their visit and yet you are worried that you may feel overwhelmed with extra chores. Ask them for help and ask them what they are willing to commit to. One of the keys to negotiating is to ask the other person first what will work for them. Once they express their idea, if it is a match, everyone wins and the kids have made the suggestion. If it does not work, or you want to add ideas, offer them as suggestions and not demands.

Often people leave things too vague: "Mom you know we'll help you." This response is a formula for resentment. The key is coming to an agreement in advance about what help looks like. For instance: no dirty dishes in the sink by 5:00 p.m., or no food or clothes left in common areas. Be sure to ask what you can do for the kids to make their stay at home enjoyable for them.

During the visit notice their help and the good things. Send a follow-up email or note when they leave to describe how grateful you are for their cooperation. It sounds to me that this was perhaps an issue that was never resolved when the kids were living under your roof. Behaviors do not change overnight and you have to recognize the willingness and the baby steps. Keep having inviting the kids to be clear about their commitments and not only will you have more cooperation; you will be modeling some good relationship skills for their future.