

my 3G family

Even Madonna is afraid of her mother-in-law, but counsellor Karen Louis has managed to live amicably with hers under one roof. How did she do it?

TEXT STEPHANIE YEO PHOTO PHOTO ELIZA PHUA STYLING ALVIN LEOW

Phua Chu Kang made it look easy, but the reality is that living with three generations under one roof often isn't so rosy. Those of us who live with our in-laws because of childcare arrangements find that balancing the needs of all can be quite a juggling act.

So if you're contemplating the big move to a 3G (that's three-generation) household, how do you make it work? *Family* asked Karen Louis, a Family Educator and consultant on family life issues with the charity HOPEworldwide (Singapore), who has lived with her mother-in-law since 1998. She has two children aged 12 and 14.

Q How did your mother-in-law come to live with you?

My husband had been posted around the region since 1993, so it wasn't until 1998 that we were transferred back to Singapore. Ama, as we call my mother-in-law, had been living in India with her siblings and church friends for three years since my father-in-law passed away.

I sensed that she needed to be with us, so we asked her to move in. While she lives with us most of the time, she still visits India for two months annually, and goes to Malaysia to see her other sons for another two months every year.

Q What are the advantages of having a 3G household?

The children enjoy having Ama around again — they love her cooking and when they were younger, they thought her

storytelling every night was great! I admit that it has been easier for me because I can afford a bigger place and because I have a maid who sometimes helps me run errands with my mother-in-law when I am too busy with work.

I also work from my home, so I'm able to have great talks with my mother-in-law when she has things on her heart.

Q And the downside?

The only thing that has been hard on me is the way that she sometimes gets very upset (usually with one of her six sons) and can be in a terrible mood for days. I hate conflict, and I like my family atmosphere to be happy and bubbly, so this is hard for me to take.

However, I have learnt not to take things personally, while my mother-in-law has worked on being more grateful and positive.

Q How do you resolve disagreements, especially about raising children?

Sometimes we won't get our views or needs across the first time, but if we bring them up in a respectful way at another time, perhaps many times, progress will be made.

Here's an example of how this has worked for me: When my first child was born, my in-laws and I had been getting along fairly well, but they tried to convince me that I "didn't have enough milk" while we were still in the hospital.

As I had resolved to breastfeed for six months, I politely changed the subject and had my husband tell his parents later that "we have decided not to give anything

but breast milk for the first six months, and Karen would feel better if you don't pressure her to do otherwise, since we have to make the decisions on how to bring up our children".

My sweet in-laws didn't take it personally, or at least they didn't show it, and were waiting at home to help me give my little one her first home bath.

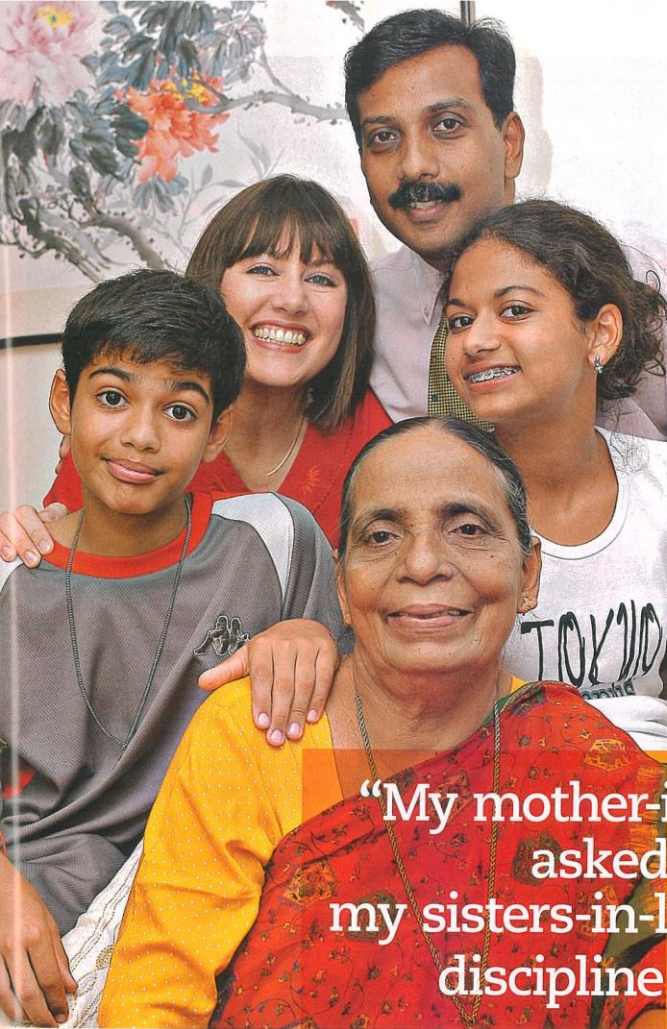
One night, I asked my mother-in-law why my (then) one month-old daughter wouldn't stop crying. The wise mother of six proclaimed, "Well, that's what babies do — they cry." Somehow, I felt much better after that.

When the children got older and my husband and I felt the need to impart various forms of discipline, my in-laws weren't too happy about it, but we both reiterated that we had choose how to bring up the children.

We have had the same conversation in different ways through the years, and now that we have younger nieces and nephews, my mother-in-law has even asked me to intervene and help my sisters-in-law to discipline their children!

Q What advice do you have for women who may not get along with their mothers-in-law?

You may feel that your husband sides with his mother more than with you. This may or may not actually be happening (she may be feeling the same thing) but if it is, you are not alone. In some cases, husbands have been sentimental with their mothers for years, and it is a hard habit for them to break. It won't change overnight, but if you feel strongly about it, perhaps seeing a



“My mother-in-law has asked me to help my sisters-in-law discipline their kids!”

husband, she has married into his family, so she must take it upon herself to learn to love his family (notice that I didn't say “like his family” — there is a difference.)

Q What should couples do before forming a 3G household?

Make sure that you do the above discuss your Boundary issues and get unified on them first. Make sure the husband is prepared to do his share of the mediating. Men don't understand how difficult this relationship is I was so intimidated by my mum-in-law when I first got married. I felt better about myself recently when I saw that even the pop star Madonna admitted that the only person who terrifies her is her husband's mother! ❦❦❦

counsellor would be the best option.

However, more often than not, the husband is just trying to show appreciation for his mum, and feels that you need to overlook her weaknesses as a sign of respect.

Talk through all the things you agree on, and if you need more help, there are many great self-help books about marriage. Ask your husband to read them with you, and then talk through how you can make him feel that you love and support his mother and how he can make you feel loved and supported as a wife.

Both partners need to be unified on

three things:

1. The husband has to stand by his wife first and should be the main communicator of disagreements or alternative viewpoints with the mum.

2. They have to talk about the important issues that they know might be at odds with the in-laws and be united on these things before the husband tells the mother about it (I call these Boundary issues).

3. The wife should be able to handle some compromises about things that are not that important.

Also, the wife has not married just the

Karen Louis holds a Masters in counselling and is also a member of the Australian Counselling Association and the American Counseling Association. In Singapore, Karen helped to pioneer Movie Therapy, which uses movies as a tool to help clients obtain awareness and to work through issues with a counsellor. HOPEworldwide (Singapore) was recently honoured with a token of appreciation by ComCare, presented by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, for using Movie Therapy to contribute to the community. She can be contacted at karenlouis@hopeworldwide.org.