

mother's day



# Mum-in-Law 101

You know those mother-in-law jokes? They always involve the son-in-law. However, the real problem, as we all know, is usually between the wife and her husband's mother. **KAREN LOUIS**, Family Educator and Counsellor shares her own experience, and dispenses advice to women in-laws.

This Mother's Day, whether you already have a mother- or daughter-in-law, or are about to acquire one, make both your lives happier by putting yourself in the other's shoes. Karen Louis shows how good sense and a little humour can go a long way.

## To the mother in law:

You might say that the basis of the trouble between daughters- and mothers-in-law is the different interests and expectations each has for her future, which involve the same guy – her husband/your son! Let's examine several reasons why your relationship with your son's wife might be strained:

**1** Your daughter-in-law may feel **threatened by you**, especially if your son treats you well (which hopefully, he does!) and she may feel that she is in a power struggle over management of her home. Therefore the solution would be to try to talk to her about her positive points, praise her for what she does well, and let her know that, assuming she speaks to you with respect, you look forward to gaining her as a new daughter, being on the same team and building family alongside her in HER home, assuming that YOU are living in HER home. Once you have won her over, then you can expect that she will also be more willing to listen since she will no longer feel the need to assert herself.

**2** Your daughter-in-law may be **poor at communication with everyone**, not just you. Perhaps when she tries to express a difference of opinion, she does it in a way that alienates you and makes you feel bad. Conflicts and differences of opinion are normal in every home, and there is no reason why you can't learn to talk together. Think about how you might like your daughter-in-law to answer you in a more helpful way and then have a talk with your son. Tell him that you are looking forward to having a great relationship with the new love of his life, and that it would help you if he could gently guide his wife to learn how to communicate with you in a more pleasant or less defensive manner. Alternatively, you could take the initiative asking your daughter-in-law, if she feels uncomfortable around you and what you could do differently to help your relationship be closer. Tell her that you are trying to put yourself in her shoes and that she can be open with you. Even though you may feel that this is a face-losing option, humility actually reveals who is the "bigger person" and is a way of gaining genuine influence, and hopefully she will have the same attitude.

3

You may have **"My-son-can-do-no-wrong-itis"**, which will cause you to subconsciously overlook the faults of your son and focus on your daughter-in-law's mistakes. Remember that your son, however wonderful, is no saint, and never take sides in an argument between the two of them. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil!!

4

You may be having **too many opinions!** One grandmother of three says that she never gives unsolicited advice, and that when she is asked, she is more careful when giving advice to her daughters-in-law than her daughters, because she knows that they are just not as close. For example, if asked for parenting advice, instead of criticizing her daughter-in-law's parenting skills, she prefaces her answer with, "It's been a long time since I had kids, and parents today know so much more than we did. But I have heard that some parents try ..." This seems to lead to a more favourable outcome! (Watch episodes of "Everybody Loves Raymond" for lessons on how to not be the ultimate well-meaning and interfering mother-in-law!)

An ancient proverb says, "The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down." Since I take it that you are the wiser woman, as the older woman in the relationship, you will already have thought about the consequences of not getting along with your daughter-in-law: (negative scenario #1) she will keep her husband away from you, which is sad, (worse scenario #2) she will leave her husband, which is bad, (best case scenario #3) your son will get an ulcer, which is also sad! As a wise builder, it pays to plan ahead and think of good strategies to ensure the family is built well so that everyone is happy and all needs are met. With good communication, mutual respect and patience, it is definitely possible.

### To the daughter-in-law:

There are many stereotypes about daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law not getting along. Let's look at what could possibly be causing your in-law trouble.

1

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 a sentimental relationship with their mothers**, and it is a hard habit for them to break. It won't change over night, but if you feel strongly about it, perhaps seeing a counsellor would be the best option, since this is a very touchy subject.

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 respecting your elders. It is understandable that he should see things from her point of view since she raised him!

Talk through all the things you agree on regarding this issue, and if you need more help, refer to any good self-help book about marriage. Ask your husband to read it 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.

(If you are engaged but not yet married, please see the chapter on "In-Laws or Out-Laws" in the new online pre-marriage quiz called "MPQ, a marriage preparation quiz" at [www.singaporebrides.com](http://www.singaporebrides.com) for free tips on how to talk about this with your spouse-to-be before the wedding day.)

2

**Your mother-in-law may have a negative communication style.** First of all, realize that she has probably always had a negative communication style – and you are just taking it personally since you are the new and vulnerable person in the relationship.

Next, even though communicating with her isn't that pleasant, remember that older people see asking advice as a sign of respect, so rope her in to discussions on issues that won't cause too much conflict. You don't have to follow it if you really disagree – just being asked makes our in-laws feel valued. It's proven that our brains change as we age, and, believe it or not, older peoples' brains are more suited to mulling over ideas, reflecting and drawing on life experience than ours are! So you never know – you just might learn something! **Just as importantly, try to listen for the love – when mothers-in-law nag, they usually mean well, even if it doesn't always sound like it.**

Lastly, try to put yourself in her shoes and figure out what is causing her negativity. Sometimes our parents/in-laws are **scared about changes** and they take it out on those closest to home, perhaps making the new in-law the scapegoat for their feelings. If your mother-in-law is over 60, she may be at a stage of life where she is facing loss on all fronts – her peers (and perhaps spouse) are dying, her health is declining, she may have no more personal income and her movement may be restricted. In this youth-obsessed world, she may even feel that she is losing respect of the young. While she is trying to come to terms with the feelings produced by these new realities, you can bet that she will be grasping on with all her might to the few things that she can possibly control, including her son's life, so be prepared.

Sometimes she may be rude because she felt that the

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way you spoke to her was not helpful. As you work on your communication and persevere with your mother-in-law, you can occasionally share with her something that has hurt you, but only one thing at a time. After all, she persevered with your husband through his sullen teen years, his rebellious army years and his arrogant years as a young executive, so you can try to go the extra mile and love her during this trying time and even fill a role of being her new daughter, however much patience this will take. (See more tips for improving communication below in my personal story.)

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### Karen Louis and her mother-in-law:



I was born in Texas, married a Malaysian in London, have lived in eight cities on four continents and now permanently reside in Singapore with my 72 year old Indian mother-in-law. With all of our differences, we still enjoy living together, have a very close relationship and share many things in common, including

language, religion and our love of Indian food! As my mother-in-law and I met for the very first time 20 years ago, we have quite a long history of working on our relationship. I have used the acronym **F.R.I.E.N.D.S.** to illustrate some of the communication skills I have used to help me in this relationship.

**F** is for **Friends**. I have always tried to be a respectful friend to my mother-in-law, not taking sides with anyone but always trying to see things from her point of view and meeting her emotional needs when possible. I look at our relationship as a Workable Compromise, and with friends, it is normal to compromise. (We'll go to the Indian vegetarian restaurant this time and we'll go to the Steak restaurant next time.) Since my mother-in-law only had sons, this has proven to be a good strategy, as she now considers me closer than a daughter and tells my husband that she likes me better than him!

**R** is for **Respectful Repetition**. Sometimes we won't get our views or needs across the first time, but if we bring them up in a respectful way at some other time, perhaps *many* times, progress will be made. Here's an example of how this has worked in my relationship with my mother-in-law regarding how my husband and I should bring up our two children: By the time my first child was born, my in-laws and I were getting along fairly well. However, I was prepared for the worst, and sure enough, my in-laws tried to convince me that I "didn't have enough milk" while we were still in the hospital! However, as I had firmly resolved to breastfeed for six months, I politely changed the subject and had my husband step in later to tell his parents 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 ultimately 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 and help out in numerous other ways. On one particular night when my one month-old daughter wouldn't stop crying no matter what we tried, I asked my mother-in-law, who was holding the baby at this time, "Why won't she stop crying?" to which 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 a bit 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 to be the ones to 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! A respectful message will eventually get across if you don't give up.

**I**s for **Inquiry**. I have asked her opinion on matters and asked her to teach me new recipes. I have inquired about her life, both in the past and in the present. Sometimes I ask my mother-in-law what she thinks I should do better or differently in the household. It makes her feel respected and I sometimes learn something. On one occasion, she told me to serve drinks (Milo, tea, etc) to my husband more often, but he later said, "If I want you to make me a drink, I'll ask for it." Oh well...even though I couldn't totally apply her advice to my situation, it did help me to remember to be more attentive to my husband.

**E** is for **End the Waffling**, which is another way of saying, "get to the point" and "don't beat around the bush." It is my habit to not be specific and be a conflict avoider, but over the years, this has hurt more than it has helped. I am trying to express myself in a briefer manner and communicate things more clearly with my mother-in-law. Rather than fret that I cannot meet her expectation in some matter, now I will say, "Sorry, Ama, but I am not able to do that today. I will try to get someone else to help you, or perhaps you can do it another day."

**N** is for **Negative agreement**, which means "calmly agreeing with your mother-in-law's true criticism of your negative qualities". For example, if your mother-in-law makes a snide remark about how few dishes you can cook, you could agree, "Yes, I know that I don't know how to cook very many dishes. Would you teach me some of your favourite recipes?" This is disarming and will help to win over your mother-in-law and end the "power struggle" that is felt in many in-law relationships. In my case, I once said, "Yes, you are right that I am overweight. What do you suggest that I do to lose weight?" (Truth is truth!) Then I listened when she suggested that I start exercising, as she had also recently joined a Tai Chi class and a cha-cha class. Not bad advice, actually!

**D** is for **Disclosure**. When I am honest about my weaknesses, such as in the example above, or even about my feelings, it helps me to be relaxed and open, and we can have a more honest relationship. I can also share my feelings about something that she is doing that I don't "feel good" about, in a non-threatening way.

**S** is for **Smooth Things Over**. No relationship will ever be perfect, and a wise friend once told me, "No one ever said that family would be easy." As another even wiser person said, "Love covers a multitude of sins." My relationship with my mother-in-law has had its moments, like all relationships have, but having Ama around has enriched our family in a great way, and I hope that all mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law can be as happy as we are.

*\*Karen Louis is a Family Educator and Counsellor and a consultant on Family Life issues for HOPE worldwide (Singapore). She is also one of the pioneers of Movie Therapy, a new therapy approach which uses movies as a tool to help clients obtain awareness and to work through issues with a counsellor. HOPE worldwide (Singapore) was awarded the ComCare Enterprise Fund (CEF) last year and was recently honoured with a token of appreciation by ComCare, presented by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, for their contribution to the community. ✕*

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