

Newlywed Boundaries: Holidays and Children

With holidays just around the corner, many newlyweds will be struggling with not only whose parents to visit first, but should they even visit at all.

Amidst the challenge of defining themselves as a couple, newlyweds must do so against the oft-competing demands to favor one set of in-laws over the other. It is important for newlyweds to know that whomever they visit first will feel “special” and can come to expect this kind of preferential treatment forever after. To avoid this situation, some newlyweds resort to the “every other year” rule, and set themselves up to alternate who gets what holiday first between the in-laws. Usually by year three, this kind of structure takes hold and both sets of in-laws come expect it to be maintained for life.

The problem occurs when the new couple comes to realize that in meeting the expectations of their parents, their needs and wants have taken a back seat. Resentment builds and the once happy couple is left in a quagmire, worrying about whose parents to disappoint first when they try to change the rules.

Change may be the result of normal family development. The newlywed couple may be juggling children of several prior marriages as well as their own. As such, they seek to establish their own traditions amidst the practical tugs and pulls of competing demands.

The need for change may also come about with the introduction of the first pregnancy. One or other grandparent-to-be may be laying claim to the care of the child as if their own. This can quickly lead to the new-parent-to-be to feel overwhelmed with their life being tugged out of control amidst fears that they will lose the baby to the well-intentioned but intrusive in-law.

At other times, the need for change may be the result of behavior of one or other in-law that reaches a threshold of no longer tolerable. There may be problems of alcohol, abuse or other forms of inappropriate behaviour that the newlywed couple

cannot condone. At times, both situations collide and the thought of exposing a child to an intrusive in-law with issues of drinking, personality problems or untoward behaviour is so unacceptable, that the newlyweds are forced to reconsider visitation arrangements altogether.

The challenge for the newlywed couple is in establishing a boundary around themselves and then determining who gets in and under what conditions.

Amidst the tugs and pulls and at times, unfinished family business, it can take considerable effort by the new couple to establish this boundary. These couples need reminding about the reason all homes have doors. Doors afford protection. They allow you to chose who gets in and who remains out. For newlyweds to succeed, they must mutually establish their door. Will it be a screen door, with little or no filter, a steel trap or a swinging bar door? It is not that one is better than the other, but situations will dictate one over the other. A screen door wouldn't work on a submarine, yet in the dog days of summer a steel trap wouldn't do either.

With holidays just around the corner, newlyweds are encouraged to think ahead about the kind of traditions they want for themselves as well as the protections that may be necessary in some families. To maintain the marriage, the integrity of your relationship comes first. That is not to say you forget your extended kin, but make arrangements you truly can live with. The arrangement you make can be with you for a very long time.

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