

The Role of Parents and In-Laws in the Lives of Their Adult Children

Dr. David Pelcovitz¹

Discussion of What Matters and What Doesn't

When a child is receptive to a discussion with parents about what to look for in a spouse, there is potential for an invaluable conversation about the enduring qualities that predict a successful marriage. Who knows the strengths and needs of their child better than a parent? Who is in a better position to share the life lessons learned from their own marriage—be it successful or challenging?

Research on what predicts successful marriage indicates that the following ingredients, though not exhaustive, predict marital satisfaction:

1. **Goals and self-Awareness:** While life is about change, a shared vision and dream is a core predictor of long-term success. While couples don't have to have identical goals, they have to generally share a set of values and dreams about what their new home will "look" like. Couples should keep in mind that change, particularly religious change, is part of life. The key is the ability to manage such change at each other's side, including an ability to openly discuss and share where they envision they are going in actualizing their shared vision and dream. In order to successfully negotiate this process, potential mates have to have a solid understanding of their own uniqueness—their own strengths, talents, goals and needs. Parents can often play an essential role in enhancing their child's engagement in this process.
2. **Ability to disagree in a healthy manner:** The ability to disagree and communicate effectively even in the face of strong feelings is an essential marker of marital success. As the

¹ Dr. David Pelcovitz, PhD holds the Gwendolyn and Joseph Straus Chair in Jewish Education at Yeshiva University's Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education. He also teaches courses in pastoral psychology at the University's affiliated Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and serves as special assistant to the President of Yeshiva University.

Sefer Chasidim no. 88, says, “*acharis ketata charata*—after disagreement there is regret.” Researchers find that marital conflict, in and of itself, does not predict problems—rather it is the ability to work things out, to confront differences in a healthy manner, that reflects solid communication skills; reflecting a balance between honesty, assertiveness and an ability to respectfully hear the other partner’s views. Such couples are able to infuse their problem-solving discussions with humor, show genuine interest in what their partner is saying, and follow disagreement with letting go of anger—ultimately being able to express feelings of warmth and affection.

3. **Realistic and flexible expectations:** Couples need to understand that facing the inevitable stresses of life together in a manner that enables them to work jointly on overcoming adversity is an important component of a successful marriage. An aspect of this is an ability to view such stresses as part of life and to perceive sources of conflict as coming from temporary rather than permanent flaws.
4. **Bring out the best in the other:** Couples should strive to be close friends who enjoy each other’s company and bring out the best in each other. Some of the questions asked in research on this component of successful marriage are: Has knowing your partner made you a better person? How much has being with your partner resulted in your learning new things? How much does your partner help to expand your sense of the kind of person you are?
5. **Basic physical attraction:** While a basic physical attraction is important, this component of marital success is often less important than the first four ingredients and often grows as a shared life and years of mutual giving to one another is expressed in the physical realm as well. The vast majority of Americans believe in the myth of the instant “soul mate.” In fact, relationships require work, getting to know the person and developing lasting love through mutual giving, knowledge and intimacy.

One’s spouse develops into a “soul mate” over time, not as a result of an instant connection.

A brief note on what doesn’t matter. What is irrelevant in predicting marital success? A partial list includes subtle differences in background, parental profession, wedding-related conflicts, and minor differences in religious philosophy.

Understanding Changes in the Transition to Adulthood

In recent years, young couples have faced a drastically different set of expectations regarding their relationship with their parents than in previous generations. In the past, marriage generally signaled a shift to a life of financial and emotional independence.

The Torah teaches us that the way of the world is that a person should build a house, then plant a vineyard and then marry.

Sotah 44a

לימדה תורה דרך ארץ, שיבנה אדם
בית ויטע כרם ואח"כ ישא אשה
סוטה מד.

The shifting role of women, most of whom work, coupled with financial uncertainty and longer periods of education, has resulted in increased dependence on parents, often for years after marriage. Researcher Jeffrey Arnett reports that, in sharp contrast to previous generations, only 26 percent of young adults today think full-time employment is a necessary component of achieving adulthood. Only 15 percent consider completing one’s education as a necessary

component of achieving adulthood, and only 15 percent considered starting a family to be a core ingredient characterizing this stage of life.²

This new reality can be a breeding ground for conflict. Parents often feel that monetary support should translate to an increased right to have a say in their married child's life, giving them an active voice in deciding where their adult child should live and where their grandchildren should go to school. From the perspective of the parents, many have voiced feelings of resentment at what they perceive to be a sense of entitlement and lack of gratitude on the part of their children whom they generously support.

The Dangers of Over-Control

Psychologists and other mental health professionals have repeatedly found that a key task of couples in their early years of marriage is finding their own voice and setting on the path of achieving their dreams. When parents interfere with this delicate psychological process, they risk bringing on the very difficulties they were trying to avoid. It is essential that parents understand that they have total control over the decision of whether or not to financially support their married children. Once they have made that decision, they have no right to dictate the path that their children have decided to take in their own lives.

The renowned 19th-century author R. Yisrael Lipschitz, known as the *Tiferes Yisroel*, shared a fascinating psychological insight about the psychological task of young adulthood. He wrote (*Tiferes Yisroel, Avos, Boaz 4:2*) that a person cannot find his own voice in achieving his dreams until he leaves his parents' home. The process of leaving home and living independently, the *Tiferes Yisroel* said, allows one to achieve the unique blend of integration of his parents' values while at the same time developing his own unique vision of the life he wants to lead. Psychological research has found that interfering with this process of finding one's voice can lead to depression, anxiety, anger and a general sense of unhappiness.

Responsibilities of Young Adult Children

A frequent complaint on the part of parents of young adults is that their children often feel entitled to the support that they are given by their parents. The failure to show gratitude can be quite problematic. Recent studies have found numerous benefits that are present when an individual develops the capacity to express gratitude to others. Among the benefits of gratitude are that not only does the recognition of what we owe others make it more likely that they will continue to act kindly toward us, but in fact we are more likely to be generous to others when we develop this trait in ourselves. The same body of research has also proven that those who recognize the good that others do for them are also easier to get along with, more forgiving and less self-involved. Ninety-five percent of individuals who express gratitude describe feeling happy as they are thanking their benefactor. Over half of those people say that expressing gratitude makes them feel extremely happy. In a fascinating study, researchers divided study participants into three groups. One group was asked to write about five things they were grateful

² Arnett, J., (2004) *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teen through the Twenties*, Oxford University Press.

for during the previous week. The other two groups were either asked to describe five hassles from the past week or five events that affected them. The members of the group that expressed gratitude described better overall feelings about their lives during that 10-week period, were more optimistic about their future during this time-span, and even reported feeling physically healthier than those in the other two groups.³

The irony is that psychologists find that people tend to be more grateful when they experience kindness from unexpected sources while we tend to be least grateful to those we are closest to.

Keeping these insights in mind, young adults should develop in themselves the trait of recognizing how much they owe their parents and to expressing sincere appreciation of the support, love and kindness given unconditionally by parents well past an age where one can reasonably expect strong levels of financial support.

Handling Disagreement⁴

When parents or in-laws and their children or children-in-law find themselves repetitively engaged in angry interchanges, it is best to keep in mind that disagreements are often a helpful mechanism for handling tension and improving relationships. Research has found that it is not how often family members fight but *how* they fight that determines the health of family interaction. When such disagreements are dominated by high level yelling, screaming, criticism and lecturing, issues do not get resolved. Particularly disruptive are fights characterized by immediate spirals of emotionalism and expressions of intense emotions, as such disagreements, almost never end with each side listening to the other. Consequently, the same fight tends to be waged repeatedly with mutual feeling that the other side is not truly listening to the other's perspective. The antidote to this futile and unpleasant process is to engage in planned discussions. These discussions should be scheduled ahead of time when both parents and child or in-laws can make sure that there is no interruption and each has each other's undivided attention. A helpful set of guidelines for these discussions are summarized by thinking of the three Ps: (1) pullback response, (2) planned discussion, and (3) perspective-taking.

The pullback response. The pullback response is what takes place when both parents and child and/or in-laws discipline themselves to not respond immediately and emotionally to a perceived provocation. In pre-Holocaust Europe, Rabbi Baruch Ber Leibowitz of Kamenetz would not allow himself to give in to anger at family members until he put on a special "anger hat." When he found himself becoming angered by a student or family member, he would go into his bedroom and rummage through his closet until he found his anger hat and put it on. Only then would he allow himself to express his frustration. Of course, by buying himself the extra time that he took to find the hat, he was able to sufficiently calm down so he could engage in a more constructive discussion informed by the perspective of the other party. Recent neurobiologic

³ McCullough, M. & Emmons, R. (2004) *The Psychology of Gratitude*, Chapter 7, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

⁴ Portions of the rest of this article are adapted from the ideas of Rona Novick, PhD and Pelcovitz, D. "Marital conflict in relationships with in-laws," Chapter in: *Whither Thou Goests*, Sarah Shapiro, Devora Publishing, 2008.

research has found that when we give ourselves the few seconds that it takes to go from the short neural circuitry that connects our emotions to the primitive brain structures where animalistic anger resides to the longer neural structures connected to the front part of our brain where more mature thinking resides, we are better able to deal with our anger in a productive manner that leads to constructive problem-solving. In order to do this, however, we need to follow the old-fashioned advice of taking several slow breaths or slowly counting to ten or metaphorically putting on Reb Baruch Ber's hat. This process should save parents and children or in-laws from unnecessarily hurting one another's feelings and the tendency to engage in emotional interchanges that never lead to constructive problem-solving.

Planned discussion. The key to successful conflict resolution is timing. When family members carefully arrange their schedules so that their cell phones are off, work is put on hold and alternative arrangements are made for child care, an atmosphere is created that is conducive to getting down to the work of real communication. Please remember the keys to successful communication, which include (1) beginning with "I" statements, as opposed to "you" statements, which tend to engender blame and criticism; (2) disciplining one's self to stay on one topic at a time; and (3) bringing an air of curiosity to trying to understand the point of view of the other family member.

Perspective taking. Psychologists have found that the key to communication is the adage "To be understood, first understand." In the process of discussing areas of disagreement, the individual who initiated the conversation about the area of conflict should first take on the role of listening until he or she fully understands the perspective of the other. In a powerful technique often used in marriage therapy—the speaker-listener technique—each family member has his or her turn to assume either the speaker or the listener role. The job of the listener is to briefly paraphrase what he or she hears the speaker say. The speaker should express his or her feelings about the area of disagreement in brief sentences, never longer than three or four sentences at a time, after which the listener should briefly paraphrase what he or she heard. The speaker should then reflect back to the listener whether or not he feels understood. If he does not feel understood, he should correct the misconception until the feeling of complete understanding is achieved. It is important during this process that the speaker stick only to the topic at hand and not drag in other areas causing tension in the in-law or parent/child relationship. After the speaker feels completely understood by the listener, the roles should switch so that the speaker now becomes the listener while the listener describes his or her perspective regarding the problem. This powerful technique often leads to an ability on the part of both parties to really "get" the perspective of the other. Once each side feels truly "understood," a compromise solution will often follow automatically. It is important to note that should such discussions deteriorate into angry interchanges, family members should end the discussion and reschedule a meeting at a later time when, hopefully, a calmer interchange can take place.

In-laws: Strategies for Dealing with a Frequent Source of Marital Conflict

In a survey of almost 1,500 Orthodox Jewish couples in the United States, researchers found that close to 40 percent of couples in our community report conflict over in-laws to be a significant

source of marital conflict.⁵ Early in a marriage, the default setting is to assume that the new family will be governed by a similar set of rules and expectations that characterized their family of origin. Yet families are inherently different. Research in family psychology finds that the two main organizing influences of families is rule structure—ranging from rigid to chaotic—and emotional closeness—ranging from enmeshed to disengaged. If one comes from a family that is very organized, compulsive about time and emotionally distant, it can come as a shock to be exposed to in-laws who might be perceived as intrusive, disorganized and chaotic.

The key is not to see the inevitably different family culture as better or worse but rather as a variation on the theme of normal. Once one pathologizes this difference as a “defect,” one’s spouse is likely to respond by seeing this issue as one of divided loyalties where they have to choose between spouse and parents. This can lead to a non-productive defensiveness and escalation of conflict is likely to follow.

Hierarchy: Challenges Posed by In-laws

The rule structure of a family can range from rigid to chaotic.

In-laws with a chaotic style might pose difficulty for a son-in-law or daughter-in-law regarding issues such as:

- **Time management:** This might be manifested by in-laws being chronically late in arriving for Shabbos, showing up to watch the children, etc.
- **Disciplinary style:** A lax approach to watching or disciplining grandchildren can lead to discomfort on the part of a parent who is used to a more structured style of raising children.

Rigid in-laws might pose difficulty for a son-in-law or daughter-in-law regarding issues such as:

- **Formality:** In-laws might stand on ceremony if son-in-law or daughter-in-law isn’t careful about calling, remembering birthdays, etc. They also might be less understanding regarding lack of promptness and more likely to get upset at a perception of overly lax parenting style when spending time at children’s home. In turn, their discipline might be viewed as too controlling, overprotective or rigid when watching grandchildren.

Another major potential source of conflict is in the area of emotional connectedness. If a family is overly close, often referred to by family therapists as “enmeshed,” the potential difficulties might coalesce around potential sources of conflict such as unexpected visits, prolonged visits, or a set of expectations of closeness from a son-in-law or daughter-in-law with a “psychological allergy” to closeness that the child might perceive as smothering.

The other extreme of emotional closeness is lack of connection. In such families, in-laws might feel that visiting their children a few times a year and an occasional call is more than sufficient. This can easily be viewed as uncaring to a son-in-law or daughter-in-law who come from a family with a warmer emotional temperature.

⁵ Fox, D. and Pelcovitz, D. (2008) Aleinu Marital Satisfaction Survey, I, Los Angeles, California, Jewish Board of Family and Children Services.

Recommendation

Take an active role in educating your spouse about your family of origin's rules. It is easy to forget that in dealing with our parents, we have the benefit of decades of learning to accommodate to their emotional needs, demands and unique idiosyncrasies. Often our accommodation to their personalities is so much a part of us that we don't even realize how we have molded our behavior to minimize conflict and maximize effective communication. Bring a high level of empathy to your spouse, who doesn't have the benefit of this experience and is often expected to "instantly" master this complex and often inscrutable code of conduct.

This means that the most crucial ingredient in managing the often inevitable challenges of getting used to an alien family style is open communication between spouses. Spouses should explore a coping plan for dealing with frustration in part by managing their expectations and not pathologizing a situation where "different" doesn't mean crazy or insensitive. Perhaps the most important point is that validation isn't the same as agreement. When one calmly listens and validates spouses who are upset with in-laws, the son or daughter doesn't have to feel a need to defend their parent. This isn't a lack of loyalty to parents—it is simply supporting a spouse while helping them understand an alien culture.