

When the in-laws cross the line

“**Y**ou cannot imagine what it’s like to live close to your parents-in-law.” I often hear this from clients. But I can. When I was young, my brother and his wife were neighbours of the family home. As a farmer’s spouse, I lived across from my parents-in-law for 30 years. Eventually, I became a mother-in-law myself.

As a farm psychologist, I’ve also seen and heard hundreds of family stories. I’ve developed some experience regarding in-law conflicts in cohabitation situations.

Living near in-laws isn’t easy, no matter which side of the fence you’re on.

Are such conflicts common in the general population? According to Cambridge University psychologist Terri Apter, three out of four couples experience significant conflict with their in-laws. It seems to be much more prominent between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law because only 15 per cent of men — compared to 60 per cent of women — complain about their mother-in-law.

According to Apter, words used to describe the relationship include: uncomfortable, strained, infuriating, depressing, draining, and awful.

To my knowledge, we do not have statistics specific to agriculture-business families, but it’s easy to guess that the situation is even worse. If you’re getting along with your in-laws, consider yourself very fortunate.

One client said, “We do not choose the in-laws, we undergo (or we have to live with) them.” For some people, the challenge will be really hard. It is quite easy to get along and limit conflicts when visiting the in-laws a few times a year. The in-laws are accommodating, in theory, at least. Everyone has their zones of intimacy, and you do not see everything that happens.

As my mother often told me, “What you don’t see or hear won’t hurt you.” So because you limit the interactions, you limit the conflicts. And if things are too difficult, the visits can be shortened or spaced — or both.

In an agricultural context, life is different. In addition to working together, we remain very close, so we can see a lot of things. “She’s not gone yet. It’s been five

times this week.” Or, “How come he hasn’t come out to work? It’s been an hour since he had dinner. He gets up late to go to the barn since he’s with her.”

Sometimes your parents might interfere in their role as grandparents. “You should not buy her this toy,” or “you should dress her like that.” Maybe they even interfere in your financial management, saying things like, “Why did you renovate the kitchen? It was fine as it was.”

When should we say something, and when should we be silent? It’s not always easy to tell. However, the more mature and healthy the relationship, the more we can talk about our mutual expectations, concerns and limits, and this can help us manage our differences.

Many reasons can explain conflicts with in-laws:

- A know-it-all and/or take-charge mother- or father-in-law — or daughter- or son-in-law.
- A parent’s belief that no one is good enough for their son or daughter.
- Differing philosophies on how to raise children.
- Gender roles.
- Standards about cleanliness.
- Work-life balance.
- Money lending or spending.
- Pressure to conform to religious or cultural norms.
- A parent trying to give marital advice.

Does the behaviour of others matter to me? It depends. What if your son decides to have his child baptized? What if he does not? It is not your business.

What if the bride decides to paint the kitchen red? Not your business. What if she decides to sign little Tommy up for ballet lessons? Not your business.

But what happens when the cost of the lifestyle of your successor jeopardizes the future of the company you’ve built? That’s your business.

Regarding salary and benefits, working conditions, and the responsibilities of the partners, there must be clear and accepted rules. These should fit into the company’s vision. Afterward, how everyone decides to enjoy their salaries and their vacation is their personal choice. However, if you

become the guardian of your cherished grandchildren, it is up to you to convey your limits.

In short, if the choices of others have real consequences on your life, or if you believe that someone’s physical or mental health is in danger, then the issue is your concern. It is your responsibility to discuss it constructively.

The stronger the relationship and the stronger your ability to discuss difficult subjects constructively, the more topics you’ll be able to discuss. However, in theory, everyone should know the difference between what belongs to me (my expectations, my values, my fears), what belongs to the other (his needs, his values, his rights), and what belongs in the relationship.

But what happens when it’s not so clear? Life is rarely black and white. Sometimes it’s hard because, as parents, we can see that certain choices could jeopardize the mental health of people we love (our children or grandchildren).

The mature position that will increase your success in communicating with others in general and the in-laws specifically is an affirmative style. Affirmative people are able to clearly state their opinions and feelings. They can firmly advocate for their rights and needs while respecting the rights of others. They are able to value themselves, their time, their money, and their physical needs.

“Good fences make good neighbours.” This is especially true with in-laws. Learn how to set healthy boundaries. At the end of the day, you can only control yourself — what you want, what you say or don’t say, what you do or don’t do, the way you say or do things. You definitely have no control of others’ expectations, behaviour, or feelings, but you can change the way you react to the situation. **CG**



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