



Find a way to  
communicate  
with everyone.

## Negotiating the Nest

Confused about how to bring up your kids in a joint family set-up without hurting the sentiments of the rest of the family? Read on. *by* RAMYA SRINIVASAN

**J**oint families have been around for centuries, but the functioning styles and the dynamics have changed. Power has become decentralized and everyone wants to offer their opinion, which makes it difficult for parents as they try to draw a balance between conventional wisdom and modern thinking. Here are some approaches you could try:

**# find a way to communicate:** Every family has its own way of communicating, especially when it comes to resolving conflicts. This is not a corporate set-up that you can draft

an agenda and ask for a meeting. In any case, it may be a better idea to discuss and resolve issues on a one-to-one basis. In a group, people tend to say things they may regret later and the situation can turn explosive. Plus, it is difficult to arrive at a consensus in a group. Sheeja Thomas, a homemaker in Bengaluru, and mom to two boys, 7 and 5 years, feels, "Even with the most genuine intentions, there can be misunderstandings. We had moved into a joint family set-up just a few months back. Previously, we always did the kids' birthdays with a blast, but this time my husband and I thought we'll keep it to just the family. But

the grandparents actually wanted to be part of a grand celebration and were confused as to why we were avoiding one this year." Just something as simple as that could become a bone of contention unless communicated correctly.

**# allow space for everyone:** The biggest advantage in a joint family set-up is that you are there to help each other out, but be careful not to abuse it. Hari Prasad, who works as an IT professional in Bengaluru, recalls, "My mom takes care of my son five days a week and has been very supportive of my wife's career. By the time the week inches

towards Saturday, she is exhausted, so during the weekend we give her the space she needs. We encourage my parents to go out for a dinner or catch a movie. We realize we desire our space too and take that into account while planning vacations. So we go for family vacations with everyone but plan trips in smaller groups as well. We arrange for package tours for my parents so they get their own couple time. This helps them bond and discuss topics which they may not be able to do in a larger group.”

### # don't allow intrusion:

Sometimes a joint family set-up can be tantamount to a boxing ring where parents and grandparents are constantly vying for the child's attention. Differences of opinion can arise on traditional versus modern medicine, food habits, choice of school, and a liberal versus disciplined approach to parenting. So, a parent has to constantly decide which side to lean on. The ultimate question though should be 'what is good for the child in the long run?'

Meena Janakiraman, a retired banker in Bengaluru, shares her experience, "When my son was young, he would throw a tantrum to finish his homework and when I would be trying to coax him, my in-laws would often intrude advising me about how important it is to let the child be. This used to frustrate me because I cannot afford to see his work remain unfinished every day. Kids learn very quickly how to play adults against each other. My son would complain to his grandmother incessantly until she interfered. Finally, I had to talk it out, take a stand and get him to finish his homework in the bedroom where it was just us."

It's OK for the family members to often pamper the child but

they should never undermine the parent's authority. Janakiraman adds, "In some areas, I let his grandparents take control, such as food habits, because I know they are better at it than me. I decide where to compromise and where not to and stick to that consistently. Eventually they understand that certain things matter to me more, and let go."

### # give the kid a break from adults:

In a joint family the child is surrounded by too many adults and tends to get a lot of attention which could end up being detrimental. Structure some playtime for the child with friends or send her to an activity class. "My daughter was cocooned by us for many years and her first exposure to other children was only when she entered school. She had a lot of adjustment issues initially because she was used to interacting with adults only, who would cater to her every desire. It was not easy for her to communicate with other children; things like taking turns or sharing or initiating conversations took her a while to get the hang of. Also the dominant usage of vernacular language at home and the use of English in the outside world made it a challenge for her to understand the other children," says Ritu Chaudhary, an IT professional in New Jersey, US, and mom to a 6-year-old.

### # avoid comparisons:

A joint family set-up could also entail living with siblings. This means that children are often pitted against their cousins. "When my daughter had speech-related issues and required therapy, it was a particularly trying phase. There would often be casual remarks about how her cousin spoke so eloquently while she was trying to

## Couple Clashes

You need to work it out between the two of you.

➔ **Harmony:** Couples fighting over parents or the family is not uncommon, but having to deal with—and please—many people in the family can put undue pressure on the couple's relationship. Dhivya Kannan, a homemaker from Sharjah, explains, "When we had a baby, we decided to move back to India and live with our parents. But it was not easy. There were too many people and too many opinions. In no time, my husband and I found ourselves bickering over silly issues. After a while, we decided that no matter what the arguments, we would not let it affect our relationship."

➔ **If it's not working, get away:** Evaluate whether the set-up is working for all, especially the kids. If it's not, look for options. What works during one phase of life need not work during another. Moving out is better than staying together and straining relationships.

get a basic idea of the language. It was very difficult for us to convince the grandparents that there was a medical issue involved, because for them, their grandchild was perfect. So we arranged for a counsellor to come home and talk to everyone, so they could understand the nuances involved. Fortunately, it worked. Just seeing our efforts in bringing a counsellor home made them appreciate the situation and handle it with better sensitivity in the future," explains Prerna Masand, an educator and mom to an 8-year-old. ❁