

# Confessions of a Daughter-in-Law

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**A**s a stand-up comic, I'm always looking for new material for my act. Fortunately I have a mother-in-law. She is, to say the least, somewhat critical of me. Our ideas on childrearing differ rather significantly, and she lets me know it. When my son Noah was 1, she tried to force me to take him to the doctor because, according to her, he wasn't blinking enough. So I said, "Maybe he's blinking when you're blinking—and you're missing it!" Unfortunately, she doesn't amuse easily.

Don't get me wrong. I love my mother-in-law and she loves me. She totally adores Noah, who is now 3. That said, I have to admit that spending time with her can be a challenge. I am a first-time mother and I realize that with every decision I make I may be increasing Noah's time on the therapy couch. But her never-ending questions don't help: "Why are his naps so long?" "Why isn't he wearing a hat?" "Are you ever going to cook him a non-frozen meal?" "Why is he always rubbing his nose?" "Why does his belly button stick out so far?" "Why is he screaming and throwing his food? Did you teach him that?" Why, yes, we did! We enjoy nothing more than shrieking at the dinner table while hurling food about. Of course, I would never say that to her—I've learned to repress my responses. And when I do make a serious attempt to explain that certain types of behavior may simply be due to low frustration tolerance or an innate character trait, she offers a vague accusation: "He must be getting it from somewhere...."

Considering all her doubts and fears, I sometimes wonder how she managed to raise two children of her own without having a nervous breakdown. How can she not recall how stubborn and occasionally out of control kids can be?

Then again, I believe that my husband has successfully traversed the Neuroses Zone and I'm thankful he turned out normal. Not that that helps me much. He'd gladly defend me against his mother's criticisms, but he honestly doesn't notice unless they're directed at him.

Otherwise, he's content with not being her immediate target.

Using humor neutralizes certain situations. For example, my mother-in-law's house is entirely kid-unfriendly, which causes stress for both

of us. She keeps her home like a museum. She's not at all thrilled with me when Noah takes a dive into her antique pillows...with chocolate all over his hands. These are the same pillows that her adult guests aren't even permitted to sit near. She's visibly shaken if crumbs accidentally drop. She once boasted that before we arrived, her kitchen floor was so clean you could eat off it. So I responded, "You can eat off mine, too, because there's food all over it!"

Luckily I've had years of experience laughing off my own dysfunction. Like when I was pregnant and my doctor told me to exercise a little less than I normally would. "For me that would be a coma," I replied. Then there's my father, who is such a hypochondriac that we actually had to stop him from watching *ER* after one episode led him to believe he had a cyst on his ovary. I told him, "Dad, remember, you don't have ovaries—they were removed when you had your hysterectomy."

Sometimes I reach my boiling point with my mother-in-law. But I diffuse my anger when I think about how much pure joy my son gets from being with his grandma and how much pleasure she experiences from her grandson. I think of how she and my father-in-law are survivors of Nazi concentration camps. She endured the unimaginable. I can see how protective she is and I know that she appreciates Noah with an intensity that only one who has suffered devastating pain and loss can.

I see how much Noah enjoys her affection and doting. He gets to taste the homemade chicken soup handed down from his great-grandmother's Eastern European recipe. On warm days, Noah and his grandma hold hands and search for "Mama Rabbit" in her garden. He asks to go to Grandma's house to bake cookies and even to take a bath. And we go because we can. Noah has the benefit of experiencing a link in the chain of his heritage I hope he will always treasure.

Ultimately, I'm learning to endure the criticism from my mother-in-law because I can see that I'm helping to create beautiful memories and an eternal bond between my son and his grandma. Plus, I know I've been blessed with the kind of family that will never let me run out of new material. **Q**

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