A clinical handout for couples

# IN-LAW BOUNDARIES
# THE COUPLE TEAM PLAYBOOK

A printable plan for couples dealing with a pushy parent-in-law or extended-family pattern. Bring it to your therapist, fill it in together, and use the scripts at the moment of contact.

## COUPLE TEAM RULES

Read these first. They set the frame for everything that follows.

### We first
The partner whose parent it is leads the message. Use "we" language so the in-law hears a couple, not one defector.

### Be observable
Boundaries describe behaviors. No drop-ins. No advice unless asked. Vague rules invite re-litigation.

### Don't JADE
Justify, Argue, Defend, Explain. JADE-ing turns the limit into a debate. Keep it brief.

### Decide consequences in advance
Pre-commit what happens if the limit is crossed. Follow through calmly, the first time.

### Expect an extinction burst
It often gets louder before it gets better. That is not a sign the boundary is wrong.

### Repair and re-invite
Pair every limit with a path back to connection. The point is a workable relationship, not a wall.

## BOUNDARY BUILDER (FILL-IN)

Write 2–3 versions for your top triggers (advice, drop-ins, criticism). One copy per couple, kept somewhere you can find it.

### Situation
*(where, who, when)*

### What I'm protecting
*(value or need)*

### Boundary
*(behavioral, specific) — "Please _____."*

### One-sentence script
*Use "we." "We _____."*

### Consequence
*Predictable, calm. "If _____, we will _____."*

### Repair / re-invite
*Keep the bond. "We'd love to _____."*

## SCRIPT BANK

Copy, paste, and rehearse. Use "we" language. Keep it BIFF: Brief, Informative, Friendly, Firm.

### Unsolicited advice — in person

"Thanks for caring. We're not taking advice on this. If we want input, we'll ask."

### Unsolicited advice — over text

"Appreciate the ideas. We're trying it our way for now. If we need suggestions, we'll reach out."

### Criticism of a partner

"We don't speak about each other that way. Let's change the subject." If it continues: "We'll pause here and talk another time."

### Drop-in visits

"Please text before coming over. Today doesn't work without a heads-up. Let's plan Saturday at 3."

### Holiday or schedule pressure

"We're rotating holidays this year. We're at home this time. Let's plan a dinner the following weekend."

### New-baby hygiene and visits

"We're holding off on kisses for now. Handwashing first, please. If that's hard, we'll plan visits for later."

### Religious or cultural expectations

"We respect your traditions. We're choosing a different approach for our home. Let's find a way to celebrate together that fits both."

### Money or gift conditions

"Thank you for offering. We're not able to accept that with strings. We'd love your help in a different way — let's talk about it."

## CONSEQUENCE LADDER

Choose the lightest effective step. Move up only if the prior step doesn't hold.

**1**

### Reminder

Brief, warm, firm. "We're not discussing this."

**2**

### Redirect

Change the topic, change the activity. Hand a baby. Refill a glass.

**3**

### End the interaction

"We're heading out / ending the call now. Try again next time."

**4**

### Time-limit

"We're taking a few weeks' break from in-person visits. Calls are fine."

**5**

### Limit the channel

Text only. Meet in public. Visits only when both partners are present.

## COACHING THE PARTNER WITH THE IN-LAW

The partner whose parent it is takes the lead. The other partner stays in the room, not in the middle.

### Lead the message

"We decided…" You speak to your parent. Your partner is not the messenger.

### Validate and limit

"Mom / Dad, I know you're trying to help. We're not taking advice on this. If it continues, we'll end the call."

### Close the triangle

"I won't discuss my partner without them in the room. Let's talk when we're all together."

## PRACTICE CORNER — BROKEN RECORD

Use the same sentence, up to three times, no escalation. Rehearse it out loud before the next contact.

1. "We're not taking advice on this."
2. "We hear you. We're not taking advice on this."
3. "We'll hop off if this keeps going. We're not taking advice on this."

## THREE THINGS TO REMEMBER

### Consistency

Consistency builds the new pattern. The first three repetitions matter most.

### Keep it BIFF

Brief. Informative. Friendly. Firm. From Bill Eddy's high-conflict work.

### Bridge back

"We'd love to ___; please ___ so we can enjoy our time together."

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If you're working with a therapist, bring this in. If you want help running this play in real life — what to say, when to follow through — that's exactly what couples work is for.

Educational only, not therapy.