

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

When two sets of parents
meddle in one relationship (yours),
**THE RESULT CAN BE
FULL-SCALE WAR**

Here are the strategies for peace and disarmament: My partner may have his faults, but I do not count his mother among them. This cheerful woman knits me sweaters, cleans my kitchen, and naps in my living room, the color of whose walls she heartily approves. From all that I gather, however, she is a rare bird. Apparently, the main effect parents (his and yours) have on a relationship, is to promote an atmosphere of war in which loyalties must be proclaimed, sides taken. To forestall all-out warfare, I see two possibilities: (1) Start a sister group to Parents Without Partners called Partners without Parents; (2) Draw up and follow intelligent and humane Articles of War, samples of which follow.

Article one: Combatants must keep a log of how many times they see each set of parents. To avoid misunderstandings, this should be as complete a record as possible, including the number of hours spent with each, the activities engaged in, the amount of travel time, etc. That way, if you find yourself in an argument about the time spent with your parents as opposed to his, you will have the facts at your fingertips and be in a position to point out that meeting your parents for dinner at a three-star restaurant six times a year is more than balanced out by the fourteen hours of bus travel required to visit his parents once a year, especially since that visit always seems to coincide with his father's annual hernia operation.

Article two: Combatants must refrain from using parents as evidence to support contentions regarding each other's limitations, as when you tell your partner that since you spent an evening in his father's company you're no longer surprised at his own ability to behave, on certain festive occasions, as if he had been dead for several hours. Nor is he allowed to point out that, having eaten dinner at your mother's, he now understands why all your meals taste as if a large animal has been sitting on them.

Article three: Combatants must defend each other from parental insinuations, such as his mother's remarks to the effect that before he met you he remembered her birthday, had a brighter future in his chosen profession, looked cleaner, and was, generally speaking, a better son all around. This

also goes for your mother's hints that if he hadn't hustled you onto the primrose path, you would now be the legal wife of a good provider, like your cousin Doris, whose husband is doing so well in cement.

Article four: Combatants should ally themselves to fend off parental intrusions into their daily lives. Among other things, this means asking your partner's aid in stemming the tide of his mother's decorating help, which is chiefly expressed by the arrival at your apartment of various pieces of her attic furniture and framed photographs of all her friends' daughters. It means, too, declining to support his mother in her campaign to get your partner to donate his oil paints, brushes and canvases to the Salvation Army and return to dental school. And when your mother tries to enlist his help in getting you to make a baby shower for (who else?) Doris, he should tell her gently but firmly that he is *your* partner, not hers.

Article five: Combatants should make it clear to each other that they must fight their own parental battles. You refuse, for instance, to tell his mother when she calls that he is away indefinitely on a secret, overseas mission for his firm, a company that deals exclusively in cleaning carpets. Conversely, he is within his rights to decline to tell your parents—because you are too chicken to do it yourself—that if they ever again tell their friends that your job as head buyer for a hardware chain is “something to do until she settles down,” you will seek out legal proof that you are adopted.

Article six: Combatants should never take sides in the endless battle of the generations. Remember, what's going on between your partner and his parents has been going on for 20 or 30 years, and if you think you're going to settle their argument about which parent is responsible for his bad habits, you are dreaming. Ditto his lunatic notion that he can get you and your father to have a conversation that does not end with your calling him “a throwback to the Stone Age.”

One final warning. Under no circumstances should you ever utter the following: “You're right, your mother *is* a monster!”

by Bette-Jane Raphael