

we are family?



COPING WITH HIS NOT-
QUITE-PERFECT SIBLINGS

SIBLINGS are the in-laws nobody talks about. The truth is, winning over your fiancé's brothers and sisters can be just as daunting as getting on good terms with his parents. Here's how to get off to a smooth start.

BY CYNTHIA HANSON

1 the adjustment period

Fact of engaged life: It's normal for them to eye you with suspicion at first, rather than instantly embrace you as their long-lost sister. "Marriage creates a new equilibrium for the whole family—not just the couple," says Evan Imber-Black, Ph.D., a marriage and family therapist in Stamford, Connecticut. Don't take coolness personally—give your siblings-in-law time to accept the new family order.

2 stick together

Before the wedding, decide where you and your fiancé stand on issues that involve family members. For example, how would you feel about your fiancé making plans for you two with his brother without consulting you first? Is it okay to let a brother or sister drop by unannounced? "If you don't present a united front, siblings may try to divide and conquer," explains Steve Brody, Ph.D., a psychologist specializing in couples therapy in Cambria, California. Even if you agree that dog-sitting isn't your thing, your sister-in-law may

not take kindly to your suggestion of a kennel. Decline together, or have your fiancé tell her about your mutual decision.

3 make small overtures

Including his siblings in your bridal party is a nice—but not mandatory—gesture. Try inviting them to lunch or pitching in when they're moving. If they're interested, get them involved in your wedding plans. Suzy, 31, asked her husband's four sisters to help her choose the wedding dress. "Bill is close to them, and I knew he'd be happy if we bonded," she says. Still, pushing too hard can be a turnoff. Just break the ice—then follow their lead.

4 a family affair?

As newlyweds, one of your chief challenges is to establish yourselves as a couple while staying connected to family. But don't become your husband's social secre-

seven things never to say to them

Steer clear of these remarks:

- "You're nothing like your brother."
- "Don't tell your mother I said this, but..."
- "Your brother's right. You are lazy."
- "So you're the one who got Aunt Emily's nose."
- "You must have been really cute when you were little."
- "Sorry, I'm only having *friends* in the wedding party."
- "I know your brother better than you do."

tary. "You shouldn't make all the calls, buy every present, and extend all the invitations," says Imber-Black. "Encourage him to maintain his sibling relationships."

When Lauren, 27, married Steve, 26, she accepted his close relationship with his younger brother, Eric, 25. Some of the rules changed after the wedding—Steve and Eric no longer get together at the last minute—but the brothers still find time to go to Cubs games and meet for drinks. "It was tough in the beginning," admits Eric, who is single. "I miss the spontaneity."

5 be diplomatic

Your brother-in-law makes Al Bundy look like a Renaissance man, and your sister-in-law is apparently an expert on everything, including your wardrobe. But to preserve harmony, try to let politeness prevail. "We tend to get angry with difficult relatives rather than use diplomacy," says Brody. Next time his sister annoys you, issue a pleasant but firm response (much as you would to a coworker) and change the subject. Don't vent to your fiancé. "Ed and Melissa's relationship predates me," says June, 26. "Complaining won't make her more trustworthy. But it will hurt Ed."

6 bridging troubled waters

If you're at odds over something wedding related, take the opportunity to set a precedent for dealing with future conflicts. Your fiancé should play the go-between, telling his brothers and sisters when they've crossed the line. Suzy asked Bill to set his sister Jenny straight after she sniped about the bridesmaids' dresses for the third time. Jenny never uttered another word about it. Two years later, Suzy and Jenny are more than sisters-in-law—they're friends.