

My mother-in-law criticised me to my boyfriend. I think she should apologise

A woman wants an apology from her partner's mother. Mariella Frostrup says she must drop her demand and take the higher ground.

If you have a dilemma, send a brief email to mariella.frostrup@observer.co.uk



'Your mother-in-law's diatribe to your partner smacks of guilt and a ruffled ego,' says Mariella Frostrup. Photograph: Getty Images

Mariella Frostrup

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The dilemma *My partner and I have two daughters, one nearly four and the other 14 months, in whom my boyfriend's mother has shown little interest. I suggested she get involved and help me make curtains for our eldest's room. But after reluctantly agreeing, she let everyone know that she felt "used". Then she popped around for the first time to find my mother and sister at our house babysitting. The next day I suggested he phone her, and she unleashed a tirade against me down the line to him. I was dragging him down, I had never been good enough for him, our home was squalid, the girls dragged up and out of control. Furthermore, I obviously sat on my arse all day while he did my bidding. An apology has not been forthcoming and our recent holiday was ruined by us dwelling on it.*

Mariella replies You know as well as I do that there's only one way to stop it being an issue and that is: to stop it being an issue. Your mother-in-law must shoulder the blame for her outburst but not for the length of time you allow it to fester and sour your life. I appreciate that she is a source of regular frustration, that her contribution to her grandchildren's wellbeing is next to zero and that she has behaved irrationally. But I am curious about what exactly you hope to achieve by eliciting this holy grail of an apology.

As you hint, she clearly had her nose put out of joint when she discovered your family doing their bit. Her diatribe to your partner smacks of guilt, a ruffled ego. The funny thing about irrational behaviour, which I admit isn't amusing to the recipient of it, is that the participant is generally aware of their untenable position; they're just not in control of their emotions. No wonder she won't apologise willingly - she knows she went way over the line. I'm not asking you to feel sorry for her but standing your ground so resolutely and demanding she ask your forgiveness is as hardheaded as her refusal to do so.

In your longer letter you say your partner is on your side but fails to see why his mother should be denied access to her grandchildren. I wonder if it is maturity that's helping me see his point of view, too. There was definitely a time when I would have recommended continuing the punishment. She certainly shouldn't be rewarded for her behaviour, but should she be denied visitation rights to her grandchildren? They should have their own relationships with their grandmother.

I'm also slightly confused. You say she plays no part in their lives. In that case, being denied access wouldn't be a big deal. Could it

be that there is an epidemic of exaggeration going on, with two main offenders? Relationships between mothers-in-law and their inherited daughters are famously tricky. Standing your ground, stamping your foot and demanding an apology may help restore your injured ego but in the long run it won't resolve the issues clearly creating havoc with your communication. Personally, I'd be tempted to take the higher ground. Within reason, allow her whatever she asks for, whether it's a visit from the kids or a date to stop by, but facilitate nothing she doesn't request. Clearly she needs to learn the boundaries between acceptable discord and what is simply a tantrum. The best way to show her is by example.

Ultimately it really doesn't matter what your mother-in-law thinks of your relationship, your parenting or your home hygiene, as long as you and your partner are in accord. Life is much easier when harmony reigns. Prolonging bouts of bolshiness, particularly towards someone whose irrational outburst is all too recognisable as ridiculous, serves neither of you well. It's far more important that instead of stewing and fretting, you and your partner can sit and have a laugh about it. Allowing her tirade to set the tone in your home is definitely a bad move.

Take a note from all those clever Crufts trainers and impose a totally unemotional reward-based system where good behaviour gains her access and treats while bad behaviour sees communication curtailed.

Finally, you really shouldn't have to suggest your partner calls his mum. You might benefit from taking your hands off the controls at home. There's the tiniest inkling from your letter that it's either your way or no way. Dictatorships are very out of fashion.

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