

Keeping it in the Family

Jennifer Nelson

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From left, Jeanne Plumley, her daughter Rebecca Miller and Rebecca's daughter Ellery

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Almost nine years ago, Rebecca Miller left her career as a lawyer to open a pie bakery in Columbia, Missouri, with her 69-year-old mother, Jeanne Plumley. "We literally had *no clue* what we were doing," says Miller, "but despite generally getting in our own way, we're now a company with over \$1 million in sales and two locations."

She and her mother have now added in Miller's husband Jason as chief operating officer; their children, ages 17 and 20, also work for [Peggy Jean's Pies](https://www.peggyjeanspies.com/) (<https://www.peggyjeanspies.com/>), which is named after Jeanne and her former pie-baking partner Peggy Day, who passed away in 2005 but whose business and baking skills are still revered.

"When I say we are a family business, I really mean our entire family is in one or both stores every day," Miller says. "And when we go home, my mom lives across the road from us, so we just never really leave the business part of our lives behind."

If anyone has the recipe for making a family business successful, it could be Miller.

Key Ingredients: Respect and Patience

"Look, we battled in some of our earliest days," she says. "I'm an only child raised by a [single mother](#)

(<https://www.nextavenue.org/learning-rummikub-at-the-pool/>), and we were so close as I grew up. That said, you think you know someone until you work 100-hour weeks together and learn about them in an entirely new framework."

She says the family uses everyone's strengths — and weaknesses, which has taken some honest conversations over the years. They've had to be open to how others work even when it changes the traditional relationship dynamics of a mother and child, husband and wife, and grandmother and grandchild, which can be challenging.

Miller says it takes so much respect for each other — not to mention [patience](#) (<https://www.nextavenue.org/maintain-healthy-family-relationships/>) and understanding — to make it all work. Consider when you're frustrated, tired or cranky after a hard day at work, and you want to vent your frustrations on those closest to you — your mother, father, husband or wife. Except in business, you can't vent those frustrations on them because you work with them, and you wouldn't do that if they were employees.

Working With Relatives

In addition to the Millers, several other experienced family-business owners agreed to play the role of mentor and share what they have learned about working with relatives.

Treat everyone equally. "Although it can be challenging, it's crucial for morale to treat your nephew or child the same as an outside employee," says Matthew Appleton, eCommerce manager of [Appleton Sweets](https://www.appletonsweets.co.uk/) (<https://www.appletonsweets.co.uk/>), a brother-run wholesale confectioner in London. You're also expected to ease intrafamily tensions — both new ones as they arise and those that festered years before the business began.

Set boundaries on who makes key decisions. "My

mom and I work so well because our strengths are very different," explains Alexis Taub, founder of [Alexis Jae Jewelry](https://alexisjae.com/) (https://alexisjae.com/), who, together with her mother, Karen, continues the 70-year-old family business started by her grandfather.

"My mom could truly sell ice during a snowstorm. I prefer operations, which my mom hates. We have clearly divided our roles based on our strengths and weaknesses," says Taub.

Communication is Critical

Taub says she speaks to her mom upwards of 20 times a day, so when there's a key decision to be made, they run it by each other in passing. "About 99% of the time, we will agree on the decision," Taub says. "If we don't, whoever's area of expertise it's in gets the final say."

The mother-daughter duo faces problems all the time. For example, their jewelry can be delayed by customs inspectors or they will need to raise prices because of an increase in raw materials costs. "We always address problems head-on by being honest with the person it affects," says Taub.

Leave Work at the Office. Jeff Moriarty's family has owned [Mothers Family Rings](https://www.mothersfamilyrings.com/) (https://www.mothersfamilyrings.com/) in Crown Point, Indiana, for 30 years. "My father started it," he says, "and now my mother, brother and cousin are involved. I just got into the business about a year ago" as the marketing manager.

Moriarty says one tip he has for others looking to get into business with family is not to bring work home with you. "The first couple of months, every time I saw family, I would only talk about work with them," he recalls. Finally, he says his dad told him to let it go and try to leave work at work and keep family gatherings about family. "It was tough, but eventually, I was able to keep that promise," Moriarty says. "It has made things much better outside of work."

Even though you may gather for a Sunday meal with the people you work with every day, after hours is not the time to hash out work problems or talk about company finances or disputes. Instead, keep [family time](https://www.nextavenue.org/family-businesses-can-set-workfamily-boundaries/) (https://www.nextavenue.org/family-businesses-can-set-workfamily-boundaries/) about the people you love and save work-related talk for nine-to-five.

Develop a Succession Plan. Few things may be as rewarding as passing a successful family business down to the next generation, but make sure the next generation wants it. Nothing is more awkward and uncomfortable than trying to force children to follow in your footsteps when they don't want to.

"As a business intermediary specializing in the sales of existing businesses, I have frequently seen instances where the existing business owner is ready to exit but either does not know how to transfer the business to the family member properly or has a family member who does not want to take over the business," says Terri Sherman of Florida Business Exchange in Jacksonville, Florida.

She says preparation is key to optimizing the value of your business when it comes to succession or exit. Talk with your family members and find out who wants to succeed you — and do it early.

Mentor potential outside successors so that if family members do not want the business or do not want to remain with the company when you sell it, a buyer coming in from the outside can fill the roles of family members who leave.

"Always treat the business like you were going to sell it to someone outside," Sherman says. "That will help you remain as objective as possible in your operations."

In short, says Miller of Peggy Jean's Pies, you must communicate, believe in what you are building and remember that what you're building is for the good of the family.

"And even when you get mad at each other — and you will — remember that family comes first," she adds. "The rest will work itself out."