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## **Involving a spouse's children in the wedding ceremony**

It's hard to calculate the U.S. divorce rate for second and third marriages in which at least one spouse has children under 18, but most sociologists estimate that it's approximately 65 to 70 percent. If you are a parent and you plan to marry, you know that you'll have to work very hard to make your new family unit last and thrive. Involving the children in your wedding ceremony can be one small but significant step toward helping them open their lives to your spouse.

Often parents spend less time with their children when they are preparing to marry. This is unfortunate, because children are almost always troubled by the upcoming marriage, and their parent and stepparent can help them tremendously by giving them plenty of time and attention. The wedding ceremony itself is a particularly good time to honor a child with your attention. This does not require a major performance by your child. Still, if your child does not want to take part in the wedding ceremony, respect her desire and pay her plenty of attention in the months before and after the wedding. \*\*

You might want to celebrate your wedding as a family event, that is, a transition that is just as important for your child as it is for you and your partner. This approach is especially helpful for a child who is jealous of the attention you're giving your partner and the attention everyone is lavishing on the wedding. But the family-centered wedding has drawbacks, and it's not for every couple. You can certainly give your children a role in your wedding without putting them at the center of it and without celebrating your wedding as a family's rite of passage.

Thanks to the creative efforts of many couples, more and more weddings are accommodating each spouse's children from a previous relationship. Here I'll note and critique three of the most popular roles for one partner's kids.

### **1. Sand ceremony**

**Description:** Sometime during the wedding ceremony, each partner and each child picks up a container of colored sand. Each person's sand is a different color, and the sand represents the person who holds it. All of the family members simultaneously pour the colored sand from their containers into a single large bottle. This large bottle of sand in a new color represents their union. The officiant or the participants might narrate the act or describe its symbolism before or after the pouring.

**Critique:** I like the sand ceremony when it is used by couples with no children. But in most cases, I don't think it's a good ceremony to perform with children. If a child takes the symbolism to heart, the ceremony might hinder her transition into a stepfamily.

This ceremony forces a child to symbolically pour her whole self into the marriage when in fact she has some reservations about it. Yes, just about every child has reservations about a parent remarrying, no matter how negligent her other parent is or how good the stepparent she is gaining. You should not deny your child's fears during the wedding; instead, you should work to allay them.

Furthermore, the child is left with an empty vial after the sand ceremony. Symbolically, she gives something up. And many children feel like they're already losing a parent and a way of life when the parent enters a new marriage. If two consenting adults want to celebrate giving up their separate souls or destinies during their wedding, that's fine. But a child should not be asked to give up her individuality.

Instead of performing an act that symbolically reduces three or more individuals to one family, you might create a ritual that emphasizes the additive nature of remarriage. You might celebrate the fact that your child is gaining an extra adult in her life – one who will not replace her other parent, but who will add to the group of people who will nurture her. You might make some object to represent each of your child's parents (and one to represent any other adult who has played a particularly significant role in raising the child, such as a relative or your ex's partner), and your partner might contribute a new object representing himself, perhaps giving this object to the child. A similar ceremony would represent your partner's joining your family with no reference to your ex, and yet another variation on this ceremony would represent the joining of two people who both have children (with representations of each child, of course).

After all, families who perform the sand ceremony represent the fantasy of becoming a nuclear family. You cannot create a nuclear family by remarrying, but you can celebrate some of the advantages of a stepfamily over a nuclear family, such as its bringing people together who developed their ways of life separately.

## **2. Family Medallion or similar gift**

<http://www.familymedallion.com>

**Description:** In the late 1980's, a minister named Roger Coleman began selling pendants, rings, and similar items in the shape of three interlocked circles. He called them "Family Medallions," and his business is still booming. Coleman recommends presenting the medallions as gifts to children (and occasionally parents) on a variety of family occasions – adoptions, for instance. But most of his customers buy the medallions as gifts to their children when they marry someone new. They present the medallions to the children during their wedding ceremonies. With every order, Coleman's company includes a script for a ceremony that can be used to present the medallion. This medallion ceremony is intended to be part of the wedding ceremony. Of course couples were presenting symbolic gifts to stepchildren during their wedding ceremonies before the Family Medallion came along, but this product has made the practice much more popular.

**Critique:** I think it's a great idea to present a meaningful gift to a stepchild during the wedding ceremony. Every stepchild has her own needs, but this is a good way to honor many stepchildren's experiences of the creation of a new family. Presenting a child with a gift does not force her to do anything she's not wholeheartedly ready to do. By presenting a gift during the wedding, you offer your attention, your support, and a modicum of security.

You can give your child almost any gift as long as your ceremony invests the gift with significance. Or you can perform an act of giving without presenting a material gift. For instance, you might pledge love and support to your child during the wedding while placing your child's hands in your own, and your partner might perform an act of giving more appropriate to a new stepparent. (In all ceremonies that involve children, don't be afraid to treat parent and stepparent differently – your roles in your child's life will always be quite different.)

If you want to present a gift to your child during the ceremony, should the gift be the Family Medallion? For many people, the medallion's symbol is a powerful evocation of family unity, and of course the medallion looks nice. Still, it has a few problems. Cash-strapped couples might have difficulty paying for it, especially if they have several children and choose to present medallions to each of them. And the ceremony included with the medallion feels Christian or Judaeo-Christian at the broadest. You can, however, rewrite the ceremony, and the medallion's symbol works independently of any religion.

Then there's the question of how your child is likely to interpret the medallion's symbol, three interlocking circles, now and in the years to come. Yes, your child will think about that symbol, because she will invest so much concern in this marriage. The symbol looks much more like a representation of two parents and a child than like a parent, a stepparent, and a child. Your child already has another parent, and she probably has some worries about your partner trying to replace that parent. If that parent is dead or mostly absent from the child's life, the child might be particularly anxious about someone trying to replace him. If your child seems especially worried about your partner trying to replace her other parent, the Family Medallion might not be the best gift to present her during the wedding.

Many studies show that the older the child is at the time of remarriage, the less likely she is to bond closely with a stepparent. If your children are teenagers, your new family will probably never bear much resemblance to a two-parent family. If you're both bringing children to the marriage, your family will be especially complex. Don't pretend that you'll be a nuclear family; use the wedding to celebrate the complexity of your family and the fact that your relationships might take any of several forms.

### **3. Making vows to the children or exchanging vows with them**

**Description:** Another popular way for parents and stepparents to include children in the wedding is to make vows to the children in addition to making vows to each other. Sometimes the children follow these vows with their own vows to their parent and stepparent.

**Critique:** In general I like the practice of adults making vows to the children, but I think it's wrong to ask children to make vows to the adults. Adults make their marriage vows freely, but a child cannot freely make a vow to her parents. Her parents' daily power over her will pressure her into making a promise too far-reaching for a child to stand behind.

Say a child promises during the wedding to love and respect her stepdad. But she has difficulty coming to really feel love for him, and a few months after the wedding, she has a fight with her stepdad and feels like she hates him in the hours afterwards. She believes she broke her promise. The worst part about this is that her wedding vow was set on a par with her parents' vows. She believes she broke her promise easily, and she concludes that her parents' vows to each other – and to her – can be broken easily too. Children of divorced parents already worry enough that their parents will break their vows and relinquish their commitments.

In contrast, vows made by a parent and stepparent to a child can make the child feel more secure and hopeful about her future. The important thing is to choose your vows carefully. Do not promise anything you're less than certain you can deliver. Did I mention that 65 to 70% of marriages involving stepchildren under 18 end in divorce? Your child will count on you and your partner to follow through.

If you feel like it's too risky to make any vow to your child at your wedding, you and your partner might each read a speech to the child during the wedding ceremony instead. Your speeches might take any number of forms. For instance, a parent's speech might thank the child for weathering all the difficulties of divorce and remarriage, and it might tell the child how much you love her and how important she is to you. A stepparent's speech might acknowledge that the child has the primary claim on the parent, it might express excitement about performing whatever role the child will allow him in her life, and it might tell the child that the stepparent is ready to work through all the difficulties that arise as he is integrated into the family.

### **In conclusion**

I'm sorry that this column has consisted of warning after warning about what not to do. Please don't let that paralyze you. Every act carries risks. Just involve your children in your wedding and your wedding preparation in *some* way. It's an honor they will appreciate.

How might you involve your children in the wedding ceremony? By creating a speech or an action that addresses your child's most potent fears about this marriage. You'll never know all of your child's fears, but work with what she tells you and what you notice. When possible, the speech or action you choose should make some progress toward allaying the child's fears. Just make sure you're presenting your child with realistic, attainable hopes.

After the wedding, follow through on working to make this new family a place for all of you to thrive. There are plenty of books, articles, and websites about stepfamilies that can guide and support you in this overwhelming task. Congratulations and best wishes to your family!

### **Three of the many resources for stepfamilies:**

A collection of good articles on remarriage and stepfamilies:

<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/family/remar.htm>

I particularly like this psychotherapist's many articles on remarriage and stepfamilies. Click on "articles to read" for the broadest selection of articles:

<http://www.familyonwards.com>

An article that summarizes stepfamilies' problems and offers lots of advice:

<http://library.adoption.com/Step-Families/Why-Step-Relationships-Arent-Easy/article/3810/1.html>

\*\* For simplicity, I often refer to the parent who is marrying as "she." I refer to her as a divorced parent who has one female child by a former partner, and I assume that she will now marry a man who has no children. But the cases I discuss are applicable to a much wider variety of parents and stepparents.

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