

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Helpful wedding tips for blended families

BY AMANDA BURHOP

Congratulations! You've survived the first wave of blended family challenges by introducing your partner to your kids and vice versa. Maybe you're even successfully past the move-in phase. While the children have made peace with the idea of a new person in their lives, the idea of "marriage" is a whole other story.

According to the Stepfamily Information website (sfhelp.org), blended-family weddings are challenging because they involve one or more children from a previous union. Because there are no steadfast rules about how to resolve the uncertainties of including all stepchildren in the marriage ceremony, finding ways to maintain a child's emotional comfort and dignity is tricky. But it's not impossible.

Cass Skinner Lopata and Andy Lopata of Eugene had two wedding ceremonies 15 months apart. In each ceremony, they found innovative ways to involve Cass' son and two daughters and Andy's son in the big day. For their first ceremony, the children sat in a circle around Cass and Andy, where they held onto their stuffed animals. Attached were the two wedding rings.

Cass considers the second ceremony a "celebration of the family as a whole." For their slightly more formal wedding, the children made loads of origami cranes to decorate the ceiling of the church. The kids were also given rings which they wore on necklaces made by the oldest son. To make the day even more "kid friendly," the reception featured fun activities — like arts and crafts — for the kids to enjoy.

"We had an ideal situation," Cass explains. Not only were the kids excited about the "permanent-family situation," but they had their friends and family to extend additional help and support. For those less confident about how to involve multiple children in the ceremony, here are some helpful tips, gathered from websites like Stepfamily Information, The Knot (theknot.com), I Do Take Two (www.idotaketwo.com) and others.

Family Medallion Service: This service gives the wedding a family-oriented feel. After the rings are exchanged between the two partners, the children are asked to join them. Each child is given a piece of gold or silver metal with three interlocking circles. If the family has multiple children, try the same exchange with another form of jewelry. No matter the item exchanged, the idea of family unity remains the same.

Lighting Ceremony: Another way to include children is to have a lighting cere-

mony where the parents and children light a unity candle to symbolize the bonding of the new family. Theknot.com also suggests a unity-sand ceremony for those looking for something less traditional. Before the wedding each child is assigned a sand color. During the ceremony sands are blended together into a hurricane lamp. Be sure to keep the lamp after the ceremony and place it somewhere special.

Special Child Vows: A great way to include children in the wedding is to create vows for them to say or agree to. Parents should also write personal statements to the children that reflect their feelings about the new family.

Roles: Of course there are the traditional ones: flower girl, ring bearer, groomsman and bridesmaid. But older children can also be ushers, present party favors and be in charge of handing out wedding programs or dealing with the guestbook.



The Skinner Lopata kids join in the ceremony

Behind the Scenes: For the shy kid or the overachiever who wants to spread helpfulness all over the place, wedding planning is a perfect time to get involved. Ask those children for their ideas on wedding colors, flowers, food selection and more. And when choosing a cake or side dish, always let them sample. After all, the fastest way to the heart is through the mouth! If a kid doesn't have a sweet tooth, ask him or her to make party favors or fun decorations.

You're thinking: "So what if the child suggests yellow and black for the colors and curly fries for food?" Well, you're going to have to find a way to balance their sensitive emotions while fulfilling your needs. As in most arenas of life, compromise is key. Just because you're coping with blended-family stress doesn't mean you should put the kids' needs above your own. But do strive to be inclusive. After all, just as you will, they will probably remember the day for as long as they live. ■

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