



HANDLING FAMILY TENSIONS  
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PUNCTUALITY

# Delicate Issues

Weddings, by their very nature of bringing families together, can also be a catalyst for tensions to arise. We've already touched on potentially tricky subjects such as compiling a guest list and paying for the wedding, but there are sometimes issues of fractured family relationships to be addressed.

## **FAMILY TENSIONS**

Families don't always come in matching sets, and it can be a testing time for a bride and groom dealing with acrimony between divorced parents, step-parents, and sometimes siblings who've taken sides with one faction or other. Marriage celebrants sometimes observe distressed brides and grooms trying to juggle such tension on what should be the happiest day of their life.

### **Putting difficulties aside**

Addressing 'fractious party' issues such as those cited in the panel on page 112 can be difficult but these scenarios are certainly not uncommon. However, there are also happy stories, where divorced parents, new partners, difficult grandmas and others put their problems aside in the interests of a warm and wonderful day for their children.

## WEDDING-DAY BLUES

- ♥ One bride was found crying bitterly in the carpark before her wedding ceremony because she'd just learned her estranged father had turned up uninvited. Other guests were trying to persuade him to leave, but he was standing his ground.
- ♥ A bridegroom was similarly reduced to tears when his mother failed, without warning, to show up at the wedding. She had planned to do a reading and be part of a joint parental blessing at the ceremony, but she was apparently making a point that she hadn't been involved enough in the wedding planning.
- ♥ At another wedding, the bride's father and his new partner stood in the front row at the ceremony glaring at the ex-wife, causing much unhappiness for the bride as she was making her vows.
- ♥ On sibling difficulties, one couple went to the trouble and expense of hiring a security guard to prevent the bridegroom's brother attending their wedding. He had threatened to disrupt it because he disapproved of the bride.

At one such wedding ceremony, the couple's four parents, each of whom had a new partner, came forward with the step-parents to give their blessing to the marriage. Eight people stood shoulder to shoulder, beaming with happiness and pride. And all the guests reached for their hankies. Many estranged parents proudly walk their daughter down the aisle together, sit together and share speech-making duties in the best interests of their children.

### Prepare ways to make things easier

There are no easy answers to family tensions, and it can seem very cruel that parents in particular would let their own past and present problems cast a shadow over their child's wedding day. Better to be civilised than uncivilised, but it doesn't always work like that. So it is helpful if the bride and groom can anticipate such problems, talk them through early, and think about ways of making the situation easier.

- ♥ For example, don't leave a solo parent stranded. If the bride's father is attending with his new

- wife, and the ex-wife is on her own, make sure she has supportive people with her, perhaps her other children, her mother or father, a good friend.
- ♥ Similarly, think about the seating plan for the ceremony and reception, and put some distance between various fractious parties; again, make sure the key players have good support people with them.
  - ♥ Try to forestall problems. One father, after much tactful discussion, attended his daughter's wedding without his new wife; it was a hard decision for them to make but the dynamics were such that it could have ruined the wedding day and he and his new partner were not prepared to see that happen.

## WHO WILL SPEAK?

Think carefully about who you ask to play key roles such as making speeches, proposing toasts and the like. Even in harmonious situations issues can arise between the bride's family and groom's family about who gets to have their say. Never assume that someone's mother or father will be too shy or awkward to make a speech; people like to be asked, even if they turn the offer down.

Some parents find it very hurtful to see the new in-laws in the limelight when they have somehow been sidelined. If you can be even-handed in the roles you ask parents to play you will certainly reap the rewards of happy faces. Like everything to do with a wedding, honesty is the best policy; hard as it may be to raise delicate matters with parents and others, the temporary pain may produce long-term gain.

## CHOOSING ATTENDANTS

Some couples also agonise over the choice of their bridesmaids, best man and groomsmen. If you're the bride-to-be and have a tight-knit group of, say, five or six women friends, plus you've got a couple of sisters, how do you choose two bridesmaids? The same dilemma, of course, applies to the groom. Sometimes

couples simply decide on a huge wedding party and ask them all. Others will take a deep breath and choose two, and ask other close friends or siblings to do readings, be the MC, propose a toast, act as an usher, or witness the marriage documents.

Many couples minimise the risk of offending friends by opting to have only their siblings as attendants, or they just choose flower girls and page boys from among their little nieces and nephews. Occasionally a bride will ask her brother to be her attendant, and a groom will ask his sister. Or they'll put everyone in the too-hard-basket and decide not to have attendants, maybe asking the two mothers or fathers to witness the documents.

## Choose supportive people

When you are choosing attendants, though, also remember you want people who'll give you plenty of support in the lead up to the wedding, and on the big day. Surround yourself with people you trust, who are there for you not themselves, and who won't turn into bridesmaidzillas or loose cannons.

### *Groomsmen*

The groom wants people who will keep him well occupied before the ceremony but will ensure he is dressed in his best in good time for kick-off. A story from a celebrant who refused to marry a couple because the groom was too drunk to understand what he was doing is a cautionary tale. It turned out his best man and groomsman had been plying him with alcohol during the morning of the wedding. The wedding eventually took place after he had sobered up, but there were a lot of unhappy people.

### *Bridesmaids*

Bridesmaids can take a lot of pressure off the bride by seeing she is watered and fed during the photo shoot, that her hair and make-up look great throughout (no lipstick on her teeth), that her dress is beautifully arranged at the ceremony, and that she's wearing all the right accessories and jewellery. They also provide

a calm head in a crisis, remain alert to potential problems, and keep a record of the wedding presents. It can be disastrous if gifts and cards get separated at the reception, and the bride and groom are left with the tricky task of finding out who gave them what. It's a good idea for the bridesmaids to pack a roll of sticky tape in their emergency kit, and spend a few minutes at the reception carefully taping cards onto the correct gifts. It can save endless trouble later.

Again, we reiterate that there are no rules, and you're in charge. And in most cases your family and friends will want to help make your wedding day a truly happy one.

## CHILDREN AT THE WEDDING

This can be a tricky one, because often you'll have quite a few friends with babies, toddlers and school-age children. And some couples, of course, have their own children to consider as well. If you add up all the children, you might find you've got enough to open a small crèche or kindergarten, and this is time to ask people to make their own arrangements for their children to be looked after by grandparents, babysitters etc.

Some couples provide information on babysitting services for their guests and some rent a house or motel unit where children can be looked after as a group. An informal wedding at home makes it easier to cater for children, but reception venues are not usually set up for them.

Sometimes there is a compromise with the children of close family members coming to the ceremony and being taken home by minders afterwards. This is usually the case with children who are flower girls and page boys and are part of the ceremony and photo shoot. It gets difficult when breast-fed babies are involved, and occasionally you'll find reception venues providing a room where parents can put porta-cots for little ones. But generally children are not your responsibility, and they don't cope well over the long period of a more formal wedding.

## BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT

Be clear with your friends about what you want and expect in terms of children at the wedding. However, you may still find people who try to bend the rules. One bride who stipulated no children at the wedding could do very little when one of her best friends turned up with her baby . . . who cried throughout the ceremony and effectively drowned out some of the words on the video. 'Expect the unexpected when it comes to kids,' this bride says.

## THE SEATING PLAN

### Watch who goes where

This can be challenging if you have to deal with potentially difficult family dynamics as well as decide the best places for important people, and try not to offend others who think they should have front-row seats. It is probably best if the two of you do the plan together, then perhaps check the arrangements with your respective parents to ensure there are no minefields you haven't considered.

Be firm about what you want, though. It's your call if you'd prefer your good friends rather than relatives at the tables closest to you. Just try be fair to both families, and particularly both sets of parents.

## SERVING ALCOHOL BEFORE THE CEREMONY?

Think hard about this. Situations have arisen where the ceremony has been disrupted by drunken guests interjecting and being badly behaved, or refusing to leave the bar and creating an unpleasant atmosphere. It could be better to serve bubbly during the signing of the register so everyone can toast you at the end of the ceremony. Take a look at your budget; you will be paying for these early drinks – is it really necessary to serve them at this time?

## No set rules

But there are no hard-and-fast rules on seating plans. Some couples choose not to seat parents at the 'top table' and instead put them together at a nearby table, perhaps with grandparents or aunts and uncles. Some mix guests up at random, while others seat them in 'common interest' or family groups. And, of course, some couples choose not to have a seating plan (apart from a table for themselves) and guests choose their own places on a 'first in, first served' basis.

### *Inviting the celebrant to the reception*

Do not assume that you must invite your celebrant to join you and your guests at the reception – this decision is entirely up to you.

## INVITATION ETIQUETTE

Whose names go on the wedding invitation, in what order, and how soon do you send them? These are all matters for debate in families before a wedding. Many couples now send out a 'place keeper' once they have set the date, to alert busy friends and family to keep their wedding day free. This can be particularly helpful to guests coming from overseas, allowing them to start planning the trip months in advance. A more formal invitation is then sent at the appropriate time, generally eight weeks prior to the wedding.

### Stating the time

The time stated on the invitation is the time that your guests will be expecting the ceremony to start. For example, if your invitation instructs you to be at the venue at 3.30 pm, that will be the time the ceremony is due to begin. To make this absolutely clear, some couples word the invitation: 'Ceremony starts at 3.30 pm'.

### Bride's parents as hosts

If the bride's parents are paying for the wedding, they are considered the hosts and traditionally the wording on the invitation would be worded:

Joan and John Smith  
request the pleasure of the company of

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at the marriage of their daughter  
Susan Jane Smith  
to  
Adam John Jones  
at the Hamilton Gardens  
on Saturday, 10 December 2009 at 3.30 pm  
and afterwards at  
The Black and White Reception Centre  
The Road  
Hamilton

RSVP by 3 November 2009 to J & J Smith, 26 Bank St, Hamilton.

It is quite acceptable to stipulate dress code on the invitation, e.g. Black Tie, which gives the guests an indication of how they are expected to dress.

### Both sets of parents as hosts

If both sets of parents are hosting the wedding, and it is less formal, appropriate wording would be:

Mary and John Smith  
and  
Edie and Bob Jones  
request the pleasure of your company  
at the marriage of  
Susan Jane Smith and Adam John Jones

In a situation where your parents are divorced but are still hosting the wedding together, the invitation would be issued in both their names: 'Mary Smith and John Smith'. If your mother has changed her name, she would be referred to as, for instance, Mary Fisher if she has remarried or Mary Brown if she has taken her maiden name.

## Hosting your own wedding

If you are hosting your own wedding; that is, paying for it yourselves, a more informal invitation can be appropriate. In such cases, the wording can be less formal. An example:

We are delighted to invite you to celebrate our wedding with us  
on 10 December 2009 at 3.30 pm  
at the Rose Garden, Brown Street, Hamilton  
and to join us afterwards for our reception at  
The Black and White Restaurant  
The Road  
Hamilton

RSVP by 3 November 2009

Hope you can join us  
Susan Smith and Adam Jones

The invitation should accurately state date, time, place, and dress code (if desired). If you are doing your wedding on a tight budget and want your guests to join you afterwards for a celebratory dinner, but you wish them to pay for themselves, your invitation should make this clear.

For example:

After the ceremony we would love you to join us for a celebratory dinner at the Black and White Restaurant. We want to have the pleasure of your presence, rather than presents, and ask that instead of buying a gift, you contribute by paying for your meal.

## STAG'S AND HEN'S NIGHTS

It is best to hold these functions at least a week or more before the wedding to allow time to get over it. Sometimes the best-laid plans or jokes can have an effect which may last longer than intended.

Many couples say they were pleased they had their 'do' well in advance, and it is now considered quite acceptable for both the stag and the hen to host a quiet dinner (guests pick up their own tab) at a restaurant rather than in a pub.

### STAG OR HEN NIGHT AFTER-EFFECTS

Some examples seen at weddings:

- ♥ A bride with pinkish hair – the colour put in by her over-zealous friends didn't wash out properly.
- ♥ A groom in pain and unable to move his shoulder, the result of an over enthusiastic drunken tackle.
- ♥ Ditto a bride, who had her left arm still strapped after spraining her wrist.
- ♥ A groom only able to whisper after a practical joke of putting a collar and lead around his neck was pulled too tight and affected his voice.
- ♥ A bridegroom with a spectacular black eye, the result of an encounter with an old adversary at his stag 'do' on the night before the wedding.

## GETTING TO THE CHURCH ON TIME . . .

It's no longer considered fashionable for the bride to be late; indeed, it's now a sign of bad manners. There are several considerations for a bride to be on time:

- ♥ Your guests will have already been waiting for 20 to 30 minutes for your arrival as most will get there in plenty of time. Standing around for too long can be hard work, especially on a hot summer's day at an outdoor venue with few seats and little shade.
- ♥ You have an obligation to your providers. Your photographer, car-hire team and celebrant have been booked for a particular period of time and wish to keep to that.
- ♥ Your caterer has organised the kitchen and prepared for the food to be served at the time you have told the venue you want it. To be late for this can ruin the whole meal, which has been carefully planned around the agreed timetable. Also, while you have been having a great time having photos taken, your guests have been again waiting for your arrival and are probably hungry.
- ♥ Speaking of guests, they also have an obligation to arrive in decent time for the ceremony. Stragglers who delay the ceremony are instantly unpopular.