

Outsider

AT THE Party

by MARY T. KELLY, M.A.

It's that time of year when weddings and graduations are in full bloom. Special events that we look forward to and remember all of our lives are popping up everywhere, and for many stepmothers the stomachs are tightening, the heart is pounding and the nerves are vibrating. ►



Why? Why these responses to such happy events?

Welcome to the realities of stepfamily life. I don't say this to be negative; Lord knows I don't want to be negative. But I've worked with too many stepfamilies where these normally happy events turn out to be anything but. Husbands feel stuck in the middle and stretched in every possible direction, stepmothers are reminded once again that they are the lowest rung on the stepfamily ladder, and the bride and groom might be fretting more about where their parents and stepparents are going to sit than how much money they are going to spend on their honeymoon.

I've come up with a solution for everyone. All it requires is one teensy weensy caveat: The solution asks for, no demands, that all involved conduct themselves as bonafide grown-ups.

Since I'm talking to stepmothers here, my encouragement is to you. What I am suggesting to you, as the stepmother, is that you take your wisdom and sense of self-protection into these events. If that translates into sitting at another table for a bit, giving your stepchild opportunities to take a photo with just their mom and dad, and ignoring any potentially hostile stares or glances from who-knows-who, than that's what a good stepmom/grown-up does.

My best friend, an events coordinator who has planned numerous weddings, tells me that one of her most major complaints are when she has to deal with all of the drama that so many weddings produce when they involve stepfamilies. She has watched brides and grooms fret and worry about the feelings of all of the adults involved, only to find that they can't please anyone, especially themselves.

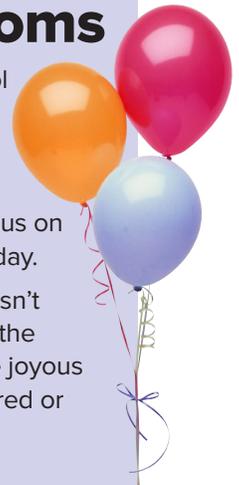
It is not uncommon for brides to want her parents at the wedding party table, asking that the parents' spouses sit at separate tables. Based on the reactions of some of the stepparents, you would think they were being exiled to the furthest points of Siberia.

My friend has witnessed yelling, screaming and basic hysterics coming from many stepmothers who insisting—no, demanded!—they be put at the head table with their spouses or included in a family picture.



Tips For Stepmoms

1. **BE AWARE** that you and can't control the ex-wives, the kids or even your husband.
2. Choose to willfully and proactively **STEP OUT OF THE SPOTLIGHT** and focus on your spouse's child and their special day.
3. **UNDERSTAND** that the special day isn't about you or proving your position in the family; it's about creating a stress-free joyous event for the child who is being honored or the couple who is getting married.



It has been my contention that there are many adults walking around but very few grown-ups. What is a grown-up? A grown-up is someone who is comfortable in their own skin, comfortable with who they are. They have no need to justify, rationalize or explain themselves to others and they have no need to get others to understand them or take care of them. They take complete and total responsibility for their behaviors. They don't take things personally. They don't resort to manipulation, drama, yelling, crying or demands to get their way. They also know they are not the only person on the planet and are able to make objective assessments of difficult situations, especially emotional ones.

In the case of a monumental event, like a wedding, they recognize that the bride and

groom have a mom and a dad who also have spent their lives looking forward to the day their child gets married.

Research strongly shows that events like weddings and graduations stir up all kinds of stepfamily craziness. Stepparents who thought they had close relationships with their stepchildren find out how much they really count when they are relegated to some corner table. Stepfathers who spent more time parenting than the “real” fathers are told that the absent father is getting the honor of walking the bride down the aisle.



Tips for Husbands

1. **BE AWARE** that your wife is about to enter a situation where she will most likely feel like an outsider.
2. During the event, perform **SMALL ACTS OF KINDNESS** and affection for your wife. Let her know how much you appreciate her support of your child in a potentially uncomfortable situation.
3. Give your daughter or son total permission to create an event that matches who they are and what they want. **PROTECT THEM** from any kind of meddling from any family member who could thwart any of their happiness on such a special day.

Brides and grooms are mystified when they see revised guest lists that include friends of stepparents they don't even know. One stepmother lamented to my events coordinator friend, “I feel like an outsider at these things. I need some of my own support.”

Can someone please ask, “What about the bride? What about the groom? What about the graduate? Does anyone care what they want since this is supposed to be about them?”

Here's one quick sure-fire tip to enjoy your stepchild's big day: be a grown-up.

Wedding days, graduations, the birth of grandchildren ... these all are huge life events that should be celebrated with joy and happiness. But the fact of the matter is, when it comes to the complications of stepfamilies, tension between ex-wives and new wives and tensions between ex-spouses, these events all can conspire to ruin a special occasion for an innocent party. And this just isn't right, fair or mature.

Remember the song “We Are the World” and the accompanying video which raised money for those suffering in Africa? With more than 45 of America's top musicians participating in the recording, organizer Bob Geldof pinned a sign outside the door to the studio that read, “Please check your egos at the door.”

Good riddance, I say. Ego has ruined more relationships, marriages, friendships, stepfamilies and special occasions than anything I've witnessed.

The next time your stepchild has one of these special events, your gift to them (as well as yourself) would be to heed the wise words of Bob Geldof. No one's day should be ruined by ego, especially by those who are 18 or older. ■



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