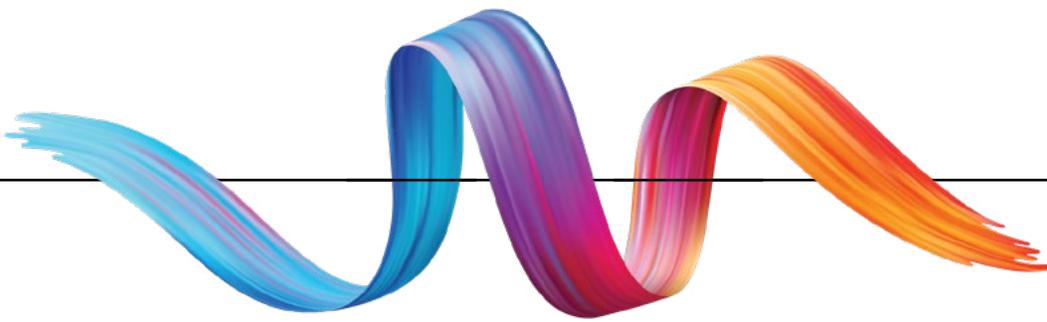


# Planning Your Blended Family Wedding with Children

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FOR BLENDED FAMILY COUPLES, a wedding ceremony culminates the process of falling in love and becoming a couple (what I like to call *coupleness*) and starts the process of becoming a family (or *family-ness*). That process begins to a small degree before the wedding, but relationally and practically, it really expands and deepens for the entire family unit *after* the wedding.

Now, here's the opportunity. The process of planning and preparing for the wedding—and the ceremony itself—can help build family identity and bonding. It can accelerate *becoming family* to one another even before the wedding.

Have you ever heard about a blended family wedding that ended in disaster because the adult kids didn't show up, or one of the children cried all the way through the ceremony? The couple is happy and excited about the wedding, but the children are resentful, angry, or hurt by it.

But just as a poorly planned wedding can make things worse for your family, a wisely designed experience can improve it. Research confirms that when children are consulted about the decision to marry and the timing of it, when they are actively included in planning the wedding, and they are able to participate in a wedding that honors the couple's vows and acknowledges both the children's family of origin and their role in the new stepfamily, they are much more likely to experience the ceremony itself as important and full of meaning.<sup>1</sup> A shared family experience that is positive and rich in meaning for both the couple and children contributes to the developing family identity (the ultimate developmental task of blended families).

To be clear, wedding planning and the wedding itself do not finalize the process of bonding (that process goes on for years). Still, they delineate a starting point for the family and can, if managed well, accelerate the process of becoming family.

You really want to get this right.

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Baxter et al., "Empty ritual: Young-adult stepchildren's perceptions of the remarriage ceremony," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 26, no. 4 (2009): 467–487.

## THE BACKSTORY MATTERS

How events prior to your decision to marry unfolded, the wedding itself, and the biological parent's relationship to their children greatly impact whether they view your wedding—and marriage—as legitimate. For example, a child who for whatever reason feels estranged from their biological parent or replaced by the stepparent in their parent's heart will likely struggle to embrace their parent's new love. In addition, a parent who quickly remarries after being widowed or divorced, or who recouples multiple times (serial dating and cohabitation), proving themselves untrustworthy, sacrifices the confidence of their child in their marital decisions.

And then there's the complication of grief. A parent's marriage always reminds children of the original loss. Watching Mom commit to love, honor, and cherish someone, for example, dramatically calls to mind the fact that Mom and Dad stopped loving, honoring, and cherishing each other. In the case of parental death, planning a wedding that will give birth to a new marriage and family resurrects grief over the parent who died and the family unit that perished with them. You can't have one without the other.

## THE TYPE OF WEDDING MATTERS

Interestingly, some children (especially teens and adults) think a parental wedding should have some elements of a traditional wedding—but not too many. Some feel a civil ceremony isn't traditional enough (it's too casual). Have conversations with your children about the wedding to see what message the ceremony style sends. In so doing, you affirm their value to you and gain information that will inform your choices.

## INVOLVEMENT AND THE ELEMENTS OF THE CEREMONY MATTER

Unless a child is estranged from their parent or too young to have an opinion, most want a fair amount of involvement in both pre-wedding planning and the ceremony itself. They want the messages of the ceremony to honor the past. And they want the wedding to not just be couple-centric, but family-centric. As one young adult indicated in hindsight about her mom's wedding, "I wish it would have helped create a family, not just a marriage."

A second or subsequent wedding for a parent brings three potentially competing emotional attachments into collision with one another: the couple's marriage, the child's loyalty to their family of origin, and the new blended family.<sup>2</sup> We typically think of weddings as being all about the couple (or for that matter, the bride), but a blended family wedding is also about the children, the family relationships that preexist the stepfamily, and the journey everyone has taken to get there. The trick is to acknowledge each of these relationships and not let one completely drown out the other two.

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<sup>2</sup> Leslie Baxter, et al., "Empty ritual," 484.

Consider the contrast. A wedding that ignores children, gives them no place in the ceremony, and focuses only on the couple could inadvertently send a strong message to a child that their family of origin is dead, their connection to their other biological parent is insignificant, and the new marriage is all that counts. Considering the many losses kids have already experienced, a message like this will, for some children, strike a death blow to their hearts regarding the marriage. However, a wedding that includes children in the decision-making, planning, and fulfillment of the ceremony helps children acknowledge the legitimacy of their parent's nuptials and receive the reality of their new family. Balance in celebrating the children's family of origin, inviting them to be part of the newly formed stepfamily, and holding up the new couple's commitment to each other can be a powerful turning point for your family.

Essentially, the three core messages to say to your children in your ceremony are: Our marital "us" matters; your past matters; and your expanding family matters. To overdo any one of those three messages to the neglect of the others could make the ceremony "empty" for a child; but the balance of all three makes it full of meaning and sends the most important message of all to a child: *You matter*.

The elements of a ceremony help send these balanced messages. Exchanging rings speaks to the importance of the couple's commitment, till death do them part. And planning a mother's wedding, for example, around the children's visitation with their father communicates ongoing respect for their past and extended family relationships. And then, to help each child see how they fit into the family being formed, a modern ritual like the Blending of the Sands Ceremony (or a similar ritual, see another example below) gives them a chance to symbolically pour themselves into what is being created. This doesn't, of course, complete that emotional process, but it does help to jump-start it, especially when children have helped plan that element of the wedding service. Planning helps them envision the moment when they will "give themselves" to the new family, and logistical preparation helps them prepare their heart to do so. Participating in the ceremony symbolically marks the day and formally starts the bonding process—which is then walked out in real life following the ceremony.

Taken together, when various elements of the ceremony give all these messages (Our "us" matters; your past matters; your expanding family matters; you matter), children are more apt to legitimize the wedding, the marriage, and the new family in their hearts.

One couple, after reading my book *Preparing to Blend*, which expands on these ideas, decided not to elope. Her children would not witness them taking vows and certainly wouldn't play a part in the ceremony. Instead, Kristin and Jason planned a small but intimate wedding for the family and let her children play the role they wanted to play. Kristin's two boys walked her down the aisle and gave her away (answering the question of who gives this woman to this man with "My brother and I"), and her daughter carried the wedding rings and held her bouquet. Jason added to his marital vows a promise to his new stepchildren to "love, support, and protect" them, and "nurture their growth in the Lord." By the way, in order not to mandate a reciprocal promise, the children were not asked to make any statements back to their new stepfather. They did feel comfortable, however, after the couple's vows and rings were

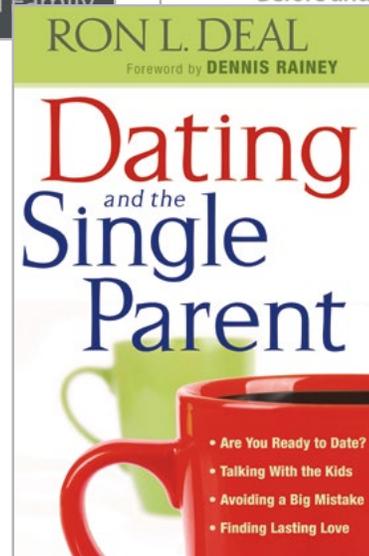
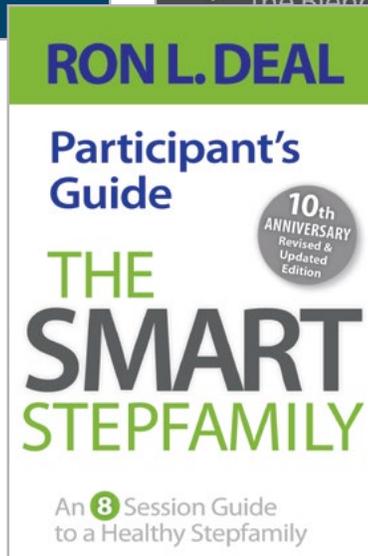
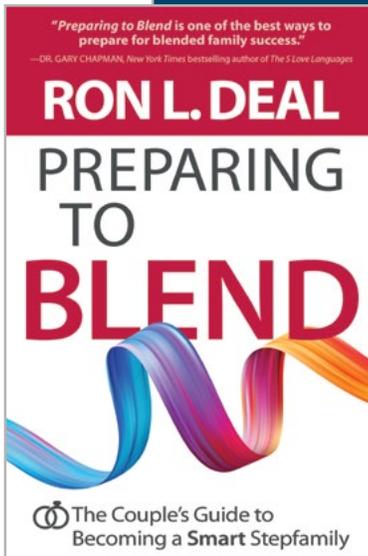
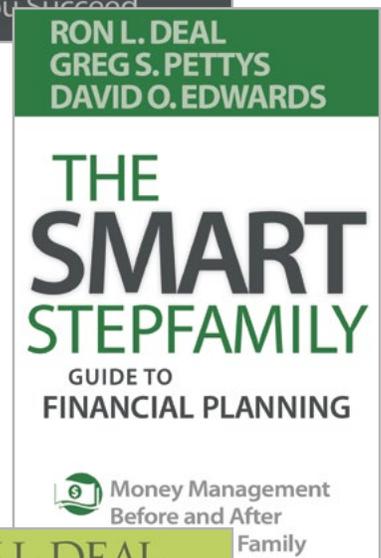
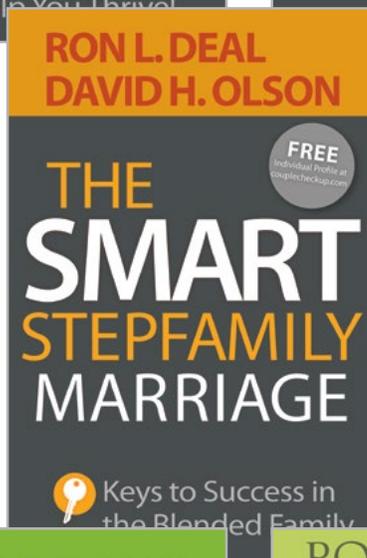
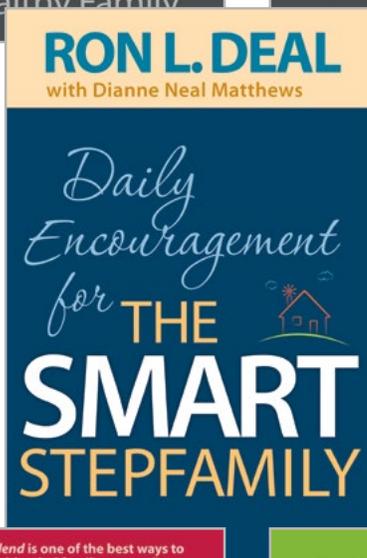
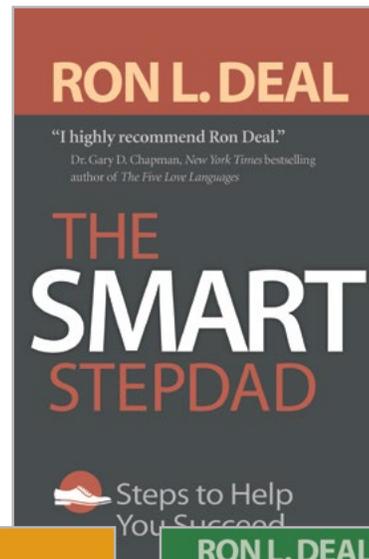
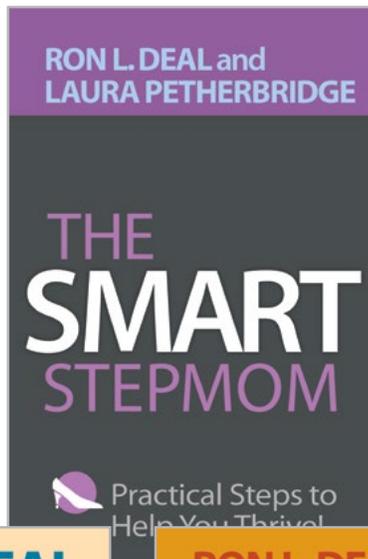
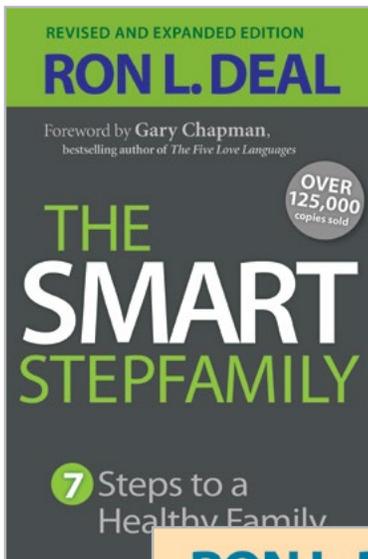
exchanged, to participate in creating a piece of family art that would later be placed in their home. Each adult and child painted their hand and pressed their handprint onto a blank canvas. The wedding officiant's comments wrapped meaning to the moment, noting that each of them—in a way they individually decide—can now put their own hand to this family, and each of them will stamp their unique fingerprints to the canvas of what this family is becoming. “And together,” he said, “in your own timing and in your own way, *together* you can create something beautiful.”



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