

These Christ-Focused Keys Will Help You Handle Special Occasions as a Stepmom

"Oh, Mom, the dress you bought for the wedding is gorgeous," Jessica gushed. "The color is perfect; the blue makes your eyes sparkle. You look 10 pounds thinner."

"But I've got some bad news," she continued. "Dad's new wife just bought the same dress for the wedding."

Pausing for a moment, the mom replied, "It's OK, honey. This is your special day. I won't let a squabble over a silly dress destroy the occasion."

"But Mom, you love it so much. It's not fair that you don't get to wear it."

"Who said I'm not going to wear it?" Mom inquired.

"I think it's more appropriate for the rehearsal dinner," beaming a coy smile. "Don't you, dear?"

There's nothing like a wedding, graduation, birthday party or family reunion to get the fur flying in a stepfamily. Traditions and lifelong dreams are often tied to these events, which can stimulate friction, antagonism and mayhem.

If a stepparent is going to enjoy—in some situations survive—special occasions, here are a few helpful tips.

Listen to the Kids

I let my stepsons decide how much of a role they want me to play—or not play—at their events.

When my stepsons got married, I asked them, "Do you want /need me to be a part of this? I'm fine either way. This is your

wedding; and as a child of divorce myself, I know stepfamily situations can make it complex. I want to be there for you, but I don't want to cause additional stress."

Smart Steps

Even if you don't like the other parent, or you have been the primary caregiver, the reality is this child has a parent. And it's not you. Even if he/she is unstable, abusive or absent, kids typically want their parent to be front and center on special occasions.

Don't take it personally. It's not about you. It's about loyalty and craving the love of a parent.

Here's a smart suggestion: "Michael, I know your graduation is coming and there are a limited number of family tickets for each student. I want to make this easier for you. If you only have one seat, and not two, I want you to ask your dad to sit up front with family."

This unselfish attitude can go a long way in building the relationship between a stepparent and stepchild. Often stepping aside, rather than stepping inside, is all it takes.

Photos May Be Awkward

Before my stepsons got married, I told my husband, Steve, "I want you to offer to be in a picture with your son and his mother on the wedding day." He didn't need to say anything; his face said it all. I was undeterred. "One of the greatest gifts you can give your child is a photo with his parents. Children long to believe that they were conceived in love, and not the hatred they have experienced after the divorce. Do this for your son," I encouraged. And he did.

The bride and groom wanted stepfamily photos too, which included me. But I never asked, because the day wasn't about validating me as a stepparent.

Lower the Expectations

If the ex-spouse or former in-laws have been nasty toward the stepparent in the past, assume they will outdo themselves during a special occasion.

When you combine stress, jealousy and unresolved resentment, stir together people who don't like each other and top it off with a few cocktails, you have a perfect storm.

You can't control the foolish actions of others. You can remain mature and sensible, even when others decide to start slinging mud.

Sometimes—Stay Home

On occasion, it's better if the stepparent doesn't attend. If his/her presence is going to cause such a great potential for disaster and tension for the kids and your spouse, it may be better to bow out.

I advise calmly explaining the reasons to the stepchild. "Josh, you and I both know your mom doesn't want me at your graduation. She caused such a scene at the last event, I know it embarrassed you. She is threatening to do it again and that's unfair to you. Because I want you to enjoy this special day, I'm going to stay home. But I don't want you to think I don't care—I do.

Make certain you plan something fun with a girlfriend or your own kids to fill the day.

Your spouse might not be too happy about this decision, but then it's not about him/her—it's about the child.

After 30 years of being a stepmom, I now ask this question, "When I'm gone, and my stepfamily is reminiscing about that special day, will they remember me as someone who helped them enjoy the occasion, or did my actions as a stepparent make it more difficult?" {eo}

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