

The Parent's Wedding Etiquette Guide

The Modern Rules for Both Families (That Nobody Thinks to Explain)

By Tony Winyard | Wedding Host & MC | 2,500+ Weddings

The Unspoken Minefield

Your child is getting married. Brilliant.

What nobody gave you is a manual. Not for the emotional bits—those you'll navigate as they come. But for the practical, social, etiquette-based questions that keep cropping up.

Who pays for what now?

Do we have to invite the groom's cousin we've never met?

What if the other family wants something completely different?

Are the old rules still rules, or has everything changed?

I've watched over 2,500 families navigate this territory. The ones who sailed through. The ones who stumbled. And the ones who caused rifts that lasted years because nobody clarified expectations early.

Here's the truth: most wedding etiquette "rules" are flexible now. But expectations still exist, and mismatched expectations cause problems.

This guide clarifies the actual landscape.

What's still expected. What's changed. How to navigate the other family. And how to get through this without damaging relationships.

Part 1: Money and Contributions

The Traditional Rules (That Mostly Don't Apply Anymore)

Historically:

- Bride's family paid for: venue, catering, flowers, photographer, bride's dress, invitations
- Groom's family paid for: rehearsal dinner, honeymoon, marriage licence, officiant
- Groom paid for: rings, bride's bouquet, groomsmen gifts

The 2026 reality:

Most couples contribute significantly themselves. Family contributions are often:

- Equal from both sides
- Based on what each family can afford
- Allocated to specific items
- Not given at all

There's no single correct model.

Having the Money Conversation

Early is better:

Before plans get too advanced, both families should know what's on the table.

How to approach it:

"We'd love to contribute to the wedding. We're thinking of offering £X. Is there a particular area where that would be most helpful?"

If you can't contribute:

Be honest: "We wish we could help financially. We'd love to contribute in other ways—hosting a dinner, helping with DIY projects, whatever would be useful."

Don't overextend yourself. Debt for a wedding is rarely worth it.

When Contributions Are Unequal

One family might give significantly more than the other. This happens.

How to handle it:

- Don't compare openly
- Don't let money buy decision-making power
- The couple allocates funds; both families trust their choices
- Giving more doesn't mean more credit or more input

Part 2: Guest List Etiquette

Who Gets Invited

The couple decides the final list. But they'll likely ask for input from both families.

Typical allocation:

- Couple's friends: their choice
- Bride's family guests: bride's parents consulted
- Groom's family guests: groom's parents consulted

The split depends on venue size, budget, and family structures.

When You Want to Invite Someone They Don't

What's reasonable:

"We'd really like to include Uncle David and Aunt Margaret—they've been at every family event for 30 years."

What's not reasonable:

Insisting on 40 guests when they've allocated you 15. Or expecting them to invite your work colleagues.

If they say no, accept it. Their wedding, their list.

The "Plus One" Question

- Married couples and long-term partners are invited together
- Single guests might or might not get a plus one (depends on numbers)
- Don't assume; check with the couple

When Someone Important Can't Come

It happens. Health issues, distance, prior commitments.

Don't pressure the couple to reschedule around one person's availability. Offer alternatives: video call during the ceremony, a separate celebration later.

Part 3: Communication Between Families

First Contact

If the families haven't met, someone should orchestrate an introduction.

Traditionally:

Groom's parents contact bride's parents after the engagement.

Modern approach:

Either family can initiate. A dinner, drinks, or video call if distance is an issue.

What to discuss:

Keep it light at first. Get to know each other as people, not just as co-parents of the couple.

Save the heavy topics (money, planning involvement) for later conversations, after rapport is established.

Ongoing Communication

Direct communication:

It's fine to message or call the other parents directly. You don't need to go through the couple for everything.

What to share:

- Your outfit plans (to avoid matching or clashing)
- Accommodation recommendations if you know the area
- Any concerns that affect both families

What to keep separate:

- Complaints about the wedding plans
- Family drama the other side doesn't need to know
- Anything that should go through the couple first

When You Disagree

Maybe you have different values. Different expectations. Different ideas about formality or tradition.

The approach:

Find common ground. Focus on supporting the couple. You don't have to become best friends—you just have to be civil for one day (and hopefully beyond).

If there's a genuine conflict, let the couple mediate. Don't try to fight it out directly.

Part 4: Your Role in Planning

How Much to Be Involved

This varies wildly. Some couples want lots of input. Some want to handle everything themselves.

Ask, don't assume:

"How involved would you like us to be in the planning? We're happy to help as much or as little as you need."

If they say "we've got it," believe them.

When You Have Opinions

You might disagree with their choices. The venue. The date. The caterer. The way they're doing readings.

The hierarchy:

1. Their wedding, their rules
2. If you're funding something, you might have slightly more input on that specific thing
3. But ultimately, they decide

How to express concerns:

Once, gently, without ultimatum.

"Have you considered X? I wondered if Y might be an issue."

Then let it go. If they proceed anyway, support their choice.

What Not to Do

- Invite people without asking
- Promise things to vendors without the couple's approval
- Change plans they've made
- Go behind their back to the venue or other vendors
- Make unilateral decisions about your contribution

Part 5: The Rehearsal Dinner

Who Hosts

Traditionally, the groom's family hosts and pays for the rehearsal dinner.

Modern variations:

- Either family hosts
- The couple hosts themselves
- It doesn't happen at all (especially for smaller weddings)

Who's Invited

Typically:

- The couple
- Both sets of parents
- Siblings
- Wedding party (bridesmaids, groomsmen, etc.)
- Close family who've travelled from afar
- Sometimes the officiant

It's not a second reception. Keep it intimate.

What Happens

Usually a dinner the night before the wedding. Casual speeches, a chance for the two families to connect, practical coordination for the next day.

Keep it relaxed:

- Don't outshine the wedding
- Don't let it run too late (everyone needs sleep)
- Don't overdo the alcohol

Part 6: The Wedding Day

Where to Be

Morning:

If the bride's family: possibly at the getting-ready location (with invitation), or arriving at the venue early.

If the groom's family: usually arriving at the venue. The groom's parents might be with him while he gets ready.

Ceremony:

Front rows. Bride's family on one side, groom's on the other. Or open seating—ask the couple.

Reception:

Top table or nearby. You're visible and will be greeting lots of guests.

Greeting Guests

You'll know many guests from your side. Be warm, welcoming, and prepared to introduce yourself to guests from the other family.

"Lovely to meet you—how do you know the couple?"

Photos

Family group shots:

The photographer will call for various combinations. Be available, don't wander off, and follow their instructions.

Individual requests:

If you want a specific photo (both families together, grandparents, etc.), tell the couple or photographer in advance.

Speeches

Who speaks:

Traditional UK order:

1. Father of the bride
2. Groom (or both partners)
3. Best man

Variations are common. Mothers might speak. Bridesmaids might speak. The couple decides.

If you're not speaking:

That's normal. Listen, laugh, cry, applaud. Your job is to be a gracious audience.

Behaviour Standards

- Pace your drinking
- Dance when the floor needs energy
- Don't monopolise the couple
- Mingle outside your immediate family
- Be gracious to the other family and their guests
- Handle any emergencies discreetly
- Enjoy yourself—it's a celebration

Part 7: Special Circumstances

Divorced Parents

General principles:

- The wedding is about the couple, not past conflicts
- Be civil, even if it's difficult
- Coordinate seating and logistics to minimise awkwardness
- Don't put the couple in the middle

Specific logistics:

- Processional: who walks with whom should be discussed in advance
- Seating: usually separate tables, not on opposite ends of the room
- Photos: the couple decides which groupings include whom
- Speeches: the biological parent traditionally speaks, but step-parents might also be included

Step-Parents

Increasingly common. Their involvement depends on the relationship.

If the step-parent has been around for years:

They might be included in photos, seated at the family table, and acknowledged in speeches.

If the relationship is newer or more distant:

Less prominent role. Still treated with respect.

The couple decides. Support their choices.

When a Parent Has Passed Away

Acknowledge and honour, don't ignore.

- An empty seat with flowers
- A mention in the ceremony or speeches
- A photo on display
- A moment of reflection

Ask the couple what they'd like. Some prefer public acknowledgement; some prefer private.

Same-Sex Weddings

Etiquette is the same:

Both families contribute as they're able. Both families are equally visible. Seating, speeches, dances—all work the same way.

Possible adjustments:

- "Father-daughter dance" might become "parent-child dance" or be skipped
- Processional order might differ from tradition
- Labels like "mother of the bride" might shift depending on how the couple identifies

Follow their lead. Use the language they use.

Second Marriages

Often lower-key than first weddings. Smaller guest list, less formal, sometimes less family involvement.

Your role:

Be supportive. Don't compare to the first wedding. Especially don't say things like "it was bigger last time."

Part 8: Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Making It About You

Your child's wedding isn't a referendum on your parenting or your family. It's about them.

Don't:

- Compete with the other family
- Demand acknowledgement
- Use the wedding to resolve old conflicts
- Expect constant gratitude

Criticising the Other Family

Even if you find them difficult. Even if you think they're doing things wrong.

Keep it to yourself. Or vent to a friend who's completely outside the wedding.

Don't:

- Make comments to the couple
- Complain to mutual guests
- Post anything negative online

Ignoring Boundaries

If the couple asks for something specific—or asks you not to do something—respect it.

"We've decided not to have speeches from extended family." "We'd prefer if you didn't post photos until after the honeymoon." "We're handling the seating ourselves."

Respecting boundaries shows you trust their judgement.

Getting Too Drunk

One of the most common regrets from wedding parents: having one too many and saying something unfortunate.

Pace yourself. Stay in control. You want to remember this day, not apologise for it.

Quick Reference

Before the Wedding

- Discuss financial contributions early
- Provide guest list input when asked
- Meet the other family
- Coordinate outfits (avoid matching or clashing)

- Clarify your role in the day
- Rehearsal dinner organised (if applicable)

Day Of

- Arrive on time
- Be where you're supposed to be
- Greet guests warmly
- Be available for photos
- Pace the alcohol
- Mingle beyond your family
- Enjoy the celebration

Throughout

- Support the couple's decisions
- Stay civil with the other family
- Keep criticism private (or unspoken)
- Respect boundaries
- Remember: their wedding, their rules

About Tony Winyard

2,500+ weddings. Thousands of families navigating the etiquette.

The parents I remember fondly weren't perfect. They were gracious. They supported the couple. They got through the day with relationships intact.

If you want guidance on any tricky situation—family dynamics, financial conversations, day-of logistics—I'm here to help.

Book a free 15-minute consultation: <https://www.winyard.com/contact>

You don't have to be perfect. You just have to be kind.

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