



Weddings as Social Practice

Weddings are a great opportunity for your child to practice their social skills. Yes, I did say 'skills'. How children react to others - be it friendly, confident or unsure - is based on their skill level. Being social is a learned skill rather than a personality trait children are born with. Like any other skill, such as riding a bike or reading a book, your children have to learn how to be sociable. It's up to us as parents to teach them how by example. We are their primary teacher in the first four years of their life, which are a crucial learning period.

So your friend or family member is getting married. Where do you start with using this opportunity as a social learning environment? Firstly I'm a great believer in telling children what to expect from a situation. Do this by describing what a wedding is and what usually happens - there will be lots of people there, many perhaps that they don't know. Run through the sequence of events and the type of behaviour you are expecting from your child, such as sitting still during the service. When you explain to children what to expect, and how you want them to behave, you are setting them up for success. Otherwise, without any guidelines, they go into the situation and choose the wrong behaviour. You are then in a position of having to correct them and deal with misbehaviour. This scenario is a set-up for failure. Not only does this apply to weddings, but every other situation children have to deal with from school, to going to appointments and grocery shopping.

The next step is to have your child practice some social skills. Start with breaking down saying hello down into steps.

Step 1 Look the other person in the eye.

Step 2 Extend your hand and greet them with 'Hi, I'm Jane' in a firm, loud voice.

Step 3 Remember to smile. Be sure to explain why it's important for your child to smile. You may want to say something like 'When you smile, people think you are friendly and interested in them. If you don't smile, people may think you're rude and don't want to talk to them, even though you might not be smiling because you're unsure or feel uncomfortable'. Most of the time, parents never explain ideas like this to children. We assume they've worked it out but that's often not the case.

Remember to lead by example. At the wedding, are you sitting at the table not talking to anyone or are you looking for opportunities to chat, move around and interact with different people? Children learn by modeling so be sure you're setting the right example.

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