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STARTER IDEAS FROM “THE FIRST DANCE”

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We want to give away some of the ideas from The First Dance. If you like what we say, feel free to pass on this written material to others who might benefit. If you are an engaged couple, it might open up a conversation between the two of you or with a parent or friend. And of course we hope that this introduction to our thinking will whet your appetite to take the whole program, which offers many more messages delivered in an engaging way in the DVD.

Planning a wedding is one of the hardest things you will do in your life, and one of the most thrilling when it all comes together. The hardest part is not what you might think when you get engaged—dealing with all the logistics. The hardest part is dealing with the people. Here is a typical chat room post from a disillusioned bride-to-be:

I am seriously regretting the upcoming wedding, only because I have changed all my pre-wedding plans to accommodate others. Neither of my attendants makes an effort to call and ask what’s up (we live in different



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states), I have felt pressure to invite people I don't want there (from both families), and I now have two flower girls, one of which I don't really want in the wedding. I know I am just whining but I wonder if any of you scrapped the plans and are going to elope.

This bride's regrets prompted immediate responses in kind. Here were the first two:

I think we've all WANTED to scrap it and elope! Planning a wedding is stressful and annoying, mostly because of everyone's "opinion" and dealing with TWO families! I think you should go along with your plans and make sure your wedding is what YOU wanted, not what everyone else wants. You only get one day, enjoy it. I'm just beginning to plan my wedding and I've already had requests as to what date works best for THEM! Ugh!

Ha-ha, the same with me. I would have to say my mom and I are becoming real stresses to each other even though we don't mean it intentionally. My dad mentioned us eloping, but I think that made my fiancé a little upset because he thought my dad was just trying to be cheap. We're Hispanic and so automatically that means it's gonna be a big wedding, so the planning part is just like whoa....



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Most weddings come off beautifully despite these hassles, and most couples are glad they did not elope. But too many brides and grooms feel like they have gone through hell getting to their wedding day. Shelves of books offer suggestions on everything from invitations to toasts, but any married couple will tell you that dealing with family members, wedding parties, and friends is the most challenging part of planning a wedding. Brides don't lose sleep over floral arrangements but over conflicts with their mothers about floral arrangements. Grooms get flummoxed not over the guest list but over their bride's insistence that they tell their parents to pare down a bloated guest list.

We are reminded of something a mayor of a large city said when a critic complained that the streets of the city were dangerous. The mayor shot back: "There's nothing dangerous about the streets in this city. It's the people..." The same could be said about weddings: there is nothing that can't be planned and carried off well—if only the people pull together. If they don't, the path towards the altar is a minefield. We developed this program to help you avoid minefields and to walk safely through ones you can't avoid.

SO MANY DECISIONS, SO MANY PEOPLE

With the possible exception of building a house together, there is nothing in a couple's life that involves more decisions, small and large, than a wedding. All of these



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Managing the People Stress of Wedding Planning
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decisions are interconnected, with the first decisions, sometimes easy to make, producing headaches later. For example, your favorite place for a reception is miraculously free, so you book it—only to learn later that the church your favorite clergy person has moved to is 35 miles away and the reception hall will not accommodate the number of family friends your in-laws want to invite.

Each decision in planning a wedding has stakeholders other than the bride and groom; in other words, lots of important people have strong feelings about nearly every aspect of your wedding. They care not only about what is decided but also about how they were involved in the decision. Sometimes they care deeply that someone else, like an ex-spouse, be kept out of the decision making.

Even if you are paying for the wedding yourselves, relatives and friends will have their opinions, feelings, and maybe rivalries. But if parents are footing the bill, their stake is higher and the negotiations even trickier. In fact, it may only be the honeymoon that couples choose more or less on their own, with other people mostly staying out of the decision—unless, of course, someone else is footing the bill.

All of this is complicated even if both of you come from intact two parent families, because weddings bring together two different families and their networks of friends. The complexities are magnified in post-divorce families, where four families may come together to re-enact old dramas of power and control. The bride and groom can be caught up in loyalty struggles over everything from the names on wedding



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invitations to toasts at the reception. On the positive side, dealing well with these complex family relationships during the wedding planning can set the stage for healthier future relationships with family members. This program will help you achieve that goal.

Then there is your own relationship as a couple. How are you going to manage the decisions and the people as you plan your wedding? Announcing your engagement is really the beginning of your marriage, because from that moment on you have serious decisions to make—and you now have in-laws. In making wedding decisions, you will have to figure out what kind of team you want to be, which tasks you will share and which you will handle separately. Before you can deal well with family and friends, you must have your own act together. No matter how you divide up responsibilities—whether traditionally or in your own unique way—each of you will have to take the lead with your own family. A particularly bad way to start a marriage is to expect the bride to handle the difficult conversations with the groom’s family, or vice versa.

WHOSE WEDDING IS IT?

Co-founder of The First Dance, Elizabeth, enjoyed wedding chat rooms during her engagement, finding them a source of moral support and good ideas. But she saw one form of bad advice repeated over and over to couples who were struggling with family and friends over decisions on everything from guest lists to the timing and location of the wedding: IT’S YOUR WEDDING, DO WHAT YOU WANT. This advice, shared as a



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form of common sense, was even stronger if the couple was paying for that part of the wedding.

So what's wrong with having it your own way if it's your wedding? The problem is that weddings are as much about community as about the couple. They have been that way in every culture throughout human history. If you don't want your wedding to be about your community of family and friends, then elope and have the justice of the peace's spouse be your witness. (You will just have to deal with your family and community later.) If you want to have a wedding and not just a legal ceremony, then it can't be just about you and your own preferences. It can be hard to see in the midst of negotiations with the caterer over the corking fee for the wine, but weddings are the beginning of life long bonds with a new, extended family. Not just the wedding day itself when the new clan is assembled—every stage of the planning forges a new family and community, for better or worse.

Guest lists, for example, are not just about the bride and groom's fantasy of an ideal size for a wedding, but also about both families reaching out to their networks of kin and friends, bringing them into the inner circle. Suppose one of your fathers owns a small business, considers his employees part of his "family," and wants to invite them to the wedding. You don't know most of them and don't relish having "strangers" at your wedding. However you resolve this matter (it involves money and space in addition to



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The First Dance, LLC
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www.TheFirstDance.com

sentiment and loyalty), our point is that a bad way to settle it is by saying, **IT'S OUR WEDDING, SO WE WILL DO IT OUR WAY.**

Rejecting the “it’s just for us” myth does not mean adopting the reverse: “Just go along and keep everyone happy.” Since you are the ones getting married, you are the principal stakeholders if not the only ones. You don’t have to let your mother make your wedding the one she had hoped for herself but was denied by her own mother. Your father, who likes to stress his power over the checkbook, should not have unilateral veto power. No parent should get away with manipulations to keep an ex-spouse out of the limelight. Your aunt Sophie may think that she can bake the best wedding cake in the state, but that does not equate to a decision that she will make your cake.

Doing it your way or their way may appear to be the easier paths because you don’t have to deal directly with differences. But you miss the opportunity to start a new life together by working on the challenges in front of you with the people who will be in your life until theirs or your dying breaths. So we propose a different wedding motto: **IT’S OUR WEDDING AND YOU’RE AN IMPORTANT PART OF IT, SO LET’S FIGURE IT OUT TOGETHER.**

We decided to focus on weddings we know best—a bride and groom planning a “community” wedding and starting a first marriage—while acknowledging that there are many different kinds of couples, many with kids already, and other more private



THE FIRST DANCE

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www.TheFirstDance.com

weddings. Couples in other situations, however, may benefit from the central ideas in the books.

If the first bit of bad advice for engaged couples is to do your own thing and not worry about what others want, a second kind of unwise advice can come from experienced married couples: don't worry so much about the wedding because it's the marriage itself that counts. Our view is different: planning your wedding is the beginning of your marriage relationship. To be clear, we are unabashedly in favor of premarital education or counseling aimed at preparing you for the future years of your marriage. We give you resources to find this kind of premarital help; in fact, the issues we raise in this program would be ideal fodder for trying out the knowledge and communications skills you can learn in a good premarital education program or through The First Dance Couple Check-Up available on our website. www.thefirstdance.com.

Although we all know that marriage is a life long project, for now you are building your marriage mostly by planning your wedding together. How you communicate now will stay with you, as will how you deal with your differences. How you support each other now with the stresses of the wedding will lay down the template for your future, as will how you deal with your families. You are preparing for the biggest event of your lives, the birth of your marriage in the embrace of your community. We hope that you will take our program on your journey and recommend it others. If you



THE FIRST DANCE

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www.TheFirstDance.com

have stories to pass on, or feedback, we would love to hear from you. Please visit “Talk With Us.”

DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES WITH YOUR FAMILIES

“What? Two thousand dollars for a dress you will wear just once? That’s obscene!”

“We don’t care how many cousins your fiancé’s family feel they have to invite, they will just have stay within the number of guests we gave them.”

“I can’t believe her parents are so chintzy. Tell them we will pay for the flowers so that the wedding doesn’t look second rate.”

“When your grandmother finds out you are not marrying in the church, it will kill her.”

“If your mother and her boyfriend come to your wedding, I will not show up. It’s your choice.”

Ask newlywed couples what were the trickiest parts of their wedding planning and the majority will tell you it was not dealing with caterers, photographers or wedding planners—it was the relatives. This should not surprise anyone. A wedding is the grandest family event, the family’s main act on the big stage. It generally costs a sizable amount of money, it involves nearly everyone important to the family, it puts the family’s tastes and values on public display, it



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The First Dance, LLC
Managing the People Stress of Wedding Planning
www.TheFirstDance.com

often involves religion, it launches a major change in family relationships, it brings together two family clans who did not know each other, and it involves hundreds of decisions made by different combinations of people who care deeply that everything comes off beautifully--and affordably.

On top of these standard family dynamics surrounding weddings, add the idiosyncrasies and flaws of family members on both sides. The bride's mother who never got to plan her own wedding and now is determined to have her way with yours. The bride's stubborn, practical father who complains vocally every time he hears a price. The bride's competitive sister who is outraged that she is not the maid of honor. The groom's mother who is the maven of good taste and frequent commentator on decisions outside of her influence. The stepmother on either side who is determined to stick it to her husband's "ex." This is the stuff of theatre, and the script has many authors. You can't write the whole script, just your own part, but how you handle your role may determine whether the inevitable struggles and mishaps turn out as comedy or tragedy. We want to help you play your part in family disagreements with integrity; in so doing, you just might bring out the best instead of the worst in your fellow family members.

FIGURING OUT WHAT'S GOING ON

Some family disagreements are inevitable in planning a wedding; no two people are going to spontaneously agree on the hundreds of decisions involved.



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www.TheFirstDance.com

Sometimes the sources of these disagreements are straightforward—for example, differences in styles, tastes, or even schedules—and other times they run deeper, for example, family loyalty about who should be invited to the wedding. We like to make a distinction between routine conflicts that can be resolved amicably after a couple of conversations, and deeper conflicts that leave everyone feeling hurt and misunderstood. Routine conflicts lend themselves to compromise. You want an artsy cake and your mother wants a traditional one, and you settle on something in between. You want a small wedding and your parents (who are paying) want to invite everyone they ever met; you compromise somewhere in between. Routine conflicts also lend themselves to one side coming around to other's position after reflecting on it. You wanted to get married on January 2 and your parents convinced you that holiday and school schedules make it too difficult for family members who will be traveling to the wedding; you set the date later in the month. Although there may be a few tense moments during a routine conflict, basically you feel good that you worked it out with everyone feeling heard and understood.

Then there are the deeper conflicts, often over the same issues that drive you up the wall. For these conflicts, you have to look at possible underlying sources in order to understand what is going on and how to deal with it. You



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know that you are dealing with a deeper conflict when the following things are going on:

- There are raised voices every time you discuss the matter.
- Someone shuts down and won't talk about the matter anymore.
- You are not feeling heard, or your parents are not feeling heard.
- You are stalemated; there is no progress after two or three conversations.
- You or your parents are feeling personally attacked.
- Language is getting inflammatory ("I don't care for..." becomes "I can't stand...")
- Third parties are getting pulled into the conflict (as in "Your sisters agree with me that the cake you want is gross.")

When conflicts have some of these ingredients, the solution may require figuring out the underlying fears, concerns, or values that are driving the disagreement, and dealing with those. In other words, the way out of the impasse starts with an effort to understand what is driving it. Say your mother can't abide the wedding invitations you like. She gripes about the color, the font, the size of the envelopes, and the wording. You find yourself defending your taste under an onslaught of criticism that ends with your mother saying something passive aggressive such as, "But it's your wedding; you're old enough to know what you want." Of course you could just go ahead with the invitations, especially if you



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are paying for them yourselves, but you feel badly about just overriding your mother's objections. (And you worry that she will harbor a grudge and make life difficult on future decisions.) But the discussions go nowhere when you say, "The font is large enough to read; I showed it to some of my friends," and your mother shoots back, "Your friends have younger eyes than my friends, and whoever saw yellow wedding invitations?" "They are goldenrod," you volley back. If the coming year is going to be this way, you think, eloping looks mighty attractive.

Rather than give in or just override your mother's views, you can try to understand concerns that she may or may not be voicing. We are assuming for the moment that your mother is not congenitally negative and controlling; if she is, then you need a different strategy we will discuss later in the book. The following strategies usually work with relatives who are being difficult but who are not impossible people.

Your first task, again, is to figure out what is not being put clearly on the table. When people seem irrationally negative or stubborn, there is usually an underlying fear or concern. For weddings, here are some underlying concerns of parents that that can fuel conflicts. The unexpressed concerns may be yours as well; don't overlook the possibility that you are the one being irrationally negative or stubborn. If a strong disagreement you are having with a parent (or someone



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else) does not make sense to you, ask yourself what may be going on more deeply underneath.

Sometime parents cannot or will not tell you what is most troubling them. They will stay fixated on the details, like the color of the invitations or the cake, or they will just clam up. In that case, you can try to elicit the concern they are afraid to voice, as in “I wonder if you are worried that we are going to end up with a hippie wedding.” Or “Are you afraid that everything about this wedding is going to seem foreign to you and your friends.” There is a good chance that she will come clean if you ask the question in a sensitive, loving way. Then you can try to reassure her instead of arguing defensively about the invitations.

Here’s a rule of thumb: if the disagreement cannot be resolved in a couple of conversations, and if it gets more polarized with further discussion, then there is an issue underlying that is not being expressed. If you can’t put the concern on the table, it bites everyone under the table. Getting it out in the open does not mean that simple reassurance will always resolve the disagreement but at least you know what you are dealing with—and it’s not the icing on the cake.

NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCES WITH YOUR PARENTS

After focusing on what the real issues are, the second key to resolving differences with families is to be clear for yourselves about which decisions are



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subject to revision--and therefore negotiable--and which decisions are final and not negotiable. Presumably most should be in the first category, based on the premise that there is rarely only one correct way to do something. Maybe you would like to have all the wedding photos done before the service, but your mother argues that it will be too taxing on grandma to arrive an hour before the service. So you do the photos with grandma after the service. Your father says that his Uncle Charlie really, really wants to do his skit at the groom's dinner—the one he does at all the weddings. You think it's corny and will take away from the classiness of the occasion, but you go along, bearing in mind that no one remembers these events anyway. The salmon was by far the best dish the caterer serves, but your parents draw the line at \$30 per plate and you settle for the chicken Kiev, bearing in mind that no one remembers the food at receptions. You really would prefer your best friend as your maid of honor, but your mother begs you not to dishonor your sister by excluding her from this role in the wedding. Your sister says she does not care, but it's obvious your mother does. So you go along, bearing in mind that a good friend will understand. You go along without rancor or a sense of being victimized, because you realize that your wedding has many stakeholders and it's OK to bend on the things that are not at the core of your values.



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Other times, just giving in does not work for you because you care more about this part of the wedding. You then use your negotiation skills. As you learn what good wedding photographers cost, your parents get skittish about paying for the quality of photos that you prefer. Rather than make this a standoff, you can look at the underlying concerns on both sides and negotiate accordingly. Your parents' concerns are monetary, yours are aesthetic. There are a couple of ways to negotiate this. One is to reassure your parents that you will stay within the wedding budget agreed to earlier, and will cut costs on other aspects of the wedding to offset the higher than expected photography expenses. Another is to say that you would like to pay for the photography yourselves, since you realize that this expense is considerably more than your parents had counted on. Of course, you have to make this offer with an open heart and not with resentment.

If you can't offer to cover an expense with this kind of spirit, then don't try. Your parents will feel you are being passive aggressive, offering to pay it yourself while expecting them to decline your offer. But if you can negotiate this as adults with adults, it is likely to lead to a good outcome—either your parents accept your decision or you all agree to watch the other expenses and try to not break the bank.

Then there are the big decisions that are not negotiable. This will differ for each couple, so our examples may not apply to you. It may be very important



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to you that the wedding ceremony reflect the religious traditions of both spouses. Sometimes this can be accommodated in one ceremony, even though relatives on either side might be uncomfortable. Other times this will require something more radical--we know a couple who had two ceremonies: a Christian one and a Hindu one. In either case, you parents and relatives will just have to accept your decision and make the best of it. Your job is not to ask if they are OK with your decision but to keep them informed about what to expect at an unfamiliar religious service. In the DVD program we talk situations when someone threatens to boycott the wedding.

Another rule of thumb: do not ask for feedback on decisions that are not negotiable. That sends a mixed message to your family. Don't ask, "How would you feel about having a rabbi do the service with our minister" if you have already decided the matter, and it's agreeable to the two clergy persons. Just say, "We want to let you know that we have lined up David's rabbi and our minister to do the service." If your parents complain about the arrangement later on when you are discussing the details of the service, you can gently remind them that it's a done deal. Most people find a way to accept that which is inevitable when, "resistance is futile." On your end, you may have to accept the fact that your parents do not fully support your decision, and then not seek their emotional approval. It's part of being emotionally ready for marriage.



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NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCES ACROSS FAMILIES

Conflict between the bride's and groom's families is some of the trickiest parts of wedding planning. For Maria and Jason's wedding, the big problem was the guest list. The head count had been set month before, but now Jason's mother asked to invite twenty additional people from her work setting. At fifty dollars per person for the banquet, this request shocked the bride's parents, who were already concerned about the size of the wedding based on the mother's large and boisterous Latino family. In fact, this was one of the reasons the groom's divorced mother wanted her friends along; she thought she would feel overwhelmed by this large family from a different culture (she was an only child from a soft spoken Norwegian family and had few relatives) and wanted support from her coworkers since she did not have a husband to support her at the event. After some struggle and hurt feelings on both sides, the issue was resolved in a way that serves as a good example of wedding negotiations:

- The groom's mother was clear about what need she was trying to meet by inviting twenty new guests. She was not arguing that these were her dearest friends in the world or that she owed them because they had all invited her to their kids' weddings. Her need for support was out on the table.



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- The bride's parents' issue was also out on the table: the unanticipated expense of feeding twenty extra people. Although they wondered privately why this woman felt the need for so many support people, they wisely kept these concerns to themselves and certainly did not share them with the groom, who would have felt defensive for his mother.
- The bride and groom suggested a middle ground: to invite the group of ten coworkers but not their spouses or partners. This would give the mother the same access to support people (her coworkers were her friends, not their significant others) and would be less expensive for the bride's parents. This solution involved some bending of protocol for invitations to a wedding, which calls for inviting a spouse or partner of the invitee's choice. The deal involved the groom's mother willingness to take responsibility for explaining the situation to her coworkers, which she was willing to do.
- The whole situation would have been better if the groom's mother initially had been more sensitive to the expense she was asking the other family to incur, instead of just announcing her wishes. She could have offered to pay for the extra guests, and allowed the bride's parents to graciously decline, or better yet, she could have told her son



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that she was feeling the need for more support people, and then problem solved this with him instead of announcing her solution. For example, they might have come up with the idea of inviting two or three people that she is closest to, instead of everyone on her work team. But having missed those opportunities for collaborative problem solving, at least she was willing to compromise on the final number and take the heat for not inviting spouses and partners.

This scenario points to guidelines for managing conflicts between families in wedding planning, which (next to divorce situations) are the most delicate challenges most couples face. The key is for everyone to keep both families' needs and perspectives in mind from the start. It doesn't matter who is paying for the wedding—the couple, the bride's parents or the groom's parents. Both families are stakeholders. When one of them feels they don't count or are being treated unfairly, it's trouble for everyone—and not a good way to start a marriage.

An unfortunately common scenario is that the bride and her family dictate the terms of the wedding arrangements to the groom's family. We think it's a mistake to give decrees such as how many guests the other family can invite, without a dialogue first to find out how many they want to invite. Even fifty-fifty arrangements on guests can feel unfair if one family has a huge clan and the other just a few living relatives. Sometimes one early decision, such as where to hold



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Managing the People Stress of Wedding Planning
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the reception, constrains future decisions and leads to one family feeling left out. For example, your decision to have the reception in a beautiful but small place may mean that the groom's parents cannot invite beloved relatives or life long friends whose family weddings they themselves have attended. This implication had not occurred to you or the bride's parents when choosing the facility, perhaps because you knew the bride's network would be easily accommodated. That's why we recommend getting the big picture of everyone's expectations before making any decisions that seriously constrain future options. That's not to say that everyone's expectations have to be fulfilled, but it is a lot more sensitive to let the parents of the groom know early on that it will be a small wedding so that they can let their network know, rather than dealing with the fallout months later when you say, "Oh by the way, you can only invite forty people, which is all we can handle and which will work fine for the other family."

CLASH OF FAMILY WEDDING TRADITIONS

Because Stephanie's parents had real money, Brian envisioned the ritzy wedding he'd secretly always wanted but knew his parents could never have afforded for his sister. Finally, he was going to be able to ride in a limo, own expensive kitchenware (he was an aspiring chef), and go on a fantastic honeymoon, all without much effort from Stephanie's rich parents. He didn't want to sound greedy so he laid low in talking about the wedding with Stephanie, until Stephanie's parents sat them down one day and spelled



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The First Dance, LLC
Managing the People Stress of Wedding Planning
www.TheFirstDance.com

out the money they were willing to spend – less than half of what it would cost for a decent wedding! Brian was angry. Later he started complaining to Stephanie about how greedy her parents were, and how obnoxious it was that they were buying a new expensive home and new furniture for their 3rd home, but weren't going to pay for whole wedding. Stephanie was shocked at Brian's reaction. It turns out that she never thought her parents would pay for the wedding at all, because that was not part of the family tradition and in fact she was tired of feeling "used" by their money. Finally she was going to set herself free as an adult with minimal money (and therefore fewer power struggles) with her parents. She started questioning if she wanted to marry this greedy man! What we have here is a difference in family cultures or traditions, not a greedy groom and miserly parents. Understanding their families could have helped this couple understand each other.

Things get particularly tricky when both families are involved in the decision making. Jess and Mitch talked with her parents and his parents about helping pay for the wedding. His parents had more money, but her parents had a sense of pride about paying for their daughters wedding. Unfortunately, the amount they were able to spend was so small it would barely feed fifty wedding guests, let alone the reception, wedding dress, flowers, limo, and so on. Mitch knew his parents would help out without question, so when he approached Jess's parents, he was not prepared for their negative reaction and hurt feelings. What was the big deal? Mitch wondered. Of course, one big mistake was



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www.TheFirstDance.com

for Mitch to approach his in-laws on his own, failing to heed a crucial lesson that is at the heart of The First Dance program: When there is conflict, blood talks to blood; each carried the main responsibility for difficult family conversations.

If you liked this material and want more ideas and advice on the people parts of wedding planning, you can take The First Dance DVD Program by going to www.TheFirstDanceCom, and then joining our online community.