

A Parenting Partnership Ceremony

Introduction

It is quite mind boggling that we have no ritual in this culture to prepare people for parenthood. Raising children is probably the most difficult endeavor most of us will engage in during our lifetimes. Parenthood should be undertaken with a great deal of conscious forethought, commitment, and planning. I, therefore, think we should develop Parenting Ceremonies where prospective parents can publicly announce their intention to parent, and make pledges regarding their readiness for parenthood with their extended family, friends and community present..

It is important for a couple's community to be involved in their decision to become parents because parenting is, in a sense, a public matter. If a couple does not live up to their parenting commitments, society at large will have to take responsibility for the children. Perhaps rituals such as this one, which prompts couples to publicly announce their commitments regarding parenthood to family, friends, and community, can increase the likelihood that couples will be able to create healthy and successful families.

On a more positive side, the birth of a child is an addition to society. This child's life will affect not only his/her parents, but all those he/she comes into contact with. Thus, it makes sense for the broader community to be involved in the birth of a new member of society. This ceremony is kind of like a group welcoming ceremony for the child that will be born.

The question of when to have a parenting ceremony is a tricky one. It could be done at the time a couple begins attempting to conceive a child. The advantage of this idea is that the couple will be prompted through the process of participating in the ceremony to do a lot of soul searching about how they feel about raising a family.

However, the disadvantage is that people might have a ceremony to prepare themselves for parenthood, only to find out that they were unable to conceive. We have a serious infertility problem in this country, and it would be quite psychologically painful to have a parenting ceremony, and then not be able to have children. It also takes some couples quite a few years to conceive, and they do not need the pressure of being constantly asked if they are "expecting" yet. Likewise, a percentage of pregnancies end in miscarriage.

Another option is to have the ceremony soon after the birth of the child. This would solve the problem of infertility and miscarriage, but wouldn't give the couple the opportunity to use the parenting ceremony, and time before the baby was born, to prepare ahead of time for their new role as parents. In light of all of these considerations, I recommend that this kind of ceremony be held at the beginning of the fourth month of pregnancy. Most of the risk of miscarriage is over at this time, the mother is at the most physically comfortable part of her pregnancy, and there are five months remaining which the couple can use to psychologically prepare for their new role as parents.

Lastly, I want to mention a very important aspect of this ceremony. This parenting partnership ritual requires that the couple make vows to uphold their parenting responsibilities, even if they someday choose to terminate their marital/lover relationship. A significant percentage of marriages in this country end in divorce, and many of these marriages involve children. It is, therefore, extremely important that prospective parents recognize that they may well be parenting partners long after they are marital partners.

I support the right of married people with children to divorce if they conclude, after serious consideration, that they have become so incompatible that they are unable to live together without seriously jeopardizing their personal happiness and growth. **However, I don't support parents divorcing their children.** Therefore,

when two people become parents together, I believe they must be willing to commit themselves to coordinating their lives, so that both of them can be actively involved in their children's lives **until their children reach adulthood.**

This ceremony is written for couples who have already had some kind of marriage ceremony at a prior time. Thus, it is primarily focused on the new dimension of parenthood, which will be added to an already existing marriage/relationship. Couples who are combining a parenting partnership ceremony with a marriage will perhaps need to add components to this ceremony which deal with their relationship as marriage partners, separate from the parenting aspect of their relationship. You may find the sample marriage ceremonies in the preceding chapter useful in adapting this ceremony to serve as both a marriage and parenthood ceremony.

A Parenting Partnership Ceremony

Woman:

Family and friends, we ask you to share in celebration with us as we proclaim our love and commitments to each other, and to our future children. We will soon share one of the greatest of all human experiences -- having a child. In order that we may prepare ourselves for this new role, we want to take this time to define our expectations, needs, and goals, so we will be ready for our new relationship as a family.

Man:

We have asked your presence today, because we hope that, by sharing our goals and commitments with you, you can be a source of support for us in carrying out these dreams and goals. Likewise, we hope we can help all of you in the daily process of your lives and struggles. We believe that families are enriched when they are bonded together to form community.

Man and Woman:

Please witness as we proclaim our love and commitments to one another, and to our future children.

Woman:

I love you. We share the same dreams, aspirations, and vision of the world. Being with you enhances my life, and brings me the greatest amount of joy I have ever known. When I am with you I feel content and peaceful and vibrantly alive. It is you I can turn to for comfort in moments of despair, and it is with you that I want to share the triumphs of my life.

Man:

I love you. Sharing my life with you sustains and enriches me. You bring a warmth to the depth of my soul. There exists between us a bond so strong that I feel as though I have known you for lifetime upon lifetime. Our relationship serves as a vehicle for the personal evolution of each of us. Each day, we help one other to become more full human beings.

Woman:

Soon, our relationship will take on a new dimension. We have gathered family and friends here today to help us in the process of preparing ourselves to meet the many challenges of parenthood.

Man:

We treasure the relationship we have created with one another, and hope and believe that becoming parents will add a greater depth and richness to our life together.

Woman:

We would now like to talk about the changes we aspire to make, in order to make ourselves ready for this new challenge of parenthood.

Man:

We know that in becoming parents, we will be pushed to achieve the fullest heights of our humanness. For in order to parent successfully, we must become more capable of unconditional love, of forgiveness, of compassion. As parents, we know we must learn to give freely, without thought of what we shall receive in return.

Woman:

Yet in such giving, we know we shall experience the miraculous wonder of giving becoming, in itself, receiving, as we recognize that only by giving of ourselves to others do we become fully human.

Man:

As we nurture and love our children, we know that we shall be enriched. Our lives will take on new meaning, as we see ourselves as an integral link in the ever-evolving family of all people. In becoming parents, we shall become instruments of the creative energy of the universe, through which is born new life.

Woman:

In order that I may become more the mother I aspire to be, I make the following pledges.

Man:

In order that I may become more the father I aspire to be, I make the following pledges.

Woman:

I know I must alter my life in order to meet the needs of this fragile being that will soon be entrusted into our keeping. I know I must learn to give, learn to put the needs of another before my own. I know that I must give up certain freedoms. I feel ready to devote my energies to raising a child, because I have taken time first, to accomplish some things that were important to my own self-development. I know being a parent requires a tremendous amount of giving. However, I believe watching our children grow and blossom will be repayment a thousand-fold for the giving I will do.

Man:

I know there are certain freedoms I have always had, which I must let go of in order to be a source of strength and stability from which our children can draw. I have waited until now to become a father so that I would be ready to give up these freedoms freely, without regret. I have achieved the goals I set for myself, and now feel I can devote the necessary time and energy to meet the needs of a child. It feels like it is time for me to give back what was given to me by my parents. I hope I can teach our children some of the wisdom I have gained, as they will, in turn, give their knowledge to their children.

Woman:

We believe that, in order to provide our children with the stable mothering and fathering relationships they need, we must view the parenting commitments we make today as a life-long endeavor. Yet, we know that we cannot guarantee that our relationship as lovers will last for a lifetime. We are deeply committed to one another. Yet we cannot know how either of us will change as the years of our lives unfold.

Man:

We recognize that we are both growing, changing people, and that as a result of our on-going life experiences, we will change in ways which we cannot predict. We acknowledge that, despite our best efforts, we may someday find we have irreconcilable differences and can no longer remain married. Therefore, we know that we must be willing to honor our parenting commitments, even if we choose to terminate our relationship as lovers. We, therefore, make the following pledges.

Woman:

I pledge that regardless of how our relationship as lovers may change in the future, these changes will not alter the parenting commitments I make today. I accept our relationship as parenting partners as a life-long commitment. We are and will always be a family; connected and bonded together by our biological links. Regardless of how our lover relationship changes in the future, I am committed to coordinating my life with yours so as to allow each of us to have a close, on-going relationship with our children.

Man:

I hereby pledge that, however our relationship as lovers may change in the future, these changes will not alter the parenting commitments I make today. You will always be the mother of my children. Our relationship as parenting partners is a life-long relationship. If we someday choose not to live together as lovers, I am committed to setting up a new living situation that allows each of us to continue to be an integral part of our children's lives.

Woman:

We recognize that, in order for our children to be able to have a close, on-going relationship with each of us, it is important that we always treat each other with respect and compassion.

Man:

We are committed, therefore, regardless of whether or not we remain lovers, to always respect one another's right to teach our children our values and ideas, though we may at times disagree with one another.

Woman:

We would like to end our ceremony by making pledges to our children to be.

Man:

In order to parent successfully, we believe we must manifest the wisdom the poet Gibran captured in his moving poem "On Children."

Woman:

We read from Kahlil Gibran's book The Prophet.

*Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's
longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you, yet they
belong not to you.*

*You may give them your love but not
your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies, but not
their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of
tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even
in your dreams.*

Man:

*You may strive to be like them, but seek
not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward, nor tarries
with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children
as living arrows are sent forth.*

*The archer sees the mark upon the path
of the infinite, and He bends you with His
might that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand*

*be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
so He loves the bow that is stable.*

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Man:

In order to be the parents we aspire to be, we make the following pledges.

Woman:

My children to be, I pledge to the best of my abilities to understand and meet your needs, and to help you find the things in life that are not mine to give.

Man:

My children to be, I pledge to the best of my abilities to understand and meet your needs, and to help you find the things in life that are not mine to give.

Woman:

My children to be, we pledge to appreciate the beauty and uniqueness of you, and to remember that you are not in this world to live up to our expectations, but to manifest your own personal destiny.

Man:

My children to be, in giving you guidance through the years, we pledge to allow you some room to find your own answers. We pledge to remember that reality is constantly changing, and therefore, the behaviors and values that were right for us in our lives may not be right for you in yours.

Woman:

We promise to protect you from danger, yet at the same time, to remember that it is not our job to protect you from all risks. We must learn to not let our fears for your safety stop you from taking the risks you need to take in order to grow and do what you need to do with your life.

Man:

We promise patience. We promise to give you the space and time to work things through at your own pace, and not to push you. We promise not to be critical in a destructive way, respecting your right to make mistakes.

Woman:

My children to be, we want to teach you to listen to others, for all that they can teach you, and also, how to turn inward for the answers that lie within yourself.

Man:

We want to help you experience life as beautiful -- to see the beauty in all people and all things, and to interact with the world with caring and respect.

Woman:

We promise to remember to continue to get our own needs met, because when people feel good inside, their love flows out of them to those around them, and when they feel empty, they have nothing to give. We promise to remember that, to love others, we must first love ourselves.

Man:

My children to be, we know we will be bringing you into a world filled with much pain and confusion. We are bringing you into a world that sometimes seems to teeter on the brink of annihilation. We are often filled with sadness and grief at the injustice of this world, and know that you, too, will have to cope with much pain here. Yet, we choose to bring you into this world, because we believe in the existence of the soul, which transcends this physical existence. As difficult as this life is at times, we believe that there is a purpose for what happens to us here. We have faith that we are all here to learn lessons that we can learn in no other way. We believe that living on this planet through these painful and difficult times will provide you with life experiences which are necessary for the enlightenment of your spirit.

Woman:

My children to be, we rejoice at the thought of your birth. We know you shall enrich our lives as we struggle together through the sometimes slow and painful, but also joyous and exciting, process of growth. We look forward to helping each other in working toward the fullest heights of our humanness.

Facilitator:

We, your family, friends, and community, have witnessed the commitments you have made to one another, and to your future children. We hear that you begin this journey with love and positive intention.

Yet, we must remind you that carrying out these commitments, day in and day out, will, at times, be fraught with frustration, pain, and confusion. Knowing this, we want to take this opportunity to give you our blessings, and to share with you some wisdom and advice that we believe may help you in the coming years. Will you stand together so that we may form a circle around you as a symbol of our love and support?

Facilitator:

_____ will you lead us in a prayer/blessing chant for this family?

Guest #1:

[This person leads a chant or recites a poem.]

Facilitator:

Would anyone like to share wisdom/advice with this couple? [The floor is opened for people to address the couple.] See examples below:

Guest #2:

First of all, I want to say that I support your decision to have a child 100%. However, being a father of three young children, I want to somehow give you some words from my own experience that can help you prepare for parenthood. The first thing that comes to mind is that my wife Mary and I keep returning to two questions about parenting: "Why is this so hard?" and "When is it going to get easier?"

Unfortunately, I don't really have the answer to either of those questions! However, I have some knowledge that helps deal with the difficulties of parenthood. Being a parent is like working out with weights--your arm gets stronger. You learn to adapt. You somehow learn to adjust to the fact that you have almost no time for yourself. You have to learn to accept that your whole lives revolve around your kids. But what we have discovered, after three kids and six years, is that if you just surrender yourself to this fact, you learn to flow with it all, and it's a very rewarding journey. I have found it great fun to discover that my children have prompted me to rediscover parts of myself. My silliness and playfulness have been enhanced, because my children respond so enthusiastically to these qualities in me. I want to say two other things real quick. You

need to have support. You have to form friendships with other couples who are going through the same challenges you are, so you can keep a sense of perspective.

Lastly, you have to develop some kind of spiritual strength inside yourself. You have to believe in your heart that the future holds positive things. You have to stay tuned to the fact that, even though humanity has its faults, it is always progressing.

Guest #3:

Having kids is the most important thing you will do in your whole life. But you've got to give yourself permission right from the word go to not do it perfectly. You can't do it right in every way all of the time.

I guess the other words of advice I can offer is be open to discovering and rediscovering who your children are. It's fascinating to discover how early they begin to develop unique little personalities. If you can try to remember to do a lot of listening, before you try to push them in any given direction, you will discover that they have a lot of innate wisdom about where they need to go.

Lastly, I would have to say, give lots of "whys." It's inevitable that you have to give lots of "Nos" -- because a big part of your job as a parent is protection. But if you explain the reasons for the things you do and say, your children will not distort your discipline as "not okayness" on their part.

Guest #4

Having raised two children to college age, the best words of advice which come to me is to see your children as the Buddha. Children are, perhaps, more than anything else, your teachers. They will lead you in directions that you never anticipated going, but which in fact you need to go for your own evolution.

Lastly, I would try to explain to you, if I could, that you will experience your life as going through some kind of profound change as a result of becoming a parent. Soon after my first daughter was born, I had a very vivid dream in which I approached a door, which opened, and I stepped onto an elevator, and I was flooded with feelings of having entered some new dimension of life. When I awoke, I had this sense that this dream symbolized my stepping onto the path of parenthood. I have remembered the dream for twenty-odd years.

Lastly, let me say that your children are your link to the future. They connect you to the generations that follow you after your death.

NOTE:

[Usually it makes sense for the facilitator to tactfully end the discussion after a certain length of time. He/she can make a comment like the following.]

Facilitator:

We're going to move along with the ceremony, because of time constraints. However, _____ and _____ want to encourage any of you who didn't get the opportunity to speak to talk with them during the reception.

Woman:

I am honored for you to become the father of my children. I know you will give our children strength and courage, as well as gentleness and caring. I have a deep respect for your opinions, and know I can trust the guidance you will give our children through the years. I have also chosen you to be my parenting partner, because the constant love, nurturing, and support you have given me makes me confident that our child will never lack for any of these.

I hereby take you as my parenting partner. I promise to nurture you, give you of my strength in times of need, celebrate your joys and triumphs, and care for you in sickness. I pledge to share equally with you the financial and supervisory care of our children.

Man:

I am honored for you to become the mother of my children. I know I can trust the ways in which you will mold the souls of our children. I understand that we can never know what course our children will choose to

take with their lives. Yet I also know that what children learn, and receive, from their parents has much to do with what they will become. I believe you will be a wonderful source of love and wisdom for our children.

I hereby take you as my parenting partner. I promise to nurture you, give you of my strength in times of need, celebrate your joys and triumphs, and care for you in sickness. I pledge to share equally with you the financial and supervisory care of our children.

Woman:

We thank you for sharing this important occasion in our lives with us.

Man:

We ask you now to join in celebration with us. Please join us in feasting and dancing!