

# GROUP THERAPY

*Even in these days of reportage wedding coverage, most photographers still need to shoot the time-honoured group picture. Annabel Williams presents a ten-step approach to take away the stress*

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It can be difficult to get a large group into one photograph so adopt a high viewpoint such as used in this shot. Other possible shoots could make use of stairs or even shooting out of a window.





Wedding photography has moved on considerably in the past few years, with the accent these days very much on a more relaxed and individual approach. Group set-ups in particular have come under severe scrutiny, with some of the more adamant reportage-style photographers eschewing them altogether in favour of candid shots of people mixing in a more natural way, and even those who do still shoot them have pared down this side of the coverage considerably.

There's little doubt that the old school approach did have a lot of shortcomings. For a start, the photographer often became public enemy number one as they dominated proceedings for long periods, organising people and taking the bride and groom away from their friends and relatives while they set up what appeared to be endless group situations. Larger gatherings in particular tended to be haphazard in the extreme, with people simply gravitating together as they saw fit, often in a mismatched and lopsided arrangement. The icing on the cake was always a communal fake smile as the shutter was fired.

Cringeworthy and dated the worst excesses of the group photograph might be, but the fact is they are still very much something that

most couples expect to see, even if they don't necessarily realise it. Many brides have said to me 'I don't want any groups or posed photos - I just want you to stay in the background and shoot what's happening.' My answer is 'What about a shot with your mother?' 'Oh yes, we want that! And my dad, and brothers and sisters, and I would love one of Granny and me!'

So, in fact couples do usually want those sort of shots, but if you try to take them randomly throughout the wedding, the chances of the correct people happening to be in the right place at the right time are pretty much zero! Not to mention the fact that you'll often miss the wonderful candid moments going on while looking for improvised group shots.

The truth is that group set-ups do still have a place in modern wedding photography. They're a way of recording the people who attended, something that becomes increasingly important as the years go by, and people continue to appreciate them as part of the overall coverage. The trick is to produce them within a reasonable time frame and to make them fun to do, so everyone looks happy and relaxed. My plan is to carry out the group shots in less than ten minutes. By being efficient and prepared the couple get the family shots they want, but with the minimum of fuss.

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**TOP** Having these bridesmaids sitting in a casual, comfortable sitting position indoors allows for more relaxed poses and smiles.

**RIGHT** As well as couple shots of the bride and groom, asking them to choose just a few family members and select friends for any group shots makes your job a lot easier. List these shots beforehand, including where you plan to carry them out, so you'll know who you need to find, when, and where.

**Be prepared**

My ten-point plan helps me to prepare for the group pictures, and takes away a lot of the stress. The good news is, many of the things you need to do can be put in place before the day arrives.

**1** Plan who will be in the groups. Explain to the couple that it will get very boring for them if they have masses of group photos, and that they should limit those to just a few. I suggest parents, siblings and grandparents. If you involve all the aunts, uncles and cousins it will go on forever. Reassure the bride and groom that you will get lots of candid shots of people on the day as well. Make sure you don't set yourself up to fail however: it's very unlikely you'll manage to get a shot of every person at the wedding. Often the bride and groom just want to be reassured they'll have at least one shot that includes every one of their guests, and once you tell them you'll set up a big group picture at some point they'll breathe a huge sigh of relief!

**2** I usually write out who the family groups are or make diagrams, and take three



**ESSENTIAL GROUP SHOT CHECKLIST**

**Important people and where best to photograph them**

**At home:**

- Bride with her mother (and siblings if there)
- Bridesmaids/pages

**Before ceremony at church or hotel:**

- Groom, best man and ushers
- Groom's parents (and siblings if there)
- Bridesmaids and bride's mother when they arrive
- Father of the bride walking in with the bride

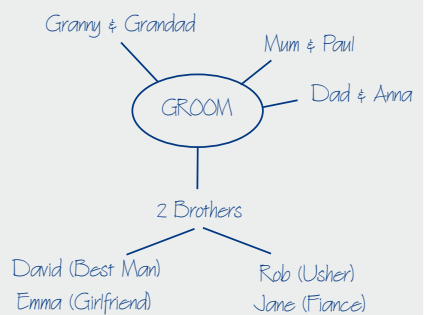
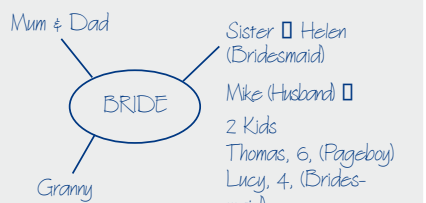
**After ceremony:**

- Bride and groom with...
- Parents
- Siblings
- Grandparents
- One big group shot of everyone

**Later on at drinks reception or after meal:**

- Friends of bride and groom
- Bridesmaids, pages, best man and ushers

**TIP:** If there are any very young bridesmaids/pages, it can sometimes work better to photograph them just after the ceremony; they may be too tired to cooperate later.



**ABOVE** It's a good idea to write a list, sometimes with accompanying diagrams, before every wedding. This should document the crucial few groups you must capture; share it with your assistant and employ the help of an usher or groomsman.





**ABOVE** Group shots outside can be striking and show off the beautiful venue, but make sure you've got a backup sorted in case the heavens decide to open.

copies with me; I give one to give to the usher, another to my assistant and I keep the third one for myself. It can get very difficult when the parents and grandparents are divorced, and the couple has various step/half brothers and sisters. In a situation such as this it's even more important to make a list and to be prepared. If you work it all out beforehand it will save loads of time and embarrassment on the actual day. I've covered weddings where some of the parents refuse to be in the same group as their ex-partner, for example, and I was even once asked to leave a gap between the bride's father and his new wife, so that they could crop her out of the photo later! If you know this kind of information before the big day you can shoot separate groups. It's potentially very embarrassing if you have to deal with things for the first time during the wedding.

**3** Plan where you are actually going to do the group shots: at the church perhaps, or the reception, or maybe a few at both? Personally I find the best time to do the family groups is at the church, simply because everyone is there. Once you get to the reception guests go missing, and it's much harder to pull everyone together. If it's a civil ceremony set your group pictures up at the drinks reception after the ceremony. I usually do group shots of friends later on in the day, when they can be a little more relaxed and less formal. Knowing in advance where you will position the groups really saves you time.

**4** Have a backup plan for if it rains. Where will you take the photos? Is there a conservatory, or a porch? I often use the front door of the hotel if it's raining, because the light is usually good under the top shade of the porch.

**5** If you're doing a big group shot of everyone you need to work out where you need to stand all these people so you can see everyone. Staircases work really well, or you could line them up on a lawn so you can shoot from a window down onto the group. Referring back to the previous point, remember to check out where you will do it if it's raining. I never promise the bride and groom that I will be able to do the big shot if it's raining: I always say I will try, but can't guarantee it, so I don't set myself up to fail. Sometimes there just isn't enough space to do one big shot of a hundred people inside on a rainy day. Try taking a wide shot of everyone at their seats in the reception - that often works as an alternative. Or go round each table and take several shots, just so you have as many people as possible.

**6** Tell the bride and groom you will need an usher or best man to help you find the people for the groups, because they usually know who all the people are. That way, you won't have to stand there shouting for people you don't know.

**7** Ask the couple to inform the main people before the wedding that they will be in the group shots and can they stand near the photographer when the shots are being taken. It can take ages finding people when group shots are being set up, and those who are already there

get fed up hanging around. Planning in advance speeds everything up considerably.

**On the day**

The remaining points in my plan refer to things you can do on the day to make your life easier.

**8** Position the bride and groom in a place where you have enough space to add more people, but keep the light flattering. Under a tree works well, or with the sun behind them if there's no shade. It helps if you can recce suitable locations at the venue before the wedding so you know exactly where you're going on the day. If you do get a chance to check locations in advance remember to work out where the lighting will be at particular times of the day.

**9** When setting up a group add the bride's parents, then siblings and grandparents. Check with the bride and groom first because sometimes they are happy to put all these people together in one shot (bride's family, then groom's family), which makes it even quicker. However, other couples will want three separate shots as you build them up, so be prepared to work this way if necessary.

**10** Ask the bride and groom to stay but everyone else to leave, and then add the groom's parents, siblings and grandparents.

There's so much going on at a wedding that it's great if you can organise the group shots to be as simple and as quick as possible. Then you can spend most of your time shooting the story of the day, and that's inevitably where you'll find the freedom to shoot the relaxed shots that define your style.