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Jan. 9, 2006 issue - Cathy Wright's second honeymoon wasn't exactly the lush romantic getaway most newlyweds imagine. For one thing, she and her new husband, George, spent a night camped out in a cave. For another, they had company: her two teenage sons. Together, the four hiked, caved, rappelled and sailed their way around Belize for eight days last April. Since it was a second marriage for both of them, the couple was less concerned with finding time alone than with building ties together. "We wanted to make it more of a family-bonding experience," says Wright, 42. "We had to interact with each other the entire time." When the couple stayed alone in the cave, the boys, 13 and 14, slept right outside in the jungle with guides—and plenty of snakes. It turned out to be everyone's favorite night of the trip. "I couldn't imagine going on a honeymoon and excluding the two people who mean most to you," says Wright. "All those shared experiences—it's a great way to start a new life together."

For couples with children who are tying the knot, the biggest challenge is creating an instant family. And increasingly, they are confronting that challenge beginning with the wedding and honeymoon. "Up until very recently, couples would go away, come back and tell the kids they were married," says Donna Ennis, founder of idotaketwo.com, a Web site devoted to second-marriage issues and etiquette. Now they are more inclined to include the children in the wedding planning, the ceremony and even the honeymoon. "It helps them feel like they're making a family, rather than that their parents are just getting married," says Ennis.

The destination-wedding industry has quickly seized on the trend. Teresa Belcher, president of the travel-planning firm Honeymoon Islands, says she has seen a 25 percent increase since 2001 in couples who choose to get married at resorts with their children and various other relatives in tow. She sends clients to family-friendly places in Hawaii, Barbados, Italy—and the Four Seasons Nevis, where kids can adopt baby sea turtles and monitor their progress. "Moms and dads are happy when kids are happy," she says. As part of its "Familymoon" package, Beaches resorts help organize wedding ceremonies that involve children; Joann Delgin, director of wedding strategy for Sandals and Beaches, says some couples give all their kids rings during the service, or have each person place a scoop of sand in a single vessel to signify their forming a family. Beaches resorts can provide butler services, kid-friendly food and Sesame Street activities. And when mom and dad want privacy, there's always baby-sitting. "You want to focus on the

fact that they're blending their families, but you also want to give the couple some romantic time alone," says Delgin.

Blended families need all the help they can get. According to E. Mavis Hetherington, emeritus professor at the University of Virginia and an expert on stepfamilies, about 55 percent of remarriages end in divorce. Of those involving children, the number of failed remarriages hovers around 60 percent. But there is a growing movement among therapists to provide specialized services to help stepfamilies beat those odds. "Talk about a niche market—it's huge and growing all the time," says Emily Bouchard, a therapist and founder of blended-families.com who often conducts therapy sessions for busy family members via cell phone, e-mail and even Instant Message. "Blended families have very special needs."

One of the greatest obstacles they have to overcome is the romanticized portrayal of stepfamilies in pop culture—from "The Brady Bunch" to recent films like "Yours, Mine and Ours" and "Cheaper by the Dozen 2." "These are feel-good movies, but it's not necessarily a feel-good situation," says Yvonne Kelly, who, with her husband, Rick, founded the Toronto-based Step and Blended Family Institute, which advises other professionals on counseling blended families. She says that for blended families, unlike nuclear ones, "conflicts of loyalty between the blood bond and the sexual bond" underlie everything. Her goal is to help couples with children adjust their expectations. "There is tremendous relief for people to hear me say, 'You don't have to love these children. You just have to care for them and respect them'," says Kelly. Lisa and David Boux, who each came to their marriage with two sons and then had a daughter together, attribute the relative smoothness of their blended family in part to their weekly three-way call with Yvonne. "She lets you know that what you're feeling is OK," says Lisa.

Religious leaders are joining the cause. Ron Deal, family-life minister for the Southwest Church of Christ in Jonesboro, Ark., and author of "The Smart Stepfamily," is one of a small but growing number of pastors focused on ministering specifically to blended families in his community. He organizes counseling sessions and educational groups, and last year developed a kit to help other churches start their own blended-family curriculums. Bob Tousey, an independent Catholic deacon in Baltimore, recently set up a series of premarriage classes catering to issues unique to blended families. The top two: attitudes toward discipline and dealing with the exes.

Marie Parks, 42, knows the difficulties firsthand. She has three children, 24, 14 and 12, from her first marriage. When she first started dating Paul MacIntyre, 43, a father of two,

she butted heads with his elder daughter because the girl was used to being "the lady of the house," says Parks. But through open communication and good humor, they survived. In fact, they more than survived; in June, the couple, their children and any other relatives who want to show up will head down to the Beaches resort in Turks and Caicos to get married. "The wedding is sort of secondary because we're all going to be together," she says. And she and the girls have already picked out their dresses.

With Sana Butler

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