

Parental Consent to a Marriage of a Bahá'í

Bahá'í marriage

For Bahá'ís, marriage is a gift of love and bounty from God to humanity. It is intended to be a *'fortress for well-being'*¹ for marriage partners and the foundation of a united family, community and world. Marriage is to be entered into with care and love, after each party comes to know the character of the other and with the joyful agreement of their parents. For Bahá'ís, *'marriage is of very great importance since the family is the fundamental institution of society'*².

Choosing a marriage partner

The Bahá'í teachings explain that an individual is free to choose a marriage partner who is *'pleasing'*³ to him or her, without interference or pressure from others. Each is to *'become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other'*⁴, giving serious thought to what they should look for in a marriage partner.

*'As for the question regarding marriage under the Law of God: first thou must choose one who is pleasing to thee, and then the matter is subject to the consent of father and mother.'*⁵

*'Their purpose must be this: to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity . . .'*⁶

Consent of parents to the marriage

Once a couple have chosen each other, and no matter how old they are, they then need the consent of all their living birth parents for the marriage to take place, even if only one of the prospective marriage partners is a Bahá'í.

It is important that everyone understands that the consent is to the marriage itself, not to the Bahá'í ceremony or the Bahá'í Faith.⁷

Why is the consent of parents needed?

Unity and harmony are fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Faith and are therefore of great importance. The consent of parents to the marriage of their children helps ensure that both families are happy with the union and will give it their blessing, support and encouragement. This approval preserves the unity of the family:

*' . . . entering into marriage is a step that has tremendous implications for a whole range of people beyond the couple themselves, both in this life and in the next.'*⁸

*'This great law He [Bahá'u'lláh] has laid down to strengthen the social fabric, to knit closer the ties of the home, to place a certain gratitude and respect in the hearts of children for those who have given them life and sent their souls out on the eternal journey towards their Creator.'*⁹

The consent of parents to a marriage is a law of Bahá'u'lláh

Bahá'ís follow the laws set out by Bahá'u'lláh as a benefit to themselves and to society:

‘The laws of the Faith are established on very sound foundations, and obedience to them is not only important for the proper development of society, but also for the attainment of true personal happiness. Bahá’í marriage laws are conducive to the promotion of family unity and harmony.’¹⁰

Responsibility for giving consent

Some parents may consider that their children are old enough and sensible enough to make their own decisions about marriage. Yet when parents give their wholehearted support to a marriage, it has a greater chance of success. A successful marriage should go a long way towards ensuring the health and happiness of husband and wife:

. . . marriage can be a source of well-being, conveying a sense of security and spiritual happiness. However, it is not something that just happens. For marriage to become a haven of contentment it requires the cooperation of the marriage partners themselves, and the assistance of their families.¹¹

By giving consent, the parents are not taking responsibility for the success of the marriage but are fulfilling a spiritual responsibility towards their children, that they may realise in their marriage *‘perfect contentment, bliss, and peace of heart, and become the object of divine grace and favour in the Kingdom of heaven’*.¹²

A parent does not have the right to place limits on who their child may choose as a potential spouse. *‘However, it is clear from the Teachings that parents do not have the right to interfere in their children’s actual choice of a prospective partner until approached for their consent to marry’* and therefore *‘when discussing the issue of courtship’*, it would be *‘best to discuss it on the level of principle without reference to individuals’*.¹³

Each parent has an individual responsibility for giving consent to the proposed marriage or withholding it. Parents may want to discuss it together and they may also wish to discuss it with the other set of parents as well as with their child and the proposed partner. Everyone may also wish to consult the Bahá’í institution that would oversee the marriage. This is usually the Local Spiritual Assembly or someone designated by a Bahá’í institution to do this on its behalf, depending on where the marriage is to take place.

Making the decision to give or withhold consent for the marriage

‘There is no indication in the Bahá’í writings of the factors that parents should consider in making their decision, so how they carry out the law of parental consent is left to them. If the parents choose, they may take steps to become well acquainted with the character of their child’s prospective spouse, or they may . . . even give consent without having ever personally met that individual.’¹⁴

It may be that parents will ask the couple to wait for a while before they give their consent. Given time, any worries they have may disappear. Sometimes parents think that differences of race, religion or culture will be insurmountable. The Bahá’í experience is that these can enrich a marriage, enable a couple to be a living example of Bahá’u’lláh’s statement about the oneness of humanity, *‘Ye are the fruits of one*

*tree, and the leaves of one branch*¹⁵ and demonstrate that *‘the human race can live harmoniously in all its diversity’*¹⁶.

Should parents feel they cannot give consent to the marriage of their child, they do not need to give reasons, but it is often helpful to the couple if they do so.

Preserving the unity of the family throughout the process of seeking and granting consent, is of utmost importance and often brings family members closer together.

Is consent always needed?

In general, consent of the parents is needed for any marriage of a Bahá’í, regardless of the ages of the couple, and whether either partner is marrying for the first time or marrying again after the dissolution of an earlier marriage whether through death or divorce.

There are a range of circumstances in which a child may seek to be free of the requirement to obtain parental consent for marriage such as abandonment at childhood. If the couple or parents think there may be a good reason why obtaining parental consent would be particularly challenging or inadvisable, they can turn to the Bahá’í institutions for advice and guidance. It is the responsibility of the Bahá’í institutions to gain a clear understanding of the situation and this can take considerable time. In these circumstances, it is best if the setting of the date for the wedding and other preparations not be undertaken until the consents of parents have been received or the Bahá’í institution has decided to permit the marriage to proceed without the consent of one or more of the parents.

How to give consent

If parents are happy for the marriage to go ahead, it is helpful if their consent is given in writing but *‘reliable evidence of oral consent is quite sufficient’*¹⁷ and can be discussed with the overseeing Bahá’í institution.

It is possible to withdraw consent after it has been given, if some new concern arises.

¹ Bahá’u’lláh, Bahá’í Prayers

² From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 26 June 2002

³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, number 85

⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, number 86

⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, number 85

⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, number 86

⁷ From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 23 April 1969; and from a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 14 July 1982 to an individual

⁸ From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 26 June 2002

⁹ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, published in U.S. Bahá’í News, no. 202, December 1947, p. 2

¹⁰ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 26 June 2002

¹¹ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Compilations*, vol. 2, p. 384

¹² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, number 92

¹³ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 28 August 1994

¹⁴ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 14 November 2018

¹⁵ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CXXXII

¹⁶ Universal House of Justice, 22 May 2001, Statement on the Opening of the Terraces

¹⁷ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 11 April 1978