

Quinceañera 101

The transition from childhood to womanhood is an important event in almost any culture. Hispanics, however, mark this memorable occasion with the celebration of a *quinceañera*. The *quinceañera* or *quince años* is a young woman's celebration of her fifteenth birthday, which is commemorated in a unique and different way from her other birthdays. The *quinceañera* is often considered to be one of the most important days of a young woman's life because it officially marks the transition from child to adult.

Besides referring to the actual festivities, the word *quinceañera* is also used to refer to the young woman whose 15th birthday is being celebrated (analogous to the word *cumpleañera* for "birthday girl"). The closest equivalents to the *quinceañera* in the English-speaking world are the Sweet Sixteen, Bar or Bat Mitzvah for Jewish children turning 13, Cotillion, or, in more affluent communities, the Debutante Ball for those who turn 18.

The entire *quinceañera* event is rivaled only by a formal wedding celebration. In fact, some *quinceañera* parties could be described as a wedding without a groom. The coordination of the entire *quinceañera* event is a teamwork effort of family, friends and relatives. Very strong family ties come into play. It is customary that all these family, friends and relatives will volunteer to be *padrinos* (godparents) or sponsors. Each sponsor takes financial and/or moral responsibility over what they have been assigned including the cake, invitations, doll, bible, rosary, etc. The entire festivity is full of spiritual and emotional moments where God, thanksgiving, food, music and dance are the mix of ingredients for a joyous culmination after months of planning.

It is customary that the *quinceañera* will wear a ball gown, usually with a petticoat or *crinolina* underneath to make the dress look extra puffy, and a crown or tiara along with her gloves. The dress is most commonly of white color though it is also common to see the *quinceañera* wear a pastel color dress or even red, royal blue, or burgundy. Flat sandals are worn for the beginning of the event then, when it comes time for the "Changing of the Shoes" ceremony, the father trades his daughter's flat shoes for high heels.



Traditionally, the *quinceañera*'s court will consist of fourteen young girls, called *damas* (ladies), and fourteen young men, called *chambelanes* (chamberlains), in addition to the *quinceañera*'s own *chambelán de honor* (chamberlain of honor). Typically, the *damas* wear same color and style gowns to coordinate with the *quinceañera* gown, and the boys wear coordinating tuxedos.



The actual *quinceañera* celebration consists of several parts. It is traditional to have a special thanksgiving mass or ceremony, followed by the reception and the banquet, and the famous *quinceañera* waltz or *el vals*. The party includes lavish food, merry music, and lots of dancing.

The entertainment begins with a choreographed waltz performed by the birthday girl and her *quinceañera* court. During the reception, the *quinceañera* will dance the waltz with her father first and then with the *chambelán de honor*, accompanied by her *damas* and other *chambelanes*. This is a major highlight of the celebration. Other important highlights will follow such as the toast and the cutting of the cake – which is usually the size and as elaborate as a wedding cake.

There are several traditional gifts for a *quinceañera* which have a special meaning relating to the *quinceañera*'s coming of age:

The Doll: Her last doll, a symbol that a *quinceañera* is no longer a child but a young woman. Traditionally, the parents or godparents give this important gift.

The Zapatillas: During the church ceremony, the *quinceañera* traditionally wears flat shoes without any heels symbolizing her child status. The flat shoes are then changed for heeled shoes or *zapatillas* at the reception during a special presentation following the presentation of the last doll. The shoes are changed either by the father or older brother of the *quinceañera*. The *quinceañera* is now ready to take the first dance of the evening as a young lady.

Other special gifts for a *quinceañera* include: the tiara (signaling her as a princess and her "triumph" over childhood); the scepter (authority and responsibility); the bracelet or ring (circle of life); and the *quinceañera*'s Bible (important to keep the word of God in the life of the *quinceañera*).