



featured article By Kristen Meyer Stroud



# Family Gatherings: Coming Back To Love

At a wedding I recently attended, the warm-hearted Italian father of the radiant bride toasted the awestruck non-Italian groom, welcoming him into “La Familia.” By this father’s generous definition, “La Familia” includes family, close friends, and essentially, everyone in the community with ties to the family! That loving patriarch touched the entire gathering with his inclusive embrace.

No single vision of family describes the myriad versions coexisting today. Families come in all colors, shapes, and sizes. Not static, families morph as mar-

riage, divorce, birth, adoption, and death vary the faces that make up any family from year to year. A Cuban-American family I’ve heard about hosts family gatherings of over 800 persons, where different branches of the family tree wear color-coordinated t-shirts! Whatever the configuration of your family, with family reunions anything goes.

Whether you love to plan and attend family gatherings or cringe at the thought, you’re invited to sample these suggestions for making every family reunion, celebration, or holiday a memorable occasion. 18 ▶

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**TIP #1: USE FAMILY REUNIONS TO GROW-UP AND OUT OF OLD, OUTWORN PATTERNS.**

Bringing family together offers the best chance of witnessing full-grown adults reduced to reenacting childish childhood roles. Why not use family gatherings as an opportunity to pull old weedy habits out by the roots? Predictably, family time shows me the places I still need to grow myself up. In the past, my “not being taken seriously” complex, a leftover relic from growing up the youngest of four, might trigger a regression. Over the years, I’ve tamed and retrained ingrained habits, making precious family time more pleasant and peaceful. Fortunately, when we get reacquainted every year, we realize most of us grow up eventually.

**TIP #2: AGREE TO DISAGREE OVER DIFFERENCES THAT CANNOT BE RESOLVED.**

Some patterns may never change, so why not adopt a strategy to give peace a chance rather than battling over unconquerable terrain? For example, my uncle, who lives comfortably in the red state of New Hampshire, and my father, who identifies strongly with the blue politics of his current home state of Vermont, now get along together famously well with their kids and grandkids every summer. Many years ago the two brothers, urged on by a harmony-seeking spouse, made a rule: don’t talk politics. That rule preserved family ties despite past arguments where tempers flared, threatening to break-up fam-

ily gatherings. By agreeing to disagree, these wise brothers enjoy poison-free family celebrations.

**TIP #3: IF YOU DON’T HAVE FAMILY, YOUR FAMILY IS TOO FAR AWAY, OR YOU CAN’T BE WITH YOUR OWN FAMILY: ADOPT, BORROW OR CHOOSE A NEW FAMILY.**

Many singles and families celebrate the spirit of Thanksgiving by giving to others. Working for a shared purpose delivers a sense of belonging to volunteers at community-sponsored dinner programs. My husband, two sons and I often invite friends, families, and strays to a turkey dinner at Thanksgiving. We take the stress off by asking each family or guest to bring a dish to share--and we can be thankful to everyone for contributing to the meal. An exuberant pack of children usually runs around outdoors, and teens may pluck out melodies on a guitar while adults gather in small clutches to chat and prepare the meal. We take time before the meal to share our gratitude. Afterward we light a bonfire and gather around, enriching our connections with each other, the earth, and its bountiful gifts.

**TIP # 4: FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE.**

This rule may seem obvious, but everyone has positive attributes if you look carefully enough. Studies have shown that couples tend to succeed when positive comments outnumber negative ones, and counselors recom-

mend paying attention to what you appreciate in your partner rather than what bothers you. Why not try that approach with your brother, sister, mother or father? The quality of our thoughts and attention directly affects our physiology, not to mention how great it feels to be accepted and supported by loved ones who know us so well. Positive thoughts lower blood pressure and other measures of stress. Our attitude and what we choose to focus on is under our control.

**TIP #5: CHOOSE A SUITABLE LOCATION**

On a practical level, everyone benefits when family comes together in a beautiful setting, free from the stresses of hosting a large gathering. One summer, my bi-coastal, extended-by-marriage family decided to gather at a long-established resort in rural Maine. To our surprise, the average age of the other resort guests was almost as old as the resort itself! While being treated to colorful desserts and some rockin’ big band swing music, our crew really perked the place up. The eighteen-and-under crowd quickly formed a cooperative, multi-aged tribe, the likes of which had never been seen at the resort, because as it turns out, we had scheduled our gathering the first year the resort allowed children! Bringing multi-generations together is one of the greatest gifts of family reunions, wherever you choose to gather.

**TIP #6: IDENTIFY A RANGE OF ACTIVITIES TO SUIT YOUR INTERESTS**

In this department, your family style determines the best fit. My mother-in-law plans Indiana Jones-style family reunions to feed her adventurous spirit. From hot air ballooning in Sedona to a steam train trip to the rim of the Grand Canyon, from heli-hiking in British Columbia to a wildlife safari in Kenya, she sets a high bar for exciting world travels. On a tight budget, closer to home, pre-teens can find plenty to do with a pond, lake or stream to muck around in. Got teens? Try the universal crowd pleaser: a swimming pool. For little ones, a big grassy area for lawn games and a play structure or sand pile work wonders. Some families love structured activities, others insist on going their own ways, coming together for meals and socializing. As one friend explained, the only rule for his family is “No Rules!”

Whether your family gets together often, rarely, or never, may you be touched by the loving presence of “La Familia” in whatever form it takes in your life. ■



Between family gatherings, author Kristen Meyer Stroud hides out in Northern California with her husband and two sons, growing herself up for next year’s family reunion.

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