

# ● Ask America's Ultimate Experts

## Q "How can we have a great family reunion?"

About 20 million people attend family reunions every year—and if you're planning one this year, odds are you want to make it your best one ever! So we got top reunion experts Edith Wagner and Craig Richards and family psychologist Elizabeth Lombardo to reveal their tips for turning a ho-hum get-together into a bash your whole family will rave about!

### 1 Bring the generations together!

#### Map out your clan!

If your reunion is large, people may not know each other. So before the event, start a virtual family tree on Ancestry.com and encourage folks to fill in what they know. Print out the tree and bring it with you, so everyone can see who's who!

#### Create cohesiveness!

Nothing says "we're together" like matching T-shirts, hats or buttons—plus they do double duty as a party favor, adds Wagner. Try sites like Custom Ink.com and GetYourShirts.com.

#### Have assigned seating for meals!

You might think it's best to keep things casual, but if you let folks just sit where they happen to sit, groups that know each other will stick together and no one will get to know extended family. That's why "one of the best ways to create a memorable event is to arrange where people sit just like you would at a wedding—so people mingle!" says Richards.

#### Get everyone connected!

Reunion websites can keep everyone posted with dates, photos, updates and more. "These are a great way to get everyone excited and anticipating the big day, as well as to organize folks to help with planning," Wagner says. Two low-cost ones to try: MyFamily.com and FamilyDetails.com.



### 2 Make your reunion fun!

#### Play a reunion game!

Gather as many pictures as you can of family members when they were children or young adults and create a slide show, says Lombardo. Then, as you flash the photos on a screen or TV, have folks see if they can guess who was who!

#### Try an icebreaker!

List some life experiences, both general like "loves to travel" and ones you already know

about people, like "is an accountant" or "moved across the country." At the reunion, read the list and ask people to raise their hands when a statement applies to them. "It helps people learn about everyone else and feel closer!" says Wagner.

### 3 Save money and headaches!

#### Remember that less is more!

Family reunions are essentially about people, not activities, says Richards. "When folks look back at the reunion, what they'll cherish most is quality time spent with family members. A reunion crammed with a frenzy of activities leaves little time for that."

#### Create a sense of ownership!

Delegating tasks and not feeling like you have to plan the whole gathering yourself will not only make you less stressed, says Richards, but it

will turn passive attendees who may arrive and wait to be entertained into participants with a sense of ownership of the event. Studies show when folks are invested in an event, they have a better time!

#### Did you know?

The average American family reunion is made up of about 50 relatives!

#### Tap into town activities!

Wherever you hold your reunion, look for local attractions, festivals and fairs that charge no admission. If your event spans several days, people will want to strike out on their own for some of the time, and it'll give out-of-towners a chance to enjoy the surrounding attractions.



#### Make it a potluck!

If most people live near the reunion, make it a potluck! Not only is it cheaper than catering, but it's an opportunity for family cooks to show off their specialties, says Wagner. Ask everyone to bring or e-mail you their recipes so you can put them on your reunion website or include them in a booklet to hand out as a memento.

—Marina Khidekel

## Our expert panel



**Edith Wagner** is founder and editor of *Reunions* magazine, and author of several books on reunions, including *The Family Reunion Sourcebook*. She has appeared on *Today* and *Good Morning America*.



Family reunion expert **Craig Richards** is the founder of the world's largest social networking site for families, *FamilyReunion.com*. As one of eight children, Craig uses what he's learned from his own family to bring other families closer.



**Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D.**, is a clinical psychologist specializing in happiness and author of the bestselling book *A Happy You*. She works with families to strengthen their bonds and has been featured on CNN.

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