

What do you think of when it comes to summer time? Summer brings to my mind hot weather, ball games, swim lessons, camping, garden work and, family reunions. Every summer, my dad's side of the family has their annual family reunion – one that I love dearly!

Both my parents are native Oklahomans, but their siblings and off-spring have, like many families in the United States, scattered across the states to new locations as they pursued careers or followed their spouse's families. That doesn't keep us from getting together, though!

My dad is one of 5 children. Each of the sibling's families hosts the annual event at the location of their choice. We have been in 7 different states in the past 10 years, alone. Our reunions are not a one-day affair. We usually begin to gather mid-week and stay until the following Monday or Tuesday. We share several meals, mix and match our outings and do not discriminate by age or ability. We just enjoy each other's company.

I know that not everyone has the same positive and excited attitude about reunions that I have. Perhaps your reunion is the 2 hour potluck meal at the community building or old family church where everyone still sits clustered with the people they get to see all the time. The older generation sits next to each other and share pictures or letters from days gone by. Kids squirm and whine that they have to sit so long with nothing to do and no one to play with. Yes, I have some experience with that type of reunion, too.

In an attempt to help your reunion experience be more exciting and fun, I thought I would share with you some ideas about how to help the gathering gain some momentum and be something everyone of all ages can enjoy. If you haven't had a family reunion for a while, these tips can help you plan a reunion that will be a hit!

First, consider or reconsider the location. Does the location encourage family together time? Is it comfortable and "age appropriate" for everyone? Even if you have it at a family church, you could have your meal there then move it to a park close by or to a nearby family member's back yard. If you are renting a facility, you need to consider how you will pay for it. Share the cost of a rental, if one is used. Passing the hat usually generates more than enough funds to cover the nominal cost of renting space. Most of the time, we just gather outdoors in a park or lake shelter for a cookout or at a restaurant that can hold our 30 – 40 family members. If you do the latter, call the restaurant to give them fair warning that you are bringing in a large group.

Second, consider the date of the reunion. You will never plan a date that works for everyone! However, you can begin by polling the family to determine what time of year works best. With children in school, our families have determined that summer works best and have committed to the second weekend in July. By keeping the time of year

consistent, our families can do their best to plan around the family reunion time and fit it into their schedules.

Third, consider being intentional about inviting family members. It may seem like a wasted effort, but you never know how the lines of communication in individual family units work. You need to make sure everyone gets the same information. You can do this formally or informally. In my family, we use a variety of tools to communicate – letters, email, social media, and good ole’ fashioned phone calls! Taking the extra time to help everyone feel welcomed will add to the success of a family reunion.

Fourth, consider the menu. The least expensive option is a basket dinner (aka potluck.) It also poses the greatest risk for food safety concerns. It is difficult to keep food hot enough or cold enough to prevent the potential for causing a foodborne illness if you have to travel a distance to the reunion. I suggest that you grill or cook the main course on site and build around that. That will keep it hot and safe from this risk.

Fifth, consider what activities or entertainment would be of interest for the age group that is attending. Children typically complain about gatherings that leave them sitting and contained for long periods of time. Take something for them to enjoy. If they have to stay inside, take board games, card games, play dough, building blocks... a variety of games for a variety of kids. We like to have our reunions close to a large body of water and often “chip in” to rent paddle boats, canoes, or pontoons. These activities also encourage family fun time and make memories for life.

Sixth, consider the distance and method of transportation that family members will have to use. Use this to help determine the location. My city cousins do not have cars with tires that can handle our area flint rock (especially with the recent rains!) If your family is spread out over many states, consider a central location, if possible.

Finally, don’t try to do it all yourself. Recruit area family members to help with the set up and ask members that live a distance to help in the planning process. The more help you have the easier it will be for everyone to enjoy their time together. Spending time together is one of the characteristics of strong families. Strengthen and celebrate your family at your family reunion. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!