

## 5 Strategies for Family Gatherings

### 1. Ask them to tell you a story.

Imagine your most boisterous aunt comments about her excitement that a particular candidate just announced he or she is running for office. If your feelings differ from your aunt's, you may be tempted to let her know. Instead, consider asking her to share a story.

Try asking open-ended questions like:

- When were you first introduced to this topic? What was that like?

You have every right to disagree, but this might not be the moment to flesh out that disagreement most productively.

### 2. Tie it back to shared communities and experiences.

Imagine that your cousin expresses his frustration with a new high school curriculum that the governor has proposed. Despite having a different opinion on the curriculum, you share some of his questions about how it could be presented to students. Given that you both went to the same high school, you could state your thoughts on the proposed implementation plan, and draw upon examples from your shared experience at school.

Statements that can help emphasize kinship and connection include:

- I have also had similar questions and have wondered about ... (list what questions you have in common).
- It sounds like our school experiences were similar in these ways ... (list them).

### 3. Practice active listening.

Imagine your peppy second cousin has trapped you on the sofa, launching into a monologue about the urgency of implementing emissions taxes on all businesses to mitigate climate change. Though you may feel differently about the possible outcomes of emissions taxes, consider reflecting some of her key points.

Start with “what I’m hearing you say is...” This signal that you are listening and are invested in the conversation might make for more fertile ground for you to then ask a question to tease out a point of contention without getting into immediate conflict.

#### 4. Be honest about your frame of mind.

Perhaps this just isn't the right moment for you to respectfully engage in a politically charged conversation. For whatever reason, you're just not in the right frame of mind to engage when your grumpy retired uncle begins complaining about how grocery stores charge customers to have their food bagged in plastic. It is reasonable to respectfully tell your family members that you are not ready to contribute to the discussion.

You can communicate your unwillingness to participate by saying:

- I appreciate your desire to listen to my opinions, but I am not ready to share them.
- I prefer to listen to you all rather than dive in right now.

When articulating your inability to engage, you are permitting yourself to remove yourself from the situation if they disrespect your boundary.

#### 5. Articulate clear boundaries.

Halfway through the meal, your older sister, whom you respect, states that you should quit your job and focus on being a stay-at-home mom like she has done. This is not the first time she has raised this topic, however, and past conversations have made you feel guilty.

It may be awkward to formalize boundaries within these conversations, but the goal is to protect your relationships.

You might use the following prompts to establish how you are willing to engage in the conversation:

- I am willing to discuss this topic with you as long as...
- Try an "I" statement, such as "I feel judged whenever you bring this up, because you don't support the way we run our household. "