

# FAMILY REUNION INSTITUTE'S

## STICKY REUNION SITUATION

### ABUSIVE FAMILY MEMBER

October 2019

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#### The Situation:

At the reunion several family members noticed a cousin being verbally abusive with his elderly mother and father. No one said anything at the time, but we're wondering if we should have said or done something. What's the best way to handle this kind of situation at a reunion?

*(The following responses are not intended to be a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment when needed.)*

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#### The Fix:



**Suzanne  
Vargus Holloman**

Thank you for your concern, it's not too late to address the incident even though the reunion is over. A small group of family members should be gathered to address the incident, keeping the fact that they are following up on it confidential. A relative that is close to the cousin should be asked to speak to him/her. The relative should find out more information in terms of the responsibilities the cousin has with his/her parents. The relative should speak to the cousin about the incident in a non-judgmental, neutral way. Hopefully the incident was atypical, possibly brought on by the stress of supporting the parent's participation in the reunion. Packing, travel arrangements, and medical aspects can add up to make preparation— as well as assisting once at the reunion—much more involved than anticipated.

The cousin may not have realized at the time that the stress was manifesting as verbal abuse.

If the cousin is experiencing on-going stress from serving as a caretaker, the family can rally to provide support. One approach, among many, is that they can organize to help out and relieve the cousin. Even if the break is only for a few hours per week, they can spend time with the parents so that the cousin can have time out for him/herself.

A relative should also visit with the parents to look for signs of abuse in the parents behavior. The relative should look for changes in the personality of the parents such as depression, being withdrawn, confusion, or nervousness. If the relative suspects that the parents are being abused, then the other family members in the small group can be asked to confirm the assessment with visits. Other resources should be tapped such as the National Center for Elder Abuse <https://ncea.acl.gov>. They can also speak to a counselor, pastor, physician specializing in geriatrics, etc.

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#### The Fix:



**Doug Harris**

First I would identify the person in the family that knows the disrespectful son and his parents best. Then I would keep in mind that although showing disrespect to one's parents is never right, the disrespect does not always come from the same place. Perhaps the disrespectful son is overwhelmed by personal issues having nothing to do with his parents, but is so distraught he lashed out at the ones closest to him. Perhaps there is a recent and/or longstanding unresolved issue with his parents that reached the boiling point. Perhaps he has been allowed to get away with this growing up and his parents kept it quiet. In any case, a family friend or elder can take him aside and explain exactly how it looked when he was disrespectful. The public scene was not only embarrassing to his parents, but to the entire family since he decided to have his outburst at the reunion. Explain the family values and standards that he transgressed, knowingly or unknowingly, and why the disrespect cannot be tolerated by the family under any circumstances. This must be done privately and calmly with no judgmental undertones. I also recommend that all parents that witness this be encouraged to have a talk with their children about why this is not acceptable and goes against family norm and standards. It also might be an impetus for someone to draft a statement of family values for all to agree on and share.

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