

Gathering Family History

How much do you know about your parent's childhood? Would you be willing to attempt to understand your parent better by finding out some of her or his history? If you consider it appropriate, see if you can arrange to interview your parent about their early life. If she or he is not open to this, you could try weaving questions into general conversation or interviewing a close relative who may be able to shed some light on the past.

Possible questions to ask a parent include:

- What kind of neighbourhood did you grow up in?
- What was the social status of your family?
- What was your position in the family? How was that for you?
- What was it like growing up in your family?
- What was the atmosphere in the home like?
- How would you describe your mother/father/siblings when you were growing up?
- How would you describe yourself as a child?
- How did your parents get on with each other?
- How did you get on with your mother/father/siblings/grandparents?
- Who were you closest to? Why?
- Was there anyone you were afraid of? Why?
- Were there any particular difficulties in your family when you were growing up (health issues, deaths, divorce, sexual abuse, poverty, mental illness, violence, infidelity, war. etc.)?
- What was the impact of this?
- How did your parents express affection?
- How were children disciplined and by whom?
- How was anger expressed?
- What was the most challenging aspect of your childhood?
- What was the best?
- When you were upset as a child, who did you turn to?
- Did either of your parents drink, gamble or do drugs when you were growing up? What affect did this have on you and your family?
- Were you ever call names, treated harshly, hit or abused physically or sexually as a child? By whom? How did this affect you?
- Did you witness other people in your family being hurt? Who?
- What happened? How did this affect you?
- What was your greatest hope as a child?
- What was your greatest fear?
- What dreams and ambitions did you have as a child?
- What strengths did you develop from your childhood?
- What piece of advice would you offer from your life experience?

It can be a good idea to capture your parent's story on tape, if she or he is willing. Give this conversation the time and privacy it deserves, and consider having more than one session if it goes well. Your parent's story is a precious gift. Listen with an open heart. Hopefully, this storytelling will be healing for you both.

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