



## FAMILY

## The Power of Your Parents' Life Stories

There's the stuff you *should* talk about (wills, health care proxies, end-of-life preferences). But this is the stuff you'll *want* to talk about—the fun and heartfelt subjects that strengthen family bonds, reveal surprising memories, and foster understanding.

BY BETH WEINHOUSE

**IVAN SCHNEIDER**, a corporate copywriter in Seattle, grew up hearing stories from his father, Leon, about coming of age poor in New York City, hitchhiking as a teenager, and joining the merchant marine. Leon had traveled the world and even survived two torpedo attacks during World War II before settling down. He was 48 years old when Ivan was born, and when Ivan reached that age, he felt the need to learn even more about his 96-year-old father's life.

Ivan instigated a series of phone calls with his dad, who lived across the country. The long talks helped Ivan put his father's stories into perspective; he began to understand the motivations and emotions that went along with them. "It was a bunch of stories before, but it became a life story," Ivan says. "The conversations were an intimate experience, and I think I understand my father a little better. We had a different dynamic afterward, until his death from Covid last November."

The emotional payoff of talking to your parents about their past has nothing to do with whether they led extraordinary lives or ordinary ones. It's the talking itself that's powerful. "As you make sense of your parents' lives, you make more sense of your own," says Susan Newman, PhD, author of *Nobody's Baby Now: Reinventing Your Adult Relationship with Your Mother and Father*. "You can see what influenced them, and you can see how that may have influenced how they raised you, and even how you think."

It's easy to set up a great chat (see "3 Ways to Start the Conversation,"

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right). You can work questions into regular phone calls or wait for an in-person family gathering, where perhaps the presence of jovial siblings and many open bottles of wine will get the conversation flowing. Or you can turn to an app like StoryCorps (see "Cool Family Story Tools," page 70) for help recording, saving, and sharing. Aim to ask open-ended (not yes-or-no) and specific questions. Here are some topics to explore with your parents, as well as sample questions to propel the conversation.

### Their Childhoods

"This is a good starting place," Newman says. You can ask, "What was it like for you growing up?," and your parent can go off in many directions.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What was your childhood bedroom like? Can you draw a picture of it?
- What are some silly things Grandma and Grandpa used to say to you? Would they sing any silly songs?
- What was your most memorable family vacation as a kid?
- Was money an issue when you were growing up, and if so, how were you aware of it?
- Did you get an allowance? What kind of household chores did you do?
- Who was your best friend? What were they like?
- Were there any big historical events you lived through that you remember?

### 3 WAYS TO START THE CONVERSATION

**GO ON A WALK OR DRIVE**  
Stroll down a favorite road, or take a day trip somewhere scenic. The uninterrupted time together leaves space for thinking and talking.

**USE PROPS** Objects can spark memories and start discussions. Look through an old photo album. Play music you know your parents love. Find a newspaper front page (or reproduction) from when your parents were young and ask what it was like to live during that time.

**DO A FAVORITE ACTIVITY**  
If you used to bake cookies with your mom, for example, try that again. Ask questions about the recipe: "Did your mother make this? How did she learn to cook?"

### Their Romantic Relationships

It's hard to get a full picture of our parents as people without asking about their courtship, their experience as newlyweds, and even their relationships before meeting each other. Maybe you heard from an aunt or uncle that your dad was a heart-breaker or your mom was a big flirt. It's worth getting over the feeling that these questions are too prying. Trust that your parents won't tell you anything they don't want you to know. And if you sense discomfort, you can simply stop probing. "I wish I'd asked my dad questions like who his first love was," Newman says, wistfully.

Try relating the topic to your own situation—whether you're single, married, or going through a divorce. "You could say, 'It would be so helpful if you're comfortable sharing some of your experiences with me,'" says Maud Purcell, a psychotherapist and the founder of the Life Solution Center of Darien in Connecticut.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Who was your first love? What happened?
- Tell me about your first kiss. Your first date?
- Did you ever have your heart broken?
- Is there a romantic relationship you regret? The one that got away?
- What made you sure you found the right person to marry?
- Tell me about the day you two met. What kind of dates did you go on together?



### Their Dreams and Ambitions

Your parents' childhood hopes can be illuminating. Find out if your parents had aspirations they weren't able to pursue—and why. "If they always wanted to be a doctor, maybe that tells you something about why you or your kids are so interested in science," Newman says.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What did you dream of being when you were a kid?
- What was your first job? Did you like it? How much were you paid?
- What was your best job ever, or who was your best boss? Your worst?
- For parents who were in the military: Did you enlist, or were you drafted? What were the living conditions like? Were you ever frightened? What did your time in the service teach you about the world?
- What's the most memorable work-day you've ever had?
- If you had to do it again, would you choose the same career?

### COOL FAMILY STORY TOOLS

**STORYCORPS** This nonprofit is creating an oral history of personal lives. The app helps you record your parents' stories, which will be archived at the Library of Congress. (Free; [storycorps.org](http://storycorps.org))

**FAMILYSEARCH** The Memories section of this personal history research site (which also has an app) lets you upload photos, documents, and audio files, tag them by date and subject, and store them in shareable albums. (Free; [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org))

**STORYWORTH** This site sends a weekly email prompt for your parent to respond to, and at the end of the year the stories are collected in a hardbound book. (\$99 per year; [storyworth.com](http://storyworth.com))