

# FAMILY HISTORY: 56 Essential Questions to Ask Your Parents & Grandparents Before It's Too Late



MODERN / HEIRLOOM / BOOKS  
*by Dawn Roode*

**IF YOU'VE DOWNLOADED THIS GUIDE, CONGRATULATIONS**—you're on your way to a most enjoyable and important journey! Who are you interviewing? *A parent? Grandparent? Beloved aunt or uncle?* Whomever it is, clearly their stories matter to you, and I am thrilled to be able to help you capture them through an oral history interview!

There needn't be a lot of pressure: Simply turn on your smart phone's voice recorder or set up a video camera on a tripod, then forget it's there...and begin reminiscing. (Setting up two recording devices is even better—you never know!)

The important thing is that you relax and let the stories flow. Don't wait until next year or any other "better time"—trust me when I say: *Now* is *always* the right time!

Use these questions merely as a guide or to give you ideas for questions of your own. The key to any good personal history interview is listening—so ask follow-up questions that genuinely interest you, and let the stories take their own paths...***that is usually when the magic ensues!***

Please, ask your parents the questions that matter now, **before it's too late.**



# 56 Questions to Ask *Your Parents & Grandparents*

## CHILDHOOD & FAMILY LIFE

- Describe the home you grew up in.
- What were you like as a child?
- Do you have memories of what your parents said you were like as a baby?
- What was a typical day like in your family when you were little?
- How does your family tend to show their love for one another—through physical affection including hugs and kisses, gift giving, saying “I love you” or some other phrase often, etc.?
- What would you say makes your family unique from other families?
- What did you do when you were bored as a child?
- If you had to create a family motto, what would it be?
- How did you feel about school, and what type of student were you?
- Did you have a best friend, and if so, how did that relationship play out over the course of your life?
- When you were little, what did you answer to the question: “What do you want to be when you grow up?”
- What were you like as a teenager?

## FOOD MEMORIES

- What meals would be in your family’s cookbook—the foods that make you feel nostalgic for your childhood or for home?
- What are your oldest recipes and where did they come from?
- What smells transport you to this day right back to your childhood?
- Who are/were the best cooks in the family? Tell me about them.
- What family dishes would you miss the most if you never tasted them again?

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## LIFE TRANSITION & MILESTONES

- Tell me about your experience...
  - ...deciding where to go to college.
  - ...pursuing your career.
  - ...getting married.
  - ...getting drafted into the war.
  - ...serving in the military.
  - ...becoming a mother/father/grandparent.
  - ...falling in love for the first time.
- Tell me about your first job.
- Did anyone ever throw you a surprise party?
- How did you feel on your wedding day? What memories of that day stand out for you?
- What can you tell me about the first time you experienced loss? Who died? Did you go to the funeral? How old were you? How did it effect your outlook on life?



## DECISIONS & LESSONS

- What is the best decision you ever made?
- What is a memorable time you have failed, and how did you recover from that experience?
- What lessons(s) do you most recall learning from your parents? Grandparents?
- Did you have a favorite teacher or another role model who had a major impact on your life?
- Can you share about any hardships (*in history, such as the Depression or a war, or in their personal life, such as a divorce or unemployment*) that you experienced in your life, and how you survived/thrived/coped?
- Tell me about a significant time you said “no.”
- Do you have any regrets? (*Encourage elaboration here; sometimes a prolonged silence is the best invitation to speak.*)

# 56 Questions to Ask *Your Parents & Grandparents*

## TRADITIONS

- What holiday did you most look forward to while you were growing up?
- What were some of the traditions your family observed related to that holiday?
- Do you have any family traditions that have been passed down for generations in your family?
- Does religion hold a strong place in your family? (*If “yes,” there are a variety of follow-up questions to ask to pursue this thread!*)
- What is the most memorable gift you have ever received? Given?
- Are there any specific family heirlooms you inherited? Why do they hold meaning for you?
- How are/were birthdays celebrated throughout your life?
- In what ways have you/your family kept your culture alive (through language, foods, cultural traditions, for example)?

## FUN & GAMES

- What songs have held special meaning to you over the years?
- Who was the trickster in your family?
- Do you have any funny stories from your past?
- What's your favorite family story to recount around the dinner table?
- Did you play sports growing up, and if so, what were those experiences like?
- What was the main form of entertainment in your family when you were a kid (board games, listening to the radio, playing music/singing, reading books, putting on shows, etc.)?
- Describe what family vacations were like, and if there were any destinations that you traveled to often?
- Tell me about a time you were incredibly embarrassed.

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# 56 Questions to Ask *Your Parents & Grandparents*

## BIG-PICTURE QUESTIONS

- What values would you like to pass down to the younger generations of your family?
- How did you learn resilience?
- What would you tell your 20-year-old self?
- What would you like your legacy to be?
- Are there any questions you wish you had asked your own parents?



### Consider this a conversation more than an interview.

Listen generously, ask follow-up questions, and let your interview subject go off on tangents that yield interesting stories and prompt unexpected memories. Your goal should be to get the most meaningful stories from your loved one, and if that means waiting another day to discuss what you *thought* today's topic was, then so be it!



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# Our Story

Modern Heirloom Books, founded by magazine publishing veteran Dawn M. Roode (*Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Parenting*), is the best resource for helping you preserve and share your stories exquisitely.

We expertly curate your “stuff”—old photos from boxes, digital family photos from phones and hard drives; hone your memories; elicit stories that surprise and delight; and design a coffee table book that is graphically and narratively evocative.

Dawn's compassionate and interested interviewing style makes subjects not only feel comfortable, but excited about sharing their stories.

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