

We Are Storytellers

Exploring Family Stories

Writing activity

For this activity, kids will discover favorite stories from their own families by interviewing a family member from an older generation.

Individual: each child works independently on their interview and story presentation.

Small groups: siblings can work together on their interview and story presentation.

This is a home-based project. For youth programs, the staff can explain the project to parents and let them know how they can assist with the interview.



Supplies

- Notepad or paper, pen or pencil
 - Drawing paper and drawing tools: colored pencils, markers, or watercolors (optional)
 - Smartphone with built-in audio recording feature or other kind of portable recording device; device with a video chat service (optional)
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Let's get started

Tell the kids that they will be trying to uncover a treasured family story by interviewing a family member. Kids should choose someone from an older generation — parent, aunt or uncle, parent's cousin, grandparent, great-grandparent, or great aunt or great uncle. Kids could also decide to choose an older friend of the family, someone who knows them well.

Ideally, this should be a person that the child can **sit down with in person**. It can be helpful to record the conversation with a smartphone or other portable recording device that the family has. Other "face-to-face" interview options are:

- **Smartphone interview:** capture the conversation with the phone's audio recording feature.
- **Video chat interview:** record the conversation with a video chat service (like Zoom).

Hearing each other's voices is a wonderful part of the interview process. However, kids can also do the interview by **email or regular mail**. Warning: snail mail will require patience!



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Getting ready for the interview

Together as a group, talk about the art of doing a good interview. Tell the kids: you could just jump in right away and ask, "*Can you tell me a great family story?*" But sometimes it's better to get to that question within a longer conversation — it gives kids a chance to learn more about their elders and gives the elders time to reflect on the past.

Kids can come up with their own questions, or use some of the questions we've provided on page 8. **Have the kids practice interviewing** each other with a shorter list of questions before they interview their grown-ups.

Interview day

Have the kids to bring their questions, a pen or pencil, and a notepad or other paper to write down all of the details they will hear about their family stories.

Tell the kids to start the interview by asking their family member to say their name and age. Sometimes the person you're interviewing is shy or quiet and gives a short answer. It can be helpful to then ask, "*Could you tell me more about that?*"

Remind the kids that they are looking for good details to make their stories interesting — things like unusual characters, a colorful setting, unbelievable action, funny expressions, and a satisfying ending.

Next, have the kids give an oral summary of the story and ask if they've left out any colorful or important details. Remind the kids to thank their grown-ups for sharing their family stories.

Writing time

After saying goodbye and offering thanks again for the shared time, the kids will write down their version of the family story. Younger kids who aren't yet writing can dictate their stories to an adult. Encourage the kids to include a drawing of the family member who shared the story, or a character or event from the story. You can remind the kids about the basic parts of any good story:

- Beginning-middle-end format
- The main character has a problem that needs to be solved by the end of the story
- Family stories (like folktales) are often funny or silly or outlandish, so don't forget the humor!



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Simpler activity: A family treasure

This is a simpler alternative to the family interview. The only supplies needed are plain paper or a notepad, pen, and drawing tools (markers, colored pencils, or watercolors). Here, kids will ask a parent or other older relative who lives nearby to share a treasured object that they've kept for years and years. It can be an old cooking pot, a handknit scarf, a charm, a painting or photograph — anything that sparks special memories and a story.

Kids will ask their elders to tell them a story about that object — where it came from and why it is a meaningful part of the family's history.

Kids will capture the oral stories in writing as they are talking with their relatives. Younger kids who aren't yet writing can dictate their stories to an adult. Next, kids will write out a final version of the story and include an illustration of the treasured object.

If a camera is available, kids can take a photograph of their relatives with their objects.

Sharing our work

Once the family stories are written down (and illustrated), gather everyone together in a circle to read their stories out loud. Tell kids that they can be as dramatic as they need to be in telling their stories. If you have a rocking chair or a porch swing ... that can make a great spot for the storyteller!

At the end, kids can add some information about the source of their family story. For example, "And that's exactly what happened, according to my Great Aunt Lou."

Try this!

Story Circle: Family stories are great to share at the next family gathering. Set up a simple storytelling circle or tent outside with blankets and chairs and let the stories begin! Stories at night are great, too — add string lights or lanterns for a theatrical effect.

If you have lots of storytellers in the circle, use a prop like a stone, a stick, or a hat. Whoever has the stone gets to share a story, then passes the stone on to the next storyteller.



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Suggested interview questions (Adapted from [StoryCorps' Great Questions](#))

Start by asking: What is your name and how old are you?

Questions for any family member

- Where did you grow up?
- What was your childhood like?
- Can you share an embarrassing childhood experience?
- Who were your favorite relatives?
- Do you remember any of the stories they used to tell you?
- Can you tell me about someone you'll always remember?
- What do you feel most grateful for in your life?
- Can you share a traveling experience that had an impact on you?

Additional questions for grandparents

- How did you and grandma/grandpa meet?
- What was my mom/dad like growing up?
- Do you remember any songs that you used to sing to her/him? Can you sing them now?
- Was she/he well-behaved?
- What is the worst thing she/he ever did? (that might spark a story ...)

Exploring family heritage

- What is your ethnic background?
- Where is your mom's family from? Where is your dad's family from?
- Have you ever been there? What was that experience like?
- What traditions have been passed down in your family?
- Who were your favorite relatives?
- Do you remember any of the stories they used to tell you?
- What are the classic family stories? Jokes? Songs?

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