

From a Child's Point of View

Whether you're a genealogist, a scrapbooker or a blend of both, you may be overlooking the valuable contribution children can make to your family heritage project. You may have already made your children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews the subject of scrapbooks, and recorded their names and vital information in family charts and family trees, and still you've barely begun to incorporate the child fully into the family legacy. The obvious thing that we overlook with children, perhaps because we are part of their lives, and perhaps because they are children, is their point of view. The journaled entries in scrapbooks, the photos, the home movies you've preserved are naturally from your point of view. What a treasure it would be to future generations and to the child himself in years to come if you could include his point of view.

What if you could go back and interview your grandmother when she was sixteen or ten or even five years old? What a richer view you'd get of her childhood than you would decades later when her memories are reshaped by adulthood. The opportunity exists, not with your grandmother but perhaps with someone else's, who at the moment is outside playing tag or sitting quietly in the kitchen conversing with an imaginary friend. But how does one capture a child's point of view? How does one "interview" a child for family heritage preservation and make it an enjoyable exchange for both of you?

Interviewing a child is probably the most fun of all interviews. Unless the child is a teenager, the questions needn't be written down beforehand and would probably be intimidating for the child if you did so. You're not after facts, but abstracts so it shouldn't be necessary to take down the answers at that moment either. You can write it all down afterward without worry of losing the information since children express themselves in such colorful fashion.

Prepare for the interview by reaching back into your own childhood. Try to remember smells, textures and simple things that gave you pleasure. Remember the people in your life then and allow the abstracts to take over. What images or smells or emotions are conjured when you think of them? Other memories will easily follow. In fact, this preparation could be the springboard for more family heritage information – your own. It might even spark a desire to do write your own story for the children you're preparing to interview.

If the child is old enough to understand not only the process of an interview but the significance of it to your family's history then tell them what you're doing, and prepare them for the sort of information you're going to want from them. But if they're young, it's best if the "interview" is just time together, a visit. You might sit down together with a bowl of popcorn or cuddle up together in a chair with a blanket.

You might start by talking about what fun it was when you were a child. Tell them a few things and then ask them some questions. Simple questions reveal the most in young children. Start with his/her favorite things. Ask about a favorite color, favorite smell. You might be surprised that favorite smells are not scents but people or places, just as you might recall from your own childhood. Ask about favorite games or toys. The idea isn't just to learn his favorite things but to get the child to turn his thoughts inward. Ask about his friends, imaginary or real, dreams and what he likes to pretend. Even the simplest answers will be revealing and more endearing in later years than you find them even now.

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I have a friend whose child at age three used to sit very still pretending she was an apple. It was precious then to hear her describe her "apple self" but now that she is grown and a young mother, her children love the story and her grandchildren will treasure it as part of the scrapbook that will be handed down.

Don't be surprised if the child has questions of his own, about your childhood, or anything else. The interview will no doubt become a conversation, particularly with older children. In fact, you'll find, no matter what the child's age, that your interviewing time is a great bonding experience.

Later you can choose to write down whatever you wish from the interview. There is no right or wrong information here. But do write it down in a journal or scrapbook all its own or along with photos.

Make it a practice to interview the child as he/she grows, perhaps yearly, making sure the questions are growing with the child. An older child will appreciate your interest in her life, such as how she is adapting to the new school. As her or she grows, they may confide things in you that you shouldn't include in the written version of your interview. If you aren't sure, ask. If they're at that stage where they find the interview intrusive, ask them to help you write something. Surely, their favorite music, and favorite clothes are permissible material.

Remember that interviewing not only creates a bond, it allows the child to ask questions and get to know you as a person, not just a parent or grandparent, aunt or uncle. You'll be surprised and they will too at what likes, dislikes and even dreams "run" in the family. And after they're grown you'll both enjoy looking back through the interviews to see if there were clues as to who this evolving child would turn out to be.

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