

Storytelling for Younger Children

What's the secret for a happy family? They talk. A lot.

Dr. Marshall Duke, a renowned psychologist, is the guest on this important podcast episode. For an Emory University research project, Dr. Duke created the *Do You Know Scale*. The survey instrument asks children 20 *Do You Know* questions about their family and its history.

The results were quite surprising. Turns out the children who knew more about their family's history had higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of anxiety, were much better at facing challenges, and a whole lot more. Yes, family stories are a critical part of a child's emerging identity and well-being.

And don't feel left out! These stories can and should be told in any family, of any age. This information is provided in the Legacy Café Podcast. To learn more about all facets of legacy, visit www.legacycafe.org.

The "Do You Know" Scale

Want to know how much your children and grandchildren know about their family history? Have them answer the following questions and circle a "Y" for "yes" or "N" for "no." Even if they know the information you are asking about, they don't need to write it down. You just wish to know if they know the information at this point.

1. Do you know how your parents met? Y/N
2. Do you know where your mother grew up? Y/N
3. Do you know where your father grew up? Y/N
4. Do you know where some of your grandparents grew up? Y/N
5. Do you know where some of your grandparents met? Y/N
6. Do you know where your parents were married? Y/N
7. Do you know what went on when you were being born? Y/N
8. Do you know the source of your name? Y/N
9. Do you know some things about what happened when your brothers or sisters were born? Y/N
10. Do you know which person in your family you look most like? Y/N
11. Do you know which person in the family you act most like? Y/N
12. Do you know some of the illnesses and injuries that your parents experienced when they were younger? Y/N
13. Do you know some of the lessons that your parents learned from good or bad experiences? Y/N
14. Do you know some things that happened to your mom or dad when they were in school? Y/N

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 15. Do you know the national background of your family (English, German, etc.)? | Y/N |
| 16. Do you know some of the jobs that your parents had when they were young? | Y/N |
| 17. Do you know some awards that your parents received when they were young? | Y/N |
| 18. Do you know the names of the schools that your mom went to? | Y/N |
| 19. Do you know the names of the schools that your dad went to? | Y/N |
| 20. Do you know about a relative whose face “froze” in a grumpy position because he or she did not smile enough? | Y/N |

Score: Total number answered Y ____

Important Note: About that last question! Fifteen percent of our sample answered “Yes!” This is because the stories that families tell are not always “true.” Often, they are told to teach a lesson or help with a physical or emotional hurt. As such, they may be modified as needed. The accuracy of the stories is not critical. In fact, there are often disagreements among family members about what really happened! These disagreements then become part of the family narrative. Not to worry!

Next Step: After learning which questions were answered “N,” you’ll have a great start on transmitting the family narrative by telling those stories.

Addendum: The major criterion for inclusion in this set of questions was that they test knowledge of things that children could not possibly have learned firsthand, either because they happened before the children were born or they involved family members who were less familiar to them than parents and grandparents.

Given this limitation, the children who knew the information would therefore have had to receive it from others through stories, writings or other indirect sources. In our research, higher scores on the Do You Know scale were associated with *higher levels of self-esteem, an internal locus of control* (a belief in one’s own capacity to control what happens to him or her), *better family functioning, lower levels of anxiety, fewer behavioral problems, and better chances for good outcomes* if a child faces *educational or emotional/behavioral difficulties*.

However, correlation is not causation. Simply knowing the answers to questions will not produce the good outcomes described above. The good outcomes as well as the knowledge of family history that the children possessed were all the result of something else. We have written about this something else in several publications, and I quote from one of those publications here:

“If simply knowing family history could make for better states of well-being, some might propose (confusing correlation with causation) that we simply teach children various facts about their families and they will become stronger.

Clearly, this approach would not work! Rather, it is our belief that knowledge of family history reflects certain processes that exist in families whose members know their histories. One such process is the communication of family information across

generations; important questions about this process would include “Who is passing this information?” and “When is this information transmitted?”

In our study of family stories at the Emory University Family Narratives Project funded by the Sloan Foundation, we found that family stories seem to be transferred by mothers and grandmothers more often than not and that the information was typically passed during family dinners, family vacations, family holidays, and the like.

Other data indicated that these very same regular family dinners, yearly vacations, and holiday celebrations occur more frequently in families that have high levels of cohesiveness and that they contribute to the development of a strong sense of what we have called the intergenerational self.

It is this intergenerational self and the personal strength and moral guidance that seem to derive from it that are associated with increased resilience, better adjustment, and improved chances of good clinical and educational outcomes.”

Source: Duke, M.P., Lazarus, A., & Fivush, R. (2008). Knowledge of family history as a clinically useful index of psychological well-being and prognosis: A brief report. *Psychotherapy Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 45, 268–272. Retrieved from <https://legacycafe.org/dyk/>

Allan Kullen, President ■ People of America Foundation
7723 Groton Road ■ Bethesda, MD 20817 ■ 301-520-8242 ■ akullen@americansall.org
www.americansall.org ■ www.sociallegacynetwork.org
www.legacypartneralliance.org ■ www.homeschoolmaterials.org