



INTERVIEW AN ELDER

Who is an elder? An elder is someone who is older than you. In many cultures, an elder is someone who others look up to because of their wisdom and experience. An elder or elderly person is usually considered to be someone 65 years or older.

Interviewing an elder, such as an older role model, grandparent or great-grandparent is a great way to learn more about them and the events that have occurred during their lifetime. The stories of everyday people are rarely recorded and collected, and become lost to time. Yet, there are so many amazing stories contained in the memories of everyday people.

Inter-generational relationships have benefits that go both ways. For younger people, it can help build a positive and respectful connection by opening up conversation. It teaches important social and emotional skills such as patience, listening, and active citizenship. Interviewing an older family member can help younger people gain a sense of their roots (where they have come from) and sense of identity. Important learning skills such as reading and writing abilities are also enhanced through the interview process.

For elders, sharing stories and memories of their past and recent-past is a way to pass on history and wisdom to the next generation. Canada has a large aging population, mainly due to the large baby-boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1964). Senior citizens make up almost 17% of the population of Canada (6 million citizens). In today's busy, fast-paced and technology-driven world, senior citizens can often feel left-out, left-behind or ignored. Building inter-generation relationships is a great way for seniors to learn new skills, maintain cognitive health, increase sense of purpose, and reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness.



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Interview Considerations

Below is a list of important tips for getting started and conducting interviews with an elder.

- Start by asking permission. Tell your elder that you would like to learn more about them and their life. Ask if they would be willing to share stories with you. Let them know they don't have to answer any questions they don't want to.
- Your elder may not be accustomed to telling stories about their life. They may think they aren't a good storyteller. They might be shy. It is important to "break the ice" with some simple and open-ended questions. Avoid yes/no questions. A good place to start is to ask about others such as their ancestors or share stories about objects and photographs.
- An interview does not need to be formal. You might start by asking a few simple questions and build on these questions over the course of a few sessions with your elder.
- Ask your elder to elaborate when appropriate. You might ask questions like: "Can you tell me more?", "How did that make you feel?", "How did that affect or impact you?", "What changed after that?", "What happened next?"
- Record the information. Use an audio recorder, video camera, pen and paper. Just make sure that your elder agrees and is comfortable with the method. They might be too intimidated by a camera and won't want to open up. They might be more comfortable writing down their answers.
- Respect the fact that someone may not want to discuss every detail of their life. Some things are too hard to talk about, or they aren't ready to share information.
- Be prepared that things might get emotional. You might ask a question that sparks a difficult memory. You should be supportive and try to carefully read cues from your elder. Should you apologize? Should you offer to stop the interview? Should you ask if they want to continue? Be supportive and be respectful of their needs in the moment.
- Know when to give space or stop. Your elder may get tired and need a break. Don't expect to get every story in one session. They may also need time to reflect, remember and think about a response to a question you have asked.
- Backup the information you collect. Don't trust that just because you recorded something on your phone that it won't get lost.

Interview Questions

Below is a list of questions. These are just ideas or suggestions – You should adjust or adapt the questions to suit your needs. Before you start asking questions, please review interview considerations on the previous page.

Family History Questions:



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- What's your full name?
 - Does your name have a special meaning?
 - How did your parent's choose your name?
 - Did you have any nicknames growing up?
- Where and when were you born?
 - Did your parents ever tell you anything about the day you were born?
 - Where did you grow up?
 - Where are places you have lived?
- What were/are your parent's names?
 - What memories do you have of your parents?
 - Who was more strict?
 - How did your family earn money?
- Did you have any siblings? What were/are the names of your siblings?
 - What was your relationship like with your siblings growing up?
- What do you know (or what can you tell me) about the origins of your family?
- What were some of your family traditions?
- What are some places you have traveled/visited?
 - What are your favourite places you have traveled to or visited?

Childhood Questions:

- What were you like as a child?
- Where did you spend most of your childhood?
 - What was your home like growing up?
 - What was your room like?
 - Can you describe the neighbourhood you grew up in?
- What was your family life like growing up?
- How did your family celebrate holidays (e.g. Christmas, Thanksgiving)?
- Did you have any chores or responsibilities at home, what were they?
- What did a typical mealtime look like at your home growing up?
- What was a special treat growing up?
- Did you have any pets growing up?
- Did you ever do anything naughty? What happened when you got in trouble as a child?
- Where did you go to school?
 - What was it like attending school as you were growing up?
 - What were your favourite subjects?
 - What were your grades like?
- What was your first job? How old were you?
- What are some hobbies or activities you did for fun growing up?
- What games did you play growing up?
- Did you participate in extra-curricular activities?
- Did you have a favourite toy growing up, what was it?
- As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?
- What sorts of clothes or activities were popular when you were a teenager?
- How did you learn to drive? Who taught you?

Adulthood:

- What did you do after grade school? Did you go to college or university?
- Where was the first place you lived on your own/outside of your family/parent's home?
- What are some jobs you have had?
 - What did you like/not like about them?
 - Which job did you like the most/least?
- How did you meet your husband/wife/partner?
 - When and where did you get married?
 - What was your wedding like?
- What was your first car?
- Who was your first crush?
- What's the hardest thing about parenting?
- What are some of your favourite family moments or stories about your children?

Identity, Interests and Achievements:

- Who are you most like in your family (past or present)?
- Who were/are people you have looked up to throughout your life?
- Who are three people in history you admire the most and why?
- What values/beliefs are most important to you?
- How do you define "a good life" or "a successful life"?
- How would you describe your personality?
- What things frighten or scare you?
- Do you practice a religion? How has faith/religion shaped your life?
- What has been your proudest personal and/or professional achievement?
- What is the most important thing you learned from your parents?
- Tell me about a time you felt important or that you did something important in your life.
- Have you ever won anything?
 - What's the highest honor or award you ever received?
- How did you decide what you wanted to do with your life?
- What's your favourite book/movie and why?
- What are your current interests or hobbies?
- What is a typical day like for you now?
- What do you like to do for fun now?



Special Memories, Life Lessons and Legacies:

- Are there times in your life you remember more vividly than others? Why?
- What have been the most influential experiences of your life?
- What big, national or world events do remember happening during your lifetime?
 - What are the three biggest world events that have happened during your lifetime and why?
 - What do you remember about the 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s?
- What are a few of your fondest memories?
- What is your most cherished family tradition and why?
- Do you have any special sayings or expressions?
- What was my mom/dad like growing up?
- What things have changed the most in your lifetime?
- How have your personal dreams or goals changed throughout your life?
- Did you ever struggled with anything or have had to overcome an obstacle? What did you do to get through difficult times in your life?
- What are some words of wisdom you can offer to my generation?
- What are things you know now that you wish you had known when you were younger?
- Are there any special objects or keepsakes that you have held onto? What are they and what do they mean to you?
- Is there anything that you threw away that you now wish you had kept?
- Do you have any family pictures, documents or information you would like to share with me? Who will you pass these onto someday?
- How do you feel about getting older?
 - What's the hardest thing about getting older? The best thing?
- If you won \$1 million tomorrow, what would you do with the money?
- If you could have three wishes, what would they be?