60 questions to ask your grandparents

Eight short sessions, easiest first

Ask about one place, one person, one day. Mornings, sixty to ninety minutes, in the language the memory lives in. Ask permission before the hard years, and accept a no. Tick each one off as you go.

Session one. The village, and how to spell it

Start with the place, because a place has no wrong answers.

- [ ] What was the name of your village or town, and how do you spell it? Write it for me in your own script too.
- [ ] Which district was it in, and which is the nearest big town?
- [ ] Walk me from the bus stop or the railway station to your front door. What do I pass?
- [ ] What was the house built from? Which room was yours?
- [ ] Where did the water come from, and who fetched it?
- [ ] Which tree, well, temple, gurdwara, mosque or shop do you remember best, and why?
- [ ] If I went there today, what would I look for?

Session two. The people before you

This is the session with a clock on it. Do it early.

- [ ] What were your grandparents' full names? What did you call them?
- [ ] What do you remember about your grandmother's hands, her voice, her cooking?
- [ ] What work did your grandfather do, and where?

- [ ] Who is the oldest person in the family you ever met? What did they tell you?
- [ ] Which surname, gotra or clan name did the family use, and did it change?
- [ ] Is there a family story about where we came from, before that village?
- [ ] Let's take the oldest photograph we have. Who is everyone in it, from left to right?

Session three. When you were my age

Grandchildren get answers parents don't, so use the comparison.

- [ ] What were you doing at my age? Where were you living?
- [ ] What did you want to become, when you were my age?
- [ ] Who was your closest friend? What happened to them?
- [ ] How did you get to school, and what did you carry?
- [ ] What did a film, a radio programme or a bus ride cost then?
- [ ] What was the first thing you ever bought with your own money?
- [ ] What did your parents forbid that you did anyway?

Session four. The crossing, the move, the leaving

Ask before you start: "Is it all right if we talk about the year you moved?" If the answer is no, skip to session five and don't come back unless they do.

- [ ] When did the family first leave the place it had always lived?
- [ ] Who decided? Who argued against it?
- [ ] What did you carry, and what did you have to leave?

- [ ] Where did you sleep the first night in the new place?
- [ ] Who helped you when you arrived? Do we still know that family?
- [ ] Was there anything you were never able to go back for?
- [ ] What did you tell your children about it, and what didn't you tell them?

For many families in Punjab, Sindh and Bengal, this session is 1947. For others it is a train to Bombay, a ship to Mombasa or a flight to Dubai. On my grandparents page I put it in two words: never push. That silence has held for decades, and it is theirs.

Session five. Work and the first money

Every working life has a first job, and if there was a business, the version on the company website is not the one your grandfather tells.

- [ ] What was your first job, and what did it pay?
- [ ] Who taught you the work?
- [ ] If there was a shop or business, who lent the first money?
- [ ] What was the worst year for money? How did the house manage?
- [ ] What did a good day at work look like?
- [ ] What job do you think you'd have been good at, if things had gone another way?
- [ ] What did you teach my parent about money?

Session six. Marriage, the house and the women in it

Ask each grandparent alone. Together, one tells and the other corrects.

- [ ] How was your marriage arranged? Who came to see whom?
- [ ] What do you remember of the wedding day, from the morning?

- [ ] What was your first home together like? Who else lived there?
- [ ] Who ran the household, and how?
- [ ] Nani, Dadi: what did you want to study, or do, before you married?
- [ ] What did your mother-in-law teach you? What did you decide to do your own way?
- [ ] Who in the family worked hardest, without anyone noticing?
- [ ] What did you two argue about in the first year?

Session seven. My parent, when they were small

This is the chapter only they can tell you.

- [ ] What was my father or mother like as a baby?
- [ ] What did they get into trouble for?
- [ ] What were they afraid of?
- [ ] What did they want to be?
- [ ] What did they do that made you proudest?
- [ ] What were you most worried about, when they were growing up?
- [ ] What do I do that reminds you of them, or of you?

Session eight. Food, songs, words, and looking back

This is the layer nobody writes down.

- [ ] What was cooked on which day of the week, and why?
- [ ] Which dish do you make that nobody else makes the same way? Show me while I record.

- [ ] Sing me a song your mother sang. Where did she sing it?
- [ ] Which words or sayings did your family use that I have never heard?
- [ ] Which festival was the biggest in your village? What happened that day?
- [ ] What changed in your lifetime that you still can't believe?
- [ ] What do you know now that you wish someone had told you at twenty?
- [ ] Which year of your life would you live again?
- [ ] What should every grandchild in this family know about us?
- [ ] Is there anything I haven't asked that you'd like to tell me?

After each session

Copy the recording the same day to three places, date first in the file name. Check names and spellings with them while they are here to correct you. The full post, with how to ask and what to do with the answers, is at sgwashere.com/blog/questions-to-ask-your-grandparents/

Saurabh Garg · sgwashere.com