



# Sharing Life Stories — A Family Experience

**An Educational Program Guide by Rabbi Mark H. Levine**



## Overview

In this 90-minute intergenerational program, teens (ages 12–15) and family members will experience how to have deeper and more meaningful family conversations. Together they will identify significant events in their lives and learn to ask open-ended questions that can cultivate stronger emotional connections in their family.

## Enduring Understanding

Every person, regardless of age, education, or social status, yearns for meaningful connections with family or friends. We can build strong connections, especially within families, by sharing personal stories that are important to us and by expressing the feelings associated with the stories.

## Goals

- Identify significant life experiences at different stages of life.
- Explore feelings associated with those significant life events.
- Learn how to write and ask probing questions that can elicit a personal story from others.

## Materials

**O:** Organization provides

**F:** Families bring

<b>F</b>	Charged devices to connect with extended family members (cell phone, iPad, laptop, etc.)
<b>O</b>	<a href="#">“Grandparents, Tell Your Personal Story: I Wished I Would Have Asked,”</a> both emailed to families in advance of the session and copies available at each table
<b>O</b>	11 X 17 sheets of paper on the tables, plus extra paper
<b>O</b>	Pens, pencils, sharpies, and highlighters on the tables
	Whiteboard with markers
<b>O</b>	Name tags for participants, pens/markers
<b>O</b>	Copies of StoryCorps’ <a href="#">“Tips for a Great Conversation”</a>
<b>O</b>	Copies of “My Storyteller’s Prayer” (included below)

## Suggested Room Setup

- Large room with good cell reception and strong Wi-Fi, outlets for charging
- Clear directions to connect to Wi-Fi
- Large round tables that seat at least eight people
- Microphone and microphone stand

## Timing (90-minute program)

PROGRAM STEP	TIMING
Welcome and set induction	15 minutes
River of Life activity	25 minutes
Identifying feelings	15 minutes
Break	5 minutes
Question writing	20 minutes
Wrap-up and survey	10 minutes

## Program Steps

### 0:00–0:15 Welcome and set induction

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Welcome the participants and explain the goal of the session: Today, we are going to try something new and quite dramatic to recall stories from different parts of our lives and experiment with questioning techniques that will help us share our stories with people we love.

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the first sentence of the article "[Grandparents, Tell Your Personal Story](#)," which is on each table ("In a funny way, I feel I know as much about Baskin Robbins' ice cream as I know about my grandmother").

If multiple families are seated at each table, invite them to introduce themselves (remember to include family members on screen) and discuss the sentence together. Ask: What feelings do you think the writer is expressing? Do you think this is a common feeling among families? What might prompt someone to make a statement like this?

Give the groups 5 minutes to discuss, and then ask for volunteers to share their perspectives.

### 0:15–0:25 Introducing the River of Life activity

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The River of Life activity will help participants recall and discuss key events in their lives. Start by reading the following sentence from the article: “So many of us feel that way. We want to leave our families with the stories of our lives. But how? How do we write them down?”

Explain: We are now going to learn a way to capture meaningful stories of our lives.

Write the following quote by Emma Smith, an English novelist, on the whiteboard: “Life is like the river, sometimes it sweeps you gently along and sometimes the rapids come out of nowhere.” *Alternative:* Write the quote before the event, cover it with a sheet of paper, and reveal the quote when you are ready.

Discuss with the group: In what ways do you think life is like a river? What are some examples of rapids in a river of life? Examples of smooth waters?

### 0:25–0:40 River of Life Activity

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Tell participants they are now going to create their own river of life.

Ask each person to take a sheet of 11 x 17 paper and markers/crayons and to draw the banks of a river that is at least five inches wide, flowing diagonally up or down the paper from corner to corner (any direction). Next, ask participants to divide and label the river crosswise into time segments, up to their current age. For example, adults might use ten-year intervals (0–10 years, 10–20 years, etc.) and teens might use three-year intervals. Make sure there is room in each section of the river to write a few short sentences describing one or two significant experiences. Have extra paper on hand.

Ask participants to take a pen or pencil and list occasions in their lives that hold deep meaning for them, such as a school graduation, memorable vacation, moment of close friendship, being recognized at work, and life-cycle events (birth of a grandchild or sibling, becoming b-mitzvah, getting engaged, etc.). Allocate about 15 minutes for this activity, and encourage conversation among family members.

### 0:40–0:55 Identifying feelings

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Focus the attention of the group on the front of the room. Write the heading “Feelings” on the whiteboard.

Invite participants to share events from their river of life and to name the associated feeling. As volunteers stand, ask them to say their name first.

Share examples to help people feel comfortable participating:

- “When I was nine, I went to sleepaway camp for the first time. I felt nervous because I had never been away from home for so long.”
- “When I held just-born [name of grandchild, gesture to grandchild] for the first time, I felt overwhelmed with love that this little one was ours.”
- “I retired from work recently and felt a mix of excitement that I could do what I wanted with my time and also nervousness that I would have too much spare time.”

During this part of the activity, write the examples in brief under “Feelings” on the whiteboard. For example, you might write, “Sleepaway camp, 9: nervous away from home.”

Encourage others to join the discussion by saying, “Anyone have a similar experience? Would you like to share?”

Explain that when we share our feelings — and even hopes and vulnerabilities — with loved ones, we can strengthen our connection to them. We may feel a sense of freedom and authenticity and build the trust of the other person.

Ask participants to choose one noteworthy event on their river of life to discuss among their family members. Perhaps encourage family members to compare similar experiences. For example, the teen and the grandparent may both recall how they moved home and the emotions associated with that. How was it different for the teen? The grandparent?

Be sure to include family members who have joined from a distance.

### **0:55–1:00 Break**

### **1:00–1:20 Question writing**

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Hand out copies of “Tips for a Great Conversation.” Review the suggestions for asking open-ended questions, follow-up questions, and questions that encourage vivid details.

Invite teens to ask the parent or grandparent a question about one of their events. For example, if the grandparent wrote, “When I retired, I was excited *and* scared,” the teen

might ask, “What opportunities did you see that excited you when you retired? And what were you afraid of?”

Next, suggest that adults check with the teen if they are comfortable responding to open-ended questions too. Encourage the adults to be specific about what they will ask so the teen is not caught off guard. For example, if the teen wrote, “When I had my bar/bat mitzvah, I felt worried I would mess up on the bimah,” the adult might say, “May I ask you what you thought would happen if you messed up?” If the teen prefers not to respond, move on to a different event, or have the teen ask the adults more questions.

Encourage grandparents to share their own experiences with their teens, especially if they went through similar events in their lifetime. For example, if the teen shares that they felt overwhelmed when they took on an extra responsibility such as running a school club, the grandparents could talk about how they worked to find balance during busy times. Sharing advice can go both ways if it feels natural.

### 1:20–1:30 Wrap-up and survey

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Distribute copies of the Jewish storyteller Peninnah Schram’s prayer, which expresses a desire to be an authentic and worthy storyteller. Read it together:

*Ribono shel olam*, God of the Universe, listen to my heart and my voice as I stand before You, wanting to tell our story.

Help me to understand and find the right feelings and words with which to transmit the tale. Make my voice expressive and clear so that the collective wisdom of our people can reach the hearts of those who listen.

May I merit to hear well with my ears and heart.

Keep me from the jealousy of other tellers and from my jealousy of them so that we may be able to share and hear each other with open hearts.

Allow me to assume this responsibility as my forebears did before me — to continue to retell our stories.

Help me choose my stories wisely and let my words live. Make me worthy to be a storyteller of our Jewish people.

— Peninnah Schram, "My Storyteller's Prayer," *Jewish Stories One Generation Tells Another* (Jason Aronson, an Imprint of Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), p. xxxv.

To conclude, consider having out on the tables a simple graphical evaluation for families or individuals to complete. It might be a piece of paper with either a full body or pictures of a head, heart, and feet (or hands). Participants fill out:

- a) *Head*: What did you learn?
- b) *Heart*: How did you feel about the experience?
- c) *Feet (or hands)*: What will you take away and do differently as a result of this experience?

## Sample preparation email

Dear Families,

On [day and date] at \_ [time] [name of synagogue/organization] will hold a family event for all \_\_ grade families.

*Sharing Life Stories — A Family Experience* is an intergenerational program designed for teens, parents, grandparents, and other close family members. During this program, participants will recall memorable experiences in their lives and also learn and practice simple questioning skills that can elicit rich details when families share stories.

To prepare for this program, please read this [post](#) from the Jewish Grandparents Network Family Room about telling our personal stories.

We invite family members who are not local to join the program remotely. Please bring whatever device works best for your family. We'll make sure there's good cell reception and strong Wi-Fi! If you have questions about how best to make this work for your family, please contact [name of contact].



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