

Questions About Your Childhood to Ask Your Partner

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies [Early Childhood Questions to Promote Bonding](#) at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which explains why being known in our childhood stories helps a partner be emotionally helpful to us. Search “early childhood questions” on the site to find it.

When our partners know the narrative of our childhood, they can understand why we are the way we are, and offer more grace and less judgmental reactivity. One partner answers and the other asks and listens. The whole set takes close to two hours, so it is split into five sittings, and there is no need to finish in one. A few words per line is enough. This is a bonding exercise, not therapy. Some questions touch loneliness, neglect, rejection and fear. If an answer opens more than the two of us can hold, we stop and bring it to a therapist.

THE SPEAKER Let the feeling come with the story	Face the listener and hold as much eye contact as is comfortable. Tell the story with the feeling in it rather than in a matter-of-fact way, and say what we need from the listener, which is usually to listen. <i>At the time this left me feeling... Right now I am feeling...</i>
THE LISTENER Affect over content	Follow the plot, and give most of our attention to two things: how our partner felt while it was happening, and how they feel now as they tell it. Watch the face, the posture and the voice. Respond with warmth, and save writing for after the answer.
WHAT WE DON'T DO The pulls to resist	No being right, no plot corrections, no adding to the story, no counter-critique, no contempt or labels, no rehearsing a reply while they talk. The speaker avoids the guessing game and says plainly what helps.
DIFFERENTIATION CHECK Whose feeling is this?	Feeling their feeling is empathy. Taking it on as our own is enmeshment, and then we stop being able to help. When something strong moves in us, we name both and stay with theirs. <i>They are feeling ____, and I am noticing ____.</i>
PACING Fatigue is information	If either of us feels full or overwhelmed, we take a break and say when we will come back. Caregivers come in many combinations, so we use the names and roles that fit the speaker's family.

A WORKED EXAMPLE

THE QUESTION	What happened when you were sad or scared?
THE ANSWER	My father forgot to pick me up from school, more than once.
FELT THEN	Scared, forgotten, unimportant.
FEELS NOW	Sad, and laughing a little to cover it.
THE PULL	“It was only a couple of times, and he worked long hours.” A plot correction. Let it pass.
THE CHECK	They are feeling sad, and I am noticing anger at their father.
WHAT IT EXPLAINS	Why lateness lands so hard on them now.

To be known and emotionally held by a partner produces felt safety, and with it more resilience, regulation, connection and courage.

Sitting one: home and caregivers

One of us answers, facing the other. The one asking listens for the feeling first, then writes two things on the line: how you felt then, and how you feel now.

QUESTION 1**Home**

Did you have siblings growing up, and what was your relationship with them? Who were your primary caregivers? Where did you live?

QUESTION 2**Being known**

What were you like as a child? Was there anyone who you felt really knew you at a deep level?

QUESTION 3**First caregiver**

What was your relationship like with your first primary caregiver as a child, as a teen, and as a young adult? What did you learn from them about parent and child relationships?

QUESTION 4**Second caregiver**

What was your relationship like with your second primary caregiver, if there was one, at each of those ages? What did you learn from them?

QUESTION 5**Parenting style**

What was the parenting style in your home? In what ways were your caregivers' styles the same, and in what ways were they different?

QUESTION 6**Keeping and leaving**

What parts of that parenting style would you want to use with children of your own, and which do you feel strongly about not repeating? Why?

Sitting two: rules and values

QUESTION 7**Rules**

What were the most important rules you were expected to follow growing up? Why do you believe those rules mattered in your family?

QUESTION 8**Success**

What beliefs, routines, values and goals guided your family? What did 'successful' mean, and what was rewarded as success? How did your caregivers measure their own?

QUESTION 9**Work and play**

What did you learn about balancing work and recreation from your childhood?

QUESTION 10**Friendship**

Tell me about friendships in your childhood. How did you see your caregivers' friendships?

QUESTION 11**Traditions**

What traditions were unique to your family when you were young?

Sitting three: comfort, joy, and fear

One of us answers, facing the other. The one asking listens for the feeling first, then writes two things on the line: how you felt then, and how you feel now.

QUESTION 12 Sad or scared

What happened when you were sad or scared? What did your caregivers do when you were uncomfortable?
Does a specific memory come up?

QUESTION 13 Joy

What happened when you were excited or joyful? What did your caregivers do when you expressed happiness?
Does a specific memory come up?

QUESTION 14 Conflict

What did conflict look like in your family? How did the adults handle conflict with each other, and with the children?

QUESTION 15 Emotions

How were emotions expressed in your family? What did your family believe about having and showing them?
Were any emotions not permitted?

QUESTION 16 Loneliness

What was your experience of loneliness, neglect, or rejection as a child? What stories come up when you hear this question?

QUESTION 17 Fear

How did fear show up in your childhood? How were you affected by it, and what were you afraid of?

Sitting four: love and care

QUESTION 18 Love

How was love expressed between your caregivers, and how was it expressed to you? Tell me about a time you felt really loved as a child.

QUESTION 19 Needs

How were your needs met: clean clothes, healthy food, school, friends, safety, medical care? Who took care of you, what were you responsible for yourself, and were you responsible for taking care of anyone?

QUESTION 20 Comfort

What did affection, nurturance and support look like in your family? How were you comforted best? Is there a story that shows how affection was given?

Sitting five: meaning

One of us answers, facing the other. The one asking listens for the feeling first, then writes two things on the line: how you felt then, and how you feel now.

QUESTION 21

Shaping

Tell me about an experience that was particularly important to who you became as a child.

QUESTION 22

Relating

Tell me about an experience that shaped the way you relate to other people. How does it show up in our relationship?

QUESTION 23

What I learned

From your caregivers' relationship, what did you learn about trust, romance, friendship, vulnerability, teamwork, support, honesty, sexuality and conflict resolution?

QUESTION 24

Themes

Through all these questions, have you arrived at any themes?

QUESTION 25

Purpose

How did your childhood shape your answers to these questions: what is the purpose of life, what is the purpose of a parent, and what is the purpose of a relationship?

AFTER THE LAST SITTING

The listener names any feelings that seemed important and were not said. Then each of us shares what the exercise was like.

FEELINGS I NOTICED THAT WE DID NOT NAME:

WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO SPEAK, AND WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO LISTEN:

WHAT I UNDERSTAND NOW

Written by the listener, and read aloud to the speaker.

ONE THING I NOW UNDERSTAND ABOUT WHY YOU ARE THE WAY YOU ARE:
