

“Like Sowing Winter Wheat!”



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Genealogy
... for Children and Youth
an Introduction

SEMINAR NOTES

Introduction

I have developed this presentation **on introducing genealogy and family history to your children, grand children and students**. In this presentation, I will examine the following topics:

1. An Introduction: Sowing Seeds!
2. Centre on the Child
3. Approaches and Interests
4. Ideas and Projects
5. Legacy
6. Our Project
7. Tying Up the Loose Ends

Wouldn't be wonderful if our children could go back in time as Sal in the book **The Olden Days Coat** was able to do and meet our ancestors?

Why do children need to come to know the past of their families? A photo taken in June 1953 shows me front and center. Of the people in this photo, five are still alive. Who were the others? While these people are all people, I knew well. A large number of relatives can often be a great puzzle to younger family members. We need to acquaint young people with their ancestral family in order that they can better come to know themselves. We truly do stand on the shoulders of the generations that came before us.

“Like Sowing Winter Wheat!”

What we do when we introduce genealogy to children and youth is sow seeds of interest. We attempt to show them that the task of studying their family and its history can be an enjoyable and enriching pursuit. We may not immediately see the results of this work, or the young person may show initial interest and then lose interest as more pressing matters of life are added to his or her plate in life. To be more precise, the process is much like sowing winter wheat. We make our initial efforts by sowing the seeds. But life will get in the way and that interest will lay hidden as the seeds below a blanket of snow. However, when the conditions are right ample sunshine and moisture, the seed will begin to grow and hopefully result in a bountiful harvest. **If the seeds of interest have been sown when a person was young, they too will begin to take root and grow once the conditions are right and life slows down a little.**

These quotations suggest the results that can ensue if one sows seeds of interest and sows them well:

“Be mindful of the seeds you plant today, as they will become the crop you harvest.” ~ Mary Morrissey

“If you thin in terms of a year, plant a seed, if in terms of ten years, plant trees, if in terms of 100 years, teach people.” ~ Confucious

“A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they shall never sit in.” ~ Greek proverb

When we introduce a subject such as genealogy, our objective is to **turn them “ON”** to the new experience and not to turn them “OFF” of it.

For a child to embrace a new pursuit, there are a number of conditions which much occur. Likewise, there are conditions which it is essential to avoid if you wish to motivate the child in a positive way. Here are some conditions that will help make your activity for young people work: 1. When the child asks or shows an interest. . . , 2. When it is

especially relevant, 3. When it is age and ability appropriate, 4. As long as it causes and extends interest, 5. When it involves activity, 6. When it is connected to the familiar, 7. When it is tied to their interests, and 8. When it is enjoyable.

As an adult “educating” the young, **you want to give them many doors to pass through.** That is you want to provide them with many varied experiences to try. Remember, even after passing through a door, the child will find that the experience is not for him or her. However, occasionally, the new experience will speak to the child in a powerful and very personal way. These experiences are likely to be the ones that he will embrace and extend.

There is a **widely-accepted myth** that our young people have no interest in the past. In part, this is true as it is for any group. But there are examples of interesting initiatives of young people engaging the past in a meaningful way. The students of St. Joseph’s High School are researching war dead who were once students of the school in their social studies classes. Junior and senior high school students in Edmonton and various other points across the nation go to the graves of former military personnel to pay respect and place a poppy on each grave for Remembrance Day. Kallie K regularly visits an Edmonton seniors home, interviews seniors there asking them about their lives and records them, writes them up, and gives a copy of the biography to the senior interviewed.

When does one start to introduce family history, that is not an easy matter to determine. However, if you listen carefully, you may find that the child will raise initial questions about the family’s past. These may serve as a point where you can begin the introduction of genealogy. **You need to listen for these cues.** Initially, provide answers simply to what the child asks and don’t go too far beyond this. If this becomes a pattern, that may suggest the child is interested in something more extensive.

The interest of a child related to any field can be very uneven. You may recall the variety of career choices that a child has over time to recognize this. Interest for any child is a series of peaks and valleys, peaks that show the heights of interest and valleys which show the depths of disinterest.

You need to determine if there is a fire within your child to study his/her family in the past. If the fire is not there, you can not will it. Don’t try to force interest on a child, make him become interested in something he has no interest in. This invariably will do more damage than good. **You can’t will interest!** Just because you are interested in a pursuit, you can’t will that interest on a child.

However there are factors which will create interest for children who initially show little interest. Remember that W. C. Fields noted that he couldn’t compete with children or animals. These simply upstaged him. These might be two great avenues that you can use to evoke interest in matters of family. The story of the Althaus deer or a similar story might do this. If the child shows interest in the family’s past, you may begin to unpack your family history with him or her. **Start while that interest is there.**

However, don’t expect to see immediate results, and don’t even be surprised if the child abandons the pursuit of seeking the history of his/her family. Life will become busy and life will get in the way. But if the seeds have been planted well, he/she may return to it when life slows down. **The results are not for today but for far down the road, years from now.** Be hopeful as we can never be certain of how the seeds will germinate.

There will always be surprises in when one looks into family history. We often discover information we were not seeking. At times, we discover black sheep, family secrets, and tales spoken in hushed tones. You need to know **how you will handle “delicate matters” should they arise** in the study of a family’s past.

You need answers to these six very vital questions before you begin especially if you are introducing the study of genealogy to a group: 1. How will you handle varied family configurations? 2. How will you handle adoption and fostering? 3. How will you handle death and dying? 4. How will you handle the child finding family secrets,

scandals, and “black sheep?” 5.How will you handle privacy matters? and 6.How will you handle 1.any matter that may conflict with the values of your family?

There are **three promising avenues through which it is possible to deliver education in genealogy and family history to children and youth**. These are: 1.School, 2.Youth groups, and 3.Family.

For any program introducing genealogy or family history to work to produce future family historians or genealogists, it should contain certain **prime ingredients**. These include: 1.Interest, 2.Readiness, 3.Appropriateness, 4.Relevance, 5.Connection, 6.Desire, 7.Need to Know, 8.Simplicity, and 9.Relates to the child.

In a photo, we have two major participants – the young girl and the goat. While the young girl is quite ready to milk the goat, the goat may not share her sense of readiness. When beginning the study of genealogy, the child needs have the “readiness” needed to handle the work. The work must be at level and delivered at a pace that the child can handle. The child may have one idea of what constitutes readiness and we like the goat quite a different one! The resources that you use with the child to do this must **fit the needs of the child** exactly where he is at that moment.

The experiences that you offer the child must be **appropriate for him or her**. It needs to begin with what he/she remembers and proceed logically from that point. It must deal with topics that the child can handle where he/she is.

Lessons are stronger when we can **connect them** to something with which the child is familiar. A person in an old photo may scarcely mean anything to a child unless you are able to tie that person to someone he is familiar with, the closer to him/her the better. Meaningful connections produce more intense ties to the subject being covered.

What is the child ready for? How much does he/she need to know? What do you need to tell him/her? What do you not? For example, would I want to tell a child about the death of my Aunt Helen at age 7 years? Even if I did, how much would I want to tell them? “Helen was grandpa’s sister. She died when she was a child.” That might be all that you need to say. Some matters are complex. Don’t rush into them. Wait at least until the child raises them. This usually indicates that he/she is ready and able to deal with those matters with your help.

There are a number of **components that children value in any learning activity**. These are:

- Hands-on activities
- A social component
- Movement
- Interest even motivation
- Variety
- Security
- Short time spans
- Being able to succeed
- A degree of challenge

For an activity to succeed, it needs to include a number of considerations. You need to have reasonable expectations. **You need to see the events through the eyes of a child**. The child will not see the world as an adult will. You need to share his/her surprise and wonder. You need to use an appropriate level of language. You need patience. You need understanding the child’s needs. You need to be supportive and positive. You need to recognize

the efforts of the child. **You need to remember that the child will not be familiar with certain concepts that you see as normal.**

You need to **be positive and supportive** in your interactions with the youth. This is easy when everything is going as it should. It is harder to do when things are not and the child is experiencing difficulty with a subject. Step back for a second and consider what is really important at this point.

The best place to provide instruction on matters of family history or genealogy is **within the family**. Here, you can set it to your values and deal with any problem areas which may arise. If family is truly important, you confirm that by studying it within that important institution.

Yes, you were a child, too. **Try to recall what appealed to you as a child, but... also remember that times change.** Be conscious of this when working with a child. What you once did; what you once enjoyed may no longer be have relevance or even be familiar in the life of the child. It may be necessary to do a good deal of explaining to make such things clear and understandable.

We moved to Edmonton in 1956, yes, over half a century ago. The city has changed markedly since then. There are three places that played important parts in my world at various points in those early years. However, none of them are around today. So, it would be important to familiarize the child with these sites if they were part of your study.

An interesting idea might be to have the child create a “Now and Then” photo essay. It could have pairings of photos historic and modern. This is a great project for a child who has an interest in photography. You might even narrow it so it focuses on family homes “now and then”. The child can place captions that summarize his thoughts related to the photo pairs. You might even have the child organize the photo essay around a theme such as “change”.

A question that often is the first that opens the door to family history is, **“what was it like when you were a kid?”** The quality of your response may heighten their interest in all things family. Don’t only tell them. Show them the places where it happened in photos or by traveling there. Show them objects that are part of the answer. Have them do the activity.

Be careful with the language you use with kids. It needs to be appropriate for the age and level development of the child. Also, remember that the child will often be unfamiliar with archaic terms. As these two picture books **My Grandma Likes to Say...** and **My Teacher Likes to Say...** by Denise Brennan-Nelson (Author), Jane Monroe Donovan (Illustrator) illustrate idioms also can fall from use and become unfamiliar to the younger generations.

Tap into the interests of the child. If your child is interested in **television programs**, discuss the television programs that you watched as a kid. Even watch and discuss these with the child. Don’t be too surprised if the child should some and possibly all of these programs as “lame”. But that has value, too.

Perhaps, the child will be interested in **what you wore to school**. What was fashionable? What were the fads then? It is wonderful if you have some of your favorite period clothes around that the child can try on. You may even become a treasured resource for clothes for plays and Halloween.

A wise philosopher once said to play the flute; you need to play the flute. While the child may enjoy hearing the stories of family, you need to take the child beyond listening alone. **You need to have the child act, do something related to genealogy.** A blend of story and meaningful activity can produce great results. There are many activities for the junior genealogist and family historian to enter. Many of them are already designed and in place.

There are **writing contests for young people** related to family history or heritage. The AHSGR has such a contest. There are magazines devoted to publishing proficient articles written by children and youth. Check these out as there a number of unscrupulous contests where almost everyone wins but is asked to sell anthologies of the published stories as their “reward”. Perhaps, a group that you are a part of might benefit from sponsoring such a contest.

This is a student from Grande Prairie. He won the local heritage fair. His topic was a famous relative, an early hockey hero Newsie Lalonde. **The Heritage Fair** is a national contest that provides many benefits for those who reach the upper levels of the competition. It takes place each year. Family members often lead interesting lives in interesting times which may form the great basis for a project as it did for this student.

A student might benefit from being involved in **a workshop** to introduce him or her to the basics of genealogy, a junior “Tracing Your Family Tree” course. This might be a resource that AGS or a group within AGS might develop. Such a course could be offered here or at a site such as a school, a church or a youth club. The society might also make available a group of speakers who could go out to schools or other sites where there is a need. This will need further discussion.

We have older members of the family who have lived through vital episodes of the history of your family. If they are willing ask them **to share their stories with younger family members** or perhaps have the younger family member interview your families treasure. I place a good deal of credence in these stories as people developed methods to insure that retellings were authentic.

Perhaps, the child might even **create a book to celebrate the life** and/or accomplishments of a family member. It can revolve around many topics: a particular family member, an important family custom, an important family celebration, an important place in the history of your family, or a vary important episode in the life of a family member.

How can you subtly create an interest in family history where none appears to exist? Lisa Louise Cook suggests **leaving family heirlooms** out in strategic locations around the house and wait for the questions to flow.

Go through **the family photo album** with the younger family members. The older and further from our times these photos are; the more questions they will be likely to bring out. They will not always be the questions that you would expect. It is okay to say that you don’t know ... but will try to find out, or better yet will out with the child! Leave out the photo album, have the child or teen focus on only a few photos and ask him/her to tell you about the details it contains. This will do things. First, it provides the young person practice in analyzing a source. In addition, it allows you to know the understanding of the child. You will get the odd surprise about what the child knows and what the same child does not know about his family.

Books like Harry Potter, The Hobbit, and The Hunger Games are popular reading for young people. These are quest stories. The young are interested in heroes and quests particularly ones that involve people of their age.. We have heroes in our families. All immigrants have lived quest stories. Children love heroes; they read about them, watch them in movies and on television, and interact with their avatars in video games. I once felt that my family weren’t very interesting and that it had no heroes. I was very wrong. Part of the problem was my narrow view of what a hero was. Could an immigrant child in your family have been a hero? **Remember all our immigrant ancestors were the major characters in a quest story.**

A lot of family good times are associated with food. At times, a young person may express the desire to learn to make **some treasured family recipe including traditional ethnic cuisine**. You can help them to do this and at the same time introduce the history and stories of family that go with the food. A good meal involves sharing as does family history.

Children generally enjoy doing activities with other children their age, especially those that know and interact with well. So, create some if not all of the family history activities social events!

Start **giving the child pieces, mementos of family history**. In the case of younger children, give them copies rather than originals. Provide a box in which to store these family relics. Organization needs to start early. For younger children, a blank pizza box will make the ideal portfolio. Let the child decorate his personal family history pizza box portfolio.

For older children, you may also start them in collecting artifacts. Here, the youth should be given some real objects. The box that will hold these relics should have a story to tell. Perhaps, you might provide a written copy of the box's story as well as photos and objects that go with it.

Children often collect various types of trading cards. **Have the child create trading cards for family members**. A trading card has both a front (or display side) and back (or data side). If the child has good computer skills, he/she could design like these using basic computer software. These card could be made and used for mixer activities and other events at family reunions.

Children and teens love adventure. **Take them to the place where family treasures are stored**. There can be family stories waiting to be discovered by new generations in the boxes and trunks that congregate there. You might also want to conduct a scavenger hunt for the young person using these resource. If you have specific things that you wish to be observed, set those conditions into the rules for the hunt.

An AGS member from Wetaskiwin Branch came up with this wonderful activity. At a reunion, she had her grandchildren experience some of the very things that were common parts of her life especially when she was a child. She placed these into an activity modelled on "The Amazing Race" and as she was named Mavis, the race became "The Amavis Race". It is important that adequate adult supervision be in place for such activities.

Gloria Cathcart, an Edmonton Branch member, developed an online scavenger hunt that took her grandson's interest in computers and his emerging interest in his family's past into account. When young people are engaged in activities that they enjoy, the experience will be more pleasant and will endure longer in their memory.

With the child, **visit the places that were important in the history of your family**. I know of a members who takes her grandchildren to Europe when each reaches 16 years of age. This trip allows the child to see where family roots were once strong, but also provide a good deal of time for that child to do what he/she wants to do. Such a trip can become interesting if you take Flat Stanley along and allow the child develop a Flat Stanley story based on your travels.

Often the stories about family members that appeared in **local newspapers** can be used to stimulate interest in children.

Provide the child with **a mystery from the history of the family** (one that you have already solved). Either work on the mystery together or allow the child to work on it by himself/herself. Children like concrete answers. So, discuss his findings or the answer to the mystery at the end. This might also be a good point to discuss the process that the child used to find the answer – what worked and what did not.

A treasure hunt for clues to the history can also create interest. Use a setting related to your family or perhaps use what appears in the displays of an area museum or historical site. For example, you might have the child look for specific things at the Ukrainian Canadian Heritage Cultural Village or any historic site or museum. In South Dakota, a child can live as Laura Ingalls Wilder did. At the Ukrainian Village, he or she can experience life as it was lived by our ancestors when they first came here. . This type of lived-experience will bring a new and interesting perspective to the family's past.

Don't try to explain or answer what you do not know yourself. It is okay to say that you don't know. You might even extend it to... **"I don't know either, but let's see if we can find out together."** The journey not the destination is what might be important. You both will learn along the way, and in the process, you will tangibly be demonstrating the work of research and the importance of family. Showing and participating rather than simply telling can provide powerful reinforcement.

The child has interests and skills. Children and youth often have skills in areas where you may lack them, e.g. technology. Use these skills in conjunction with family history wherever you can. Children like to be asked to show you the things that they do especially if they consider themselves skilled in them.

Kids like to help those people they value. Ask them to help you with your family history projects. Here, do not get too hung up on quality. These are children not techies. Just show appreciation for whatever they do for you.

Much of genealogy involves a few basic forms including **the family tree**. You will want to introduce these forms and how they work to your young people. However, the scope and depth to which you do this will depend on the level of the child at the time. You can show them family trees of famous families. Many such trees including that of Donald Duck can be found on line. These can help get the discussion going and create additional interest in trees. Once students have a basic understanding of family trees, encourage them to create trees in a medium that they enjoy. Generally, they may want to do this on a rather large scale, So, make certain that you have the room and materials to do this. (Discuss the plans in advance with the child so that you can make the necessary plans before the project begins).

Beware! While at family reunions, you may be quite comfortable with the large number of family members. It is not the same with children and youth because they know few there and are unaware of what any of these people have to do with them. **It is important that one provide activities** that will be enjoyable, that will occupy them, and that will get them to interact with many relatives of those who are their age.

Remember the **"KISS" Keep It Simple Sage** when providing answers to questions that young people may ask. There are only certain things that a child may want to know, things they are generally ready to know. Going into too much depth can do more damage than good. Don't make your answers more complex than it needs to be. The child simply may not be able to handle this. If your answer does not satisfy the child, they will generally ask you for more. Little may be better than too much.

Not the Banquet; Just a Taste! Quantity is important. You don't want to inundate the child with a wall of information and data. You do not want to provide the whole banquet but just a taste. If the young person likes that taste, they will be very likely to come back for more. A little taste of family history may be all that is needed to draw the young deeper into family history.

Above all make the study of genealogy fun when introducing it to children and youth. This will increase the likelihood that their interest will continue, often grow, and stick to it.

There are many resources out there that you can draw on to assist you with introducing genealogy and family history to children and youth.

You don't always need to reinvent the wheel. There are wonderful resources out there that you can use to assist you in introducing genealogy and family history to young people. **Several picture books are out there that can be used to introduce the topic, stimulate discussion, or begin a project.**

Nikki Giovanni, an American poet, has penned a wonderful poem "Legacies" in which a grandmother is teaching her granddaughter how to make rolls. However, the poem encompasses so much more. The pair are talking but

not communicating – too common when different generations are involved. The rolls are the legacy that the grandmother is attempting to pass on. However, without true communication, one wonders if the grandmother's efforts will be successful. **If they are not, not only the method of making rolls but an entire legacy may be lost.** This is why we need to begin the discussion of our family's history and the great legacy from their past with our children and youth. If not, it too may fade and eventually vanish.

The Keeping Quilt by Patricia Polacco is a wonderful story of a family who passes on its history through a quilt which incorporates pieces of fabric taken from items associated with major events in that history. As well as the quilt itself, the family has maintained the stories associated with each element of the quilt. Here, I will note a caution. In this book and at many entry points in genealogy, the mention of death will quite naturally come up. You will need to consider that this can be upsetting to some children if they are not ready for the concept, if there has been a recent death in their circle of acquaintances, if death has drastically changed their lives, or if they have been sheltered from this reality. You will need to consider what you will do if a child becomes distressed when the mention of death arises here.

The study of family history and genealogy is a part of the legacy of each and every family. It comes to us not only in the form of pieces of data but also through the stories of those family members who came before us and who acted to shape not only their world but ours. By learning this rich and at times wondrous legacy, a child or youth can begin to understand himself or herself in new and very enriching ways. We very often are the stories that our ancestors lived.

Three picture books that you may use to introduce legacy and your family's own history are the three books of the **Baba's Babushka** series. They are written by **Marion Mutala**.

Children often do not know about the lives of our older family members. **When they learn their stories, this can often appreciate their appreciation of these members and enhance the child's overall esteem and appreciation for his/her family.**

Pride in one's family legacy is important. It can counter shame, acceptance of negative stereotypes, and establish a framework for resisting and overcoming bias and possibly even discrimination. Those ashamed with heads down quickly become victims; those with heads held high are rarely challenged. It might eventually translate into sentiments roughly like these. "My family fought for their land, their culture, and their rights at Batoche. We are people of action. I am proud of that, and I will continue that tradition of action."

There is a more immediate benefit as well. The children's interest in genealogy may initially be a superficial one. They become interested in it because it interests you, and they want to spend time with you. **Being with you and doing something with you, may be their desired reward.**

There are certain **optimal conditions under which introducing family history and genealogy** to children and youth should work best. These are:

- Works best when the child displays interest.
- Works best when it is centered on the child.
- Works best when "driven" by the child.
- Works best when activity based.
- Works best when done with someone whose attention the child values.

The Alberta Genealogical Society (AGS) recognizes the importance of introducing children and youth of Alberta to their family history and the study of genealogy while they are young. To facilitate this AGS is currently developing a series of resources that will assist in doing this and that will soon be available for those who wish to use them. Two resources are currently available **My Family Now and in the Past** (for children aged 6 to 8 years) and **Our Family Home Here in Alberta and Far Away** (for children aged 9 to 11 years). They are available free of charge in pdf format to anyone who would like to use them in whole or in part on the AGS website at **<http://www.abgenealogy.ca/>** Under pull-down menu “Resources” or scroll down to near bottom of page. Click on “Genealogy for Youth” in either case.

The Genealogy for Children and Youth Project will do the following:

- Create Materials to Assist in Doing This.
- Assemble Resources to Help.
- Tie Them to the Alberta School Curriculum.
- Make Them for Use in Various Places.
- Make Them Available at a Reasonable Cost or Free.

We are currently developing seven resources to do this. These resources are:

- My Family Now and in the Past
- Your Family Home Here in Alberta and Far Away
- In Search of Your Immigrant Ancestor
- Your Family in Its Historical Context
- First Nations and Métis Roots
- Project Book
- Adult Facilitator’s Guide

The first four of these are units that are age specific and related to the curriculum for those age groups. These four resources will be released as they are completed. These units are:

- My Family Now and in the Past (6 – 8 years)
- Our Family Home in Alberta and Far Away (9 – 11 years)
- In Search of Our Immigrant Ancestor (12 – 14 years)
- Our Family in History (15 – 18 years)

Once these are in place, work will be done on the remaining resources:

- A collection of projects
- A unit for genealogy with First Nations and Métis Students
- A Guide for Adult Instructors

This is what we hope that these resources will achieve. If we take the time and provide resources, we have an

avenue to introduce children to their passion. We make them **“child centered”**. However, if this is done in a loving and caring way by adults who engage with the children in an enjoyable manner, the experience can have positive and lasting results. In the future when the young person has more time, he or she may take up genealogy.

I see that groups dealing with genealogy in two distinct ways. I see groups that I label **“Genealogy Groups”** whose main focus is preserving the history of individual families. They use “heritage” as a tool to better understand that history. The other groups I call **“Heritage Groups.”** Their main focus is preserving the history and way of life of an entire group of people. They use “genealogy” as a tool to make a direct and personal connection to this history. This is a small distinction but perhaps an important one.

It is important that we keep the past alive. The work of these groups becomes especially vital and important where the homeland of a people no longer exists as we knew it or where a homeland of the past is no longer on the map.

We must take action or that history may vanish into the mist and never be found again. Remember, the victors write the history. If you do not preserve the history and heritage of your people, who will? It is being preserved by those who lived it. I know that many of you have lived these stories of the past, and many of you even tell them. Now, you need to preserve them by writing them or recording them. What happens when they are gone?

There are two major ways that a group whether genealogy or heritage can save its history, its past. First, by **having individual members, record and preserve their personal histories.** Second, by **interesting our children and youth in that past.** If we do that history will remain alive through them long after all of us are gone. The choice to act or not is yours.

The young person or for that matter anyone can learn much from our family’s past. **We recognize our inheritance from it. We come to better understand who we are now. We begin to see the possibilities that the future holds for us.** But once we are gone especially those who have lived that history, **who will tell these important vignettes to our future generations? Who will keep this essential part of who we are alive?**

Normally, this would be just “THE END”. However, I see this as **“THE BEGINNING”** instead a time when **a few seeds will fall on fertile and if all goes well begin to take root to the benefit of all far in the future. Our efforts must begin with introducing the children and youth of our families to the rich history and legacy of their past.**



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**...perhaps these seeds will take
root!**

***"All work is a seed sown, it
grows and spreads and sows
itself anew!"***

~ Anonymous