

# When I Was Your Age: PhotoTherapy Techniques for Families

Source: Judy Weiser

## Goals

- Improve communication among family members
- Increase parents' understanding of their children's worldview by remembering what it was like for them at that age
- Encourage parents to discuss details of their own childhood to increase the children's knowledge of their parents' younger hopes and fears, feelings and dreams
- Increase trust between children and parents once they realize they have had similar childhood feelings, worries, hopes, and experiences
- Increase the frequency of positive interactions between the parents and the children

## Materials

- Good-quality photocopies of photographs of each parent taken when the parents were the same age as each of their children is now. If photos of the parents at those particular ages cannot be found, the parents can "remember" or "imagine" a moment in their childhood and draw simple stick-figure sketches to use as the photographs. NOTE: Using original photographs puts them at risk of accidental damage. It is better to use photocopies of the originals.
- Interview questions (included)
- Pens
- Paper
- Video or audiotape (optional)

## Advance Preparation

If it will be difficult for all family members to continuously view the photos being discussed throughout the interview, it might help to digitally pre-scan each of the photos so they can be displayed on a screen or digital frame (or wall), or use a photocopier to enlarge them and tape them to a wall.

Carefully consider which parent to begin with. The reason for this is that for the first parent these questions will be fresh (not heard before when the other parent did it), and when the second parent does the same exercise, he/she will have heard the questions already and had time to prepare (or rehearse) the answers. Also, decide which child should start (i.e., chronologically or randomly by drawing straws).

Similarly, decide how to proceed after the first child interviews the first parent. For example, have the same child interview the other parent via a photo of that parent

at the same age, or have another child interview the parent who went first.

The therapist needs to decide in advance what to do if there is not enough time for all of the children to interview both parents during the one session: should all the children interview only one parent in that session, or should the child who starts, interview both parents, before another child starts again with the first parent at the different age? The therapist must decide what will work best for the family's situation and tell the family what the procedural rules will be before starting.

Review the interview questions and modify them as needed to fit the particular family's situation. Photocopy one sheet of interview questions for each family member to use when they are observing (and making notes) during each of the child-parent interviews.

### **Description**

This activity can take different amounts of time, depending upon the number of children in the family and the amount of discussion afterwards, so there needs to be flexibility in planning the activity to fit into the set appointment time.

Provide each child with a sheet of interview questions. Make sure that those "recording" the session have working pens or pencils and know that their job is to document what they think is important to remember and discuss later.

Explain to the family that, while they look at a photo of the parents as children of the same age, each child in the family will get to interview each parent about what his/her life was like at the same age they are now. Each child will first ask the questions on the list, and then he/she can add any of his/her own questions after the list is finished.

They should be told that if the person who is being interviewed does not know the answer, he/she can just say so and try to make a hunch at one that would likely be very close to the real answer. The person answering can voice his/her answers as if being the child at that time, or he/she can use his/her adult voice to talk about the photo from "back then."

No one is permitted to interrupt the child-parent interview by talking, disrupting, or leaving the room (unless it is a bathroom emergency, in which case the person must leave quietly). If the therapist feels that some guidance or elaboration is needed, then he/she may interrupt.

Have the child begin by asking the parent the following general question: "What was your life like at the age you are in that picture?" Once the parent has finished his/her spontaneous summary, the child should begin asking the questions on the interview list in order to get additional information. The therapist should not

interrupt unless it is truly necessary; "trusting the flow" of the dialogue itself is important. However, if necessary, the therapist should gently remind the parent and child that the questions are about feelings as well as thoughts, and so it would be helpful for the parent to share his/her thoughts about the "why" of each answer given and some of the feelings attached to it.

Both the child and the parent are permitted to take notes if desired (but this is not necessary). However, all others in the room should be taking notes as they follow along.

After the child has asked all the questions on the list, then any other questions that come to mind can be asked.

After the interview has ended, the two-part discussion can begin: first the "de-briefing" of the two participants, then asking the others to share their observations, thoughts, feelings, and insights.

The therapist should ask the child:

1. How was your parent's childhood similar or different from yours at your age?
2. What things did you learn about your parent's life at that age that you didn't know before?
3. Did anything you learned about your parent today surprise you? If so, what?
4. Did anything you learned about your parent today upset or disturb you? If so, what?
5. What feelings did your parent describe?
6. Were there any connections between what your parent was like at that young age and the problems the family is trying to get help with today?
7. Is there anything you would like to ask or tell your parent as a result of what you learned about them today?

The therapist should ask the parent:

1. What seems different about your child's childhood and yours at the same age?
2. What things did you learn about your life at that age that you hadn't really realized before? What things surprised or upset you?
3. What feelings did you find yourself talking about – and why did you have those feelings at that age?
4. Do you ever have any of those childhood feelings in your life today?
5. Did you see any connections between what your life was like at that young age and the problems your family is trying to get help with today?
6. Is there anything you would like to ask or tell your child, as a result of what you shared with him/her today?

The observers can then have an opportunity to speak and ask questions. They should not be interrupted while they are speaking. When they are finished, the therapist can facilitate a general discussion among all the family members.

The above process can be repeated according to which method the therapist determined would work best. That is, having the same parent interviewed by a different child or having the other parent interviewed by the first child, before moving on to next child.

## Discussion

This activity is designed to permit individual family members to encounter each other in more fullness as unique individuals, in addition to their more stereotypical roles when relating to each other as parent and child.

What makes PhotoTherapy techniques valuable in therapy is that, when you look at a photo (or, just as importantly, simply remember one), the moment inside its borders instantly comes "alive." You see it as if it is happening right now – being viewed in three dimensions as if it is real, and you are there in the scene, not realizing that your eye is not the lens of a camera – even if it was taken decades ago.

This quality of the viewer instantly "being there" inside the photo that is being encountered in its "all at once-ness" unconsciously connects him/her with any feelings and memories associated with that moment – whether the photo is one from his/her own life or one never seen before that just reminds him/her of related situations and unconsciously triggers feelings embedded in those memories.

This is the reason for asking participants to view real photographs and be interviewed as if they were that age, instead of just asking them to relate old memories. It is important for the parent to actually *be* his/her young self for a few minutes and view the world (and reply to the questions) from inside that perspective. Asking people to tell stories to help explain photos of their lives will always yield a different (and deeper) quality of information than just asking them to talk about their past.

When the parents take the time to think about *being* a specific young age (what it was like, how it felt, how they understood complicated things from their limited perspectives, how they encountered feelings without much idea how to handle them, how their own issues at that age are often very similar to their child's right now, and so forth), it can help them better understand their child at the same point in development and hopefully see things better through the eyes (and age) of that child.

Similarly, knowing that their parents were once young and occasionally silly and that they did things their own parents did not approve of, helps the children realize their parents are people whose identities are made up of many more things than just being their parents. These combined learnings help the participants move beyond the limitations of being simply parent and child and encourages them to get to know each other more fully as unique individuals whom they might want to get to know better in the future.

While chatting about the old photos of the parents when they were young, the parents and children share pleasurable experiences in common, bringing them closer together. This in itself creates a more trusting bond, especially since it is being witnessed by other family members whose very presence validates the shifted reality.

Although the therapist can often detect these patterns and interactional dynamics more quickly or more deeply than family members themselves, it will be more therapeutically beneficial to let the family members first share their own observations and conclusions before hearing the therapist's version. Since such discussion at the end of this activity can easily go longer than one might expect, the therapist is cautioned to structure the timing of each part of the activity to ensure that sufficient time for debriefing and good closure is provided.

It is ideal to videotape the session for the sake of future viewing (both for later therapy sessions and for family history in general), but using taping or playback equipment is not a requirement. Even if it is done, the "recorders" should still be writing down their own observations and thoughts.

## References

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## About The Author

Judy Weiser, R.Psych., A.T.R., Founder and Director of the PhotoTherapy Centre, is a psychologist, art therapist, consultant, trainer, and early pioneer of PhotoTherapy techniques (using people's personal and family snapshots to access feelings and memories during the therapy process). She is the author of the classic text *PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums* (now in its third printing), as well as numerous professional articles, book chapters, and a video/DVD on the subject. She also created and maintains the primary informational resource and networking website for the field (*PhotoTherapy Techniques in Counseling and Therapy*) as well as a Discussion Board and Facebook Group. Long considered the world authority on PhotoTherapy, she has given over 300 workshops, lectures, and training intensives about these techniques (and related applications of Therapeutic Photography) in over 50 cities worldwide during the past 30 years.

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09-15-20  
Dear Judy,  
Thank you for sharing  
your creative work and  
for being a part of this  
publication - I LOVE  
your photoTherapy activity!  
Warmly,  
Liana

**CREATIVE FAMILY THERAPY TECHNIQUES:  
PLAY, ART, AND EXPRESSIVE THERAPIES  
TO ENGAGE CHILDREN IN FAMILY SESSIONS**

*Edited by*

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# Creative Family Therapy Techniques

Play, Art, and Expressive Activities  
to Engage Children in Family Sessions



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