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Discover Your Family History

Easy advice to help you start exploring your family's past.

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Parent & Child

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Believe it or not, there are few things more exciting than unearthing your family's past. The hunt to discover your history is not only fun, it can also help strengthen family bonds *and* foster new ones. Going back hundreds of years can give you and your children a sense of pride and belonging. Plus, delving into your own past is a great way to spark your kid's interest in history!

Start unearthing your ancestry with easy tips from genealogy expert Megan Smolenyak, advisor to the hit shows *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *Finding Your Roots*.

Begin the Search

The best way to get started on your journey is to go on a scavenger hunt at home. Head to the attic or basement or grab that box from the back of the closet and look for clues. Keep an eye out for military documents, diplomas, letters, newspaper clippings, and photo albums from generations gone by. Concentrate on finding names, dates, and places to help you build a better idea of where your relatives came from. If your family has lived in the same area for generations, hit up the local library. Many times they have a genealogy section in addition to census materials and old newspapers.

Another great way to gain some ancestral footing is to simply pick up the phone or plan a visit with your oldest family members. They'll love to reminisce and may have saved some documents of their own to add to any you've already found. It's also a great opportunity for kids to create their own bonds with older relatives. Encourage little ones to get involved and ask their own questions. Who knows, one of Great-Grandma's stories may offer up a piece of the family puzzle.

Go Online

Doing your homework before you jump onto ancestry sites will help you make better use of online tools. There are many websites that offer genealogical services, but not all of them will get you what you're looking for. Here are a few good places to consider:

- **Ancestry.com:** Delivers different levels and types of services, including DNA testing and a free library version. You can also build a visual family tree to share and collaborate on with relatives.
- **FamilySearch.org:** Provides all of their services for free, and after 100 years of gathering and preserving documents, FamilySearch offers the largest collection of genealogical and historical records in the world.
- **23andMe.com:** Their Relative Finder genetic testing gives you an overview of your ethnic heritage and helps you find cousins from assorted branches of your family tree.

Preserve Your Findings

Once you've compiled a solid timeline, it's time to put it all together. Family trees can be presented in all shapes and sizes, but a popular method is in a good old-fashioned coffee table book. Many online ancestry sites actually offer the option to turn your findings into a book or visual display. Need some inspiration? Browse through a few sample layouts to get a feel for what style you'd like to go for; personalized printing sites like MixBook and Shutterfly have tons of cute photo book designs to choose from. Order multiple copies to share with as many branches of the family tree as you'd like — just don't forget to include your own story! People can get so wrapped up in the past that they don't include their present — future generations will want to know about you, too!

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