

# Family history knowledge can help American adolescents develop healthy sense of identity

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Teenagers struggling to develop a healthy sense of identity must walk a tightrope, balancing commitment to their family's values with their own

exploration of what matters, most psychologists agree.

A new BYU study suggests that studying [family history](#) may help [older adolescents](#) find this sweet spot. From a [survey](#) of 239 18- to 20-year-old students at seven U.S. universities, researchers found that individuals who had the healthiest identity development—both a sense of connectedness to family and adherence to their own beliefs—also had high levels of family [history](#) knowledge.

"Family history knowledge is particularly good at keeping us grounded," said BYU experience design and management professor Brian Hill, an author of the paper that was published Wednesday in the journal *Genealogy*. "There are kids who go off and explore their own paths without settling into a value system that can guide them going forward. We need knowledge of where we come from along with individual differentiation from family to find a steady path."

The surveys in the study assessed whether students knew about the major events and important anecdotes from their parents' and grandparents' lives, as well as how developed the students' identity was based on standard measures—whether they were close with family, how they had arrived at their political and [religious views](#), how they had explored occupational options and how committed they were to their values.

The results indicated that many adolescents have high levels of family history knowledge. About 77% of the participants knew the answers to three-quarters of the family history questions. The more they knew, the more likely they were to have developed a healthy sense of identity.

"Knowing where we come from expands our sense of who we are," Hill said. He noted that family history enables adolescents to sift through the lessons accumulated in generations of ancestors' experiences. "Obviously we get a sense of our identity from our parents, but if you can go back a

generation or two, it just broadens the possible values that we might think are important in our lives."

Hill saw firsthand how family history can inspire teens during previous research he conducted in Australia, in which adolescents were introduced to some of their family stories for the first time.

"There was a kid who found out about his grandfather who had been a marketer and came up with a famous advertising slogan for Cadbury chocolates," Hill said. "It gave this young man a whole new direction in his life to realize that he had a family member who'd done this amazing thing. He gained confidence that maybe he could do something important as well."

The way that stories are shared matters, too. One caveat in the study's findings was that knowing a lot of family history can limit the independence adolescents feel in their families, possibly because they feel pressure to conform to family narratives. Teachers and parents can prevent this effect by discussing family history in ways that allow adolescents to develop autonomy by interpreting stories themselves, without demands to assign them a particular meaning.

There are several ways to encourage exploration and discovery while sharing family history, noted co-author Clive Haydon. Possibilities include telling stories around the [dinner table](#), creating family-history focused rituals like celebrating ancestors' birthdays or vacationing in places family members previously lived.

"Sharing [family](#) history is most likely to influence positive [adolescent](#) identity development when it promotes positive relationships, respects agency and invites personal reflection," Haydon concluded.

**More information:** Clive G. Haydon et al, Identity Development and

Its Relationship to Family History Knowledge among Late Adolescents, *Genealogy* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/genealogy7010013](https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7010013)

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