



# THE MYSTERY OF BABY MEMORIES



Scan to review worksheet

Expemo code:  
1H9D-K1L7-704

1

## Warm up

Look at the pictures and discuss the questions below in pairs.



1. What is your earliest memory?
2. Can you remember more things from your first few years than your partner?
3. Why do you think we struggle to remember our time as babies?
4. Are there many photographs of you as a child?
5. Have you ever had a memory of a childhood event that later turned out to be false?



## 2 Pre-listening: general and psychology vocabulary

Part A: Match words with the correct definitions.

### Group 1:

- |                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1. <u>circulated</u> (v)   | a. the time when someone is a baby or a very young child                           |
| 2. <u>infancy</u> (n)      | b. (formal) babies or very young children  |
| 3. <u>nanny</u> (n)        | c. the crime of taking somebody away illegally and keeping them as a prisoner      |
| 4. <u>kidnapping</u> (n)   | d. outlines of a plan or theory  |
| 5. <u>elaborate</u> (adj.) | e. spread something, such as a story or idea, from one person to another           |
| 6. <u>toddlers</u> (n)     | f. children who have only recently learnt to walk                                  |
| 7. <u>infants</u> (n)      | g. very complicated and detailed   |
| 8. <u>schemas</u> (n)      | h. a person whose job is to take care of young children in the children's own home |

### Group 2:

- |                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1. <u>autobiographical</u> (adj.) | a. confusing problems or questions that are very difficult to solve |
| 2. <u>inaccessible</u> (adj.)     | b. being or connected with the story of a person's life             |
| 3. <u>conundrums</u> (n)          | c. by accident; without intending to                                |
| 4. <u>conjured</u> (v)            | d. difficult or impossible to reach, get or use                     |
| 5. <u>fabricated</u> (v)          | e. invented false information in order to trick people              |
| 6. <u>cached</u> (v)              | f. stored data, information etc.                                    |
| 7. <u>inadvertently</u> (adv.)    | g. made something appear as a picture in your mind                  |

Part B: Discuss the questions in pairs.

1. Can you think of some reasons why somebody might fabricate the past?
2. Why do you think memories are sometimes conjured by hearing or smelling something in particular?
3. Do you think that some memories may be present in our minds but are inaccessible?
4. What do you think the biggest conundrum is in the world of psychology?



### 3 In-depth listening: psychology vocabulary

Part A: Listen to the report and tick the psychology-related items you hear mentioned.



- infantile amnesia
- delusion
- psyche
- anxiety
- ego
- psychoanalysis
- hippocampus
- cognitive psychology
- trauma
- depression
- psychotherapists
- neuron

Part B: Listen to the report again. Match items with the correct definitions below.

hippocampus  
psychoanalysis

infantile amnesia  
psychotherapist

neuron  
trauma

1. \_\_\_\_\_ : a cell that carries information within the brain, and between the brain and other parts of the body
2. \_\_\_\_\_ : a person who is trained to treat somebody who has problems with their mental health by talking with them
3. \_\_\_\_\_ : a mental condition caused by severe shock, stress or fear, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time
4. \_\_\_\_\_ : either of the two areas of the brain thought to be the centre of emotion and memory
5. \_\_\_\_\_ : the inability of adults to remember things that happened during the first few years of their lives
6. \_\_\_\_\_ : a method of treating somebody who has problems with their mental health by encouraging them to talk about past experiences and feelings





## 4

**Listening for comprehension**

For each question, select the answer that most accurately reflects the information given in the audio. Listen to the report again to check your answers.

**Group 1:**

1. Who first identified infantile amnesia?
  - a. researchers from Yale University
  - b. Professor Qi Wang
  - c. Sigmund Freud
2. What did a recent study discover about babies?
  - a. They are able to store memories in the hippocampus.
  - b. They can't remember anything at all.
  - c. Their brains develop at different rates.
3. Which type of memory were the research team looking at?
  - a. statistical
  - b. episodic
  - c. all types of memory
4. What are the researchers planning on looking at next?
  - a. how memory changes as we age
  - b. how memory is linked to dreams
  - c. if our early memories could be accessible through cues
5. What is the psychological conundrum that is mentioned in the report?
  - a. why we are unable to remember some dreams, but are able to remember others
  - b. why some people claim to be able to remember their time as babies, when most people can't
  - c. why we are unable to remember early memories but are still affected by childhood trauma



**Group 2:**

1. Where are our memories stored?
  - a. on neuron networks in the brain
  - b. in cells found in all of our major organs
  - c. in a part of the brain called the "recall centre"
2. What did Jean Piaget have a false memory of?
  - a. saving his nanny from an attempted kidnapping
  - b. his nanny saving him from an attempted kidnapping
  - c. attempting to kidnap his nanny
3. What do the memories of Chinese infants appear to focus on?
  - a. general routines and collective activities
  - b. the self and individual achievements
  - c. colours and shapes
4. Who conducted research into the way culture affects autobiographical memory?
  - a. Jean Piaget
  - b. Qi Wang
  - c. Cristina Alberini
5. What does Cristina Alberini believe is the purpose of early childhood memories?
  - a. to function as a foundation for adult memories
  - b. to help prepare us for difficult times in life
  - c. to allow us to form relationships more easily





## 5

**Pre-reading: general and psychology vocabulary**

You are going to read an article in which four members of the public give their opinions on early childhood memories. Read the text quickly and find words that match the synonyms and definitions below in each paragraph.

**Group 1:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ (adj., para. A): interested
2. \_\_\_\_\_ (adj., para. B): unclear
3. \_\_\_\_\_ (v, para. C): gradually disappearing
4. \_\_\_\_\_ (n, para. C): the part of your mind that contains feelings that you are not aware of
5. \_\_\_\_\_ (v, para. C): fixed an idea, attitude etc. in somebody's mind

**Group 2:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ (n, para. C): formal written or spoken statements saying what you know to be true, usually in court
2. \_\_\_\_\_ (n, para. C): the person in a trial who is accused of committing a crime
3. \_\_\_\_\_ (adj., para. D): very many
4. \_\_\_\_\_ (adj., para. D): thinking too much about one particular person or thing, in a way that is not reasonable or normal
5. \_\_\_\_\_ (n, para. D): a brain condition, mostly affecting older people, in which a person has difficulties with memory, thinking, control of the body etc.





## What can you remember from your earliest years?

Four members of the public share their opinions.

**A. Mandeep, 26**

My earliest childhood memory isn't even real! I remember being bitten by a big, yellow dog while holding an ice cream. The memory is vivid, but my mother assures me that this actually happened to my older brother, Dev. I didn't believe her until she showed me a photo of the moment just before the dog attacked Dev. The weirdest part is that I wasn't even there. At the time of the incident, I was in the car with my father on the other side of the city. What does this say about memory? I suppose we shouldn't really trust it, especially our early memories! Perhaps we need to rely more on other people than we tend to think, instead of seeing ourselves as incapable of being wrong. That'll be the basis of my thesis. Anyway, I was so intrigued by the idea of false memories that I decided to study psychology at postgraduate level.

**B. Joseph, 39**

I had a ferret as a child. My friend, who came to visit, swears it was a rabbit and remembers playing with it, but I have a video of the ferret. My ferret was called Nigel and he smelt awful. The recording was taken by my mother when I was around two years old, in our first house. We moved a few weeks later and I have to say, I have no memory of that place at all. I do remember Nigel, who moved with us into our new home, but the details are fuzzy, like a photograph that is out of focus. Sometimes I wish I could remember my childhood in more detail. However, my wife, Melanie, was in a car accident as a toddler and lost both of her parents. She can't remember the incident at all, but has had panic attacks throughout her life at the idea of getting into a car. It seems cruel that an unremembered memory can continue to affect us, doesn't it?

**C. Katrina, 52**

As a psychologist, I've always found memory fascinating. We tend to think of memories as things that exist for a time, before fading away, but the truth may be more complicated. Memories could hide behind locked doors in our subconscious, waiting for the right key to unlock them. Accessing these memories could even change them. To further complicate matters, we have the concept of false memories, with research even showing that these can be implanted in an innocent mind. Such studies are of particular value in the world of law, with many legal cases relying on eye witness testimonies. Researchers have discovered that *leading questions* can alter the memory of an event, with details changing, such as the colour of a car, or even the identity of a person. Naturally, this can have life-changing consequences for defendants in a court case.

**D. Clive, 62**

Our third child was born last week. The other two are four and seven, and almost every aspect of their lives has been documented by my partner and I. We have countless photo albums and hard drives full of images and video clips of our children. A friend told me he thinks I'm a bit obsessive, and that we should focus on enjoying the moment rather than trying to record it. I think I'm so keen to document our family's time together because my father had dementia. It was painful watching him fail to remember his own children, to struggle with his identity and to confuse events from the past. I want to create a permanent record of our family's life, so that, one day, if I can't remember things myself, my children will still have access to these precious moments.

*leading questions* – questions that you ask in a particular way in order to get the answer you want

Sources: The Guardian, BBC, Science



## 6

**Reading comprehension**

**Part A: Read the article again. Match statements with the correct speakers. You may be able to match more than one speaker.**

1. They have memories of a childhood pet. \_\_\_\_\_
2. They are working in or studying psychology. \_\_\_\_\_
3. They have children. \_\_\_\_\_
4. They have a memory of an event that actually happened to somebody else. \_\_\_\_\_

**Part B: For each question, choose the answer you believe best suits the speaker.**

1. Why did Mandeep decide to study her particular subject?
  - a. She finds the way that memory changes as we age interesting.
  - b. She is particularly interested in false memories.
  - c. She is intrigued by the idea of memory affecting real life events, such as court cases.
2. What relation was between Nigel and Joseph?
  - a. Nigel is the name of Joseph's childhood friend.
  - b. Nigel is the name of Joseph's wife's father, who died in an accident.
  - c. Nigel is the name of Joseph's childhood pet.
3. According to the researchers that Katrina mentions, what can change the memory of a specific event?
  - a. the state of mind that the individual was in when the event occurred
  - b. cultural differences
  - c. leading questions
4. Why does Clive want to create a permanent record of his family's life?
  - a. He wants his children to be able to access these past events in case he can't remember them himself.
  - b. He wants to create a record to give to his own father, who has dementia.
  - c. He thinks that modern children are less likely to form early memories, due to their use of technology.

**Part C: Do you think that Clive is right to want to record his children's childhood? Why/why not? Discuss in pairs.**



## 7

**Talking point**

In pairs or small groups, discuss the following questions.

1. Do you have a good or bad memory? How does this affect your daily life?
2. Why do you think people forget things? Can forgetting be a good thing?
3. If you were able to access your earliest memories through technology, would you want to?
4. If it is possible to remember something that didn't happen, should we be more careful when considering eyewitness testimony in court cases?
5. If it was possible to erase specific memories, would you be interested in doing so?
6. Do you think our personality is linked to our memories? If you permanently lost your memory, would you become a different person?
7. Has the digital age changed how we remember things? If so, how?

## 8

**Extended activity: close listening**

Part A: Look at the transcript for the report. In pairs, fill in the missing words from the list below, then listen to the report again to check your answers.

|          |             |              |         |          |
|----------|-------------|--------------|---------|----------|
| address  | complicated | conversation | defined | function |
| remember | smells      | stable       | store   | theories |

**Newsreader:** How much do you \_\_\_\_\_<sup>1</sup> from your childhood? Can you remember your early years at all?

**Newsreader:** Most of us have no memories from the first few years of our lives – a phenomenon known as infantile amnesia, which was first identified by Sigmund Freud in 1905.

**Newsreader:** \_\_\_\_\_<sup>2</sup> as to why we can't remember our time as babies have circulated for centuries. For a long time, this was thought to be caused by the part of our brain that deals with memory – the hippocampus – not being fully developed.

**Newsreader:** However, a recent study by researchers from Yale University found that babies are able to \_\_\_\_\_<sup>3</sup> memories in the hippocampus, suggesting that memories from early infancy are inaccessible, rather than non-existent.

**Newsreader:** To conduct the study, researchers looked at a specific type of memory called episodic memory, which relates to the recall of single events, such as a \_\_\_\_\_<sup>4</sup> with a friend or a trip to the beach. Other forms of memory include statistical memory, which form over time through learning, such as through the gradual understanding of a new language.



- Newsreader:** The research team are preparing further studies into what happens to these early memories, and whether they could become accessible somehow through cues such as \_\_\_\_\_.<sup>5</sup> Such experiments could help researchers to understand one of the biggest conundrums of developmental and cognitive psychology: how is it possible that we can't remember our lives as babies, and yet can be affected by early childhood trauma?
- Newsreader:** Exposure to upsetting events as babies can lead to anxiety, depression and other mental health problems in adulthood. Psychotherapists, following in Freud's theories of the mind, have made the connection with early trauma and later problems, an issue they attempt to \_\_\_\_\_<sup>6</sup> through psychoanalysis.
- Newsreader:** Yet psychologists are still uncertain about how we remember and forget things. If a memory is forgotten, is it lost forever, or can it be recalled later? Do our brains have a data limit, as computers do?
- Newsreader:** Unlike files on a computer network, memories appear to be stored on neuron networks in the brain. Recalling a memory activates and strengthens these networks, but these memories may not be \_\_\_\_\_<sup>7</sup> in themselves. There have been instances of false memories being conjured either deliberately or inadvertently.
- Newsreader:** Jean Piaget, a developmental psychologist, had a clear memory of his nanny saving him from an attempted kidnapping at the age of two, but years later, the nanny admitted she had fabricated the story.
- Newsreader:** Study into memory is further \_\_\_\_\_<sup>8</sup> by the way in which our culture and upbringing appears to affect how we remember things. Earliest memories in Americans can begin at around three and a half years – six months earlier than in Chinese toddlers – but American memories tend to be more self-focused and emotionally elaborate. By contrast, the memories of Chinese infants appear to centre more on collective activities and general routines.
- Newsreader:** Professor Qi Wang, who has conducted research into the way culture affects autobiographical memory, says that this is because, in Asia, the sense of self is more \_\_\_\_\_<sup>9</sup> by your roles and relationships with others than by seeing yourself as unique.
- Newsreader:** Regardless of the age at which we start to remember things, the fact remains that we appear unable to recall memories that may well be cached deep in our minds. As further studies take place, some psychologists, such as Cristina Alberini of New York University, believe that the purpose of these early memories is to \_\_\_\_\_<sup>10</sup> as schemas on which adult memories are built, much like the foundations of a home.

**Part B: What do you think the difference is between cognitive and developmental psychology? Can you think of any other fields of psychology that aren't mentioned in the report? Discuss in pairs.**



# Transcripts

## 3. In-depth listening: psychology vocabulary

- Newsreader:** How much do you remember from your childhood? Can you remember your early years at all?
- Newsreader:** Most of us have no memories from the first few years of our lives – a phenomenon known as infantile amnesia, which was first identified by Sigmund Freud in 1905.
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- Newsreader:** However, a recent study by researchers from Yale University found that babies are able to store memories in the hippocampus, suggesting that memories from early infancy are inaccessible, rather than non-existent.
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- Newsreader:** The research team are preparing further studies into what happens to these early memories, and whether they could become accessible somehow through cues such as smells. Such experiments could help researchers to understand one of the biggest conundrums of developmental and cognitive psychology: how is it possible that we can't remember our lives as babies, and yet can be affected by early childhood trauma?
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# Key

## 1. Warm up

5 mins.

Tell the students they will be listening to a report about research into early memory, and reading an article in which four members of the public give their opinions on the topic. The discussion activity is suitable for pairs or small groups.

## 2. Pre-listening: general and psychology vocabulary

Part A

5 mins.

Ask the students to match the words with the correct definitions.

Group 1:

1. → e.    2. → a.    3. → h.    4. → c.    5. → g.    6. → f.    7. → b.    8. → d.

Group 2:

1. → b.    2. → d.    3. → a.    4. → g.    5. → e.    6. → f.    7. → c.

Part B

5 mins.

Students should discuss the questions in pairs.

## 3. In-depth listening: psychology vocabulary

Part A

5 mins.

Students should listen to the report and tick the psychology-related items they hear mentioned.

Items not mentioned: delusion, ego and psyche.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> infantile amnesia    | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> hippocampus    |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> cognitive psychology | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> trauma         |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> anxiety              | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> depression     |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> psychotherapists     | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> psychoanalysis |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> neuron               |  |

Part B

5 mins.

Students should match the definitions with the correct vocabulary items from Part A. This task may be completed individually or in pairs.

- |                |                      |                   |
|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1. neuron      | 2. psychotherapist   | 3. trauma         |
| 4. hippocampus | 5. infantile amnesia | 6. psychoanalysis |



#### 4. Listening for comprehension

5 mins.

Individually or in pairs, ask students to select the answer that best fits each question, before listening again to check.

Group 1:

1. c.                      2. a.                      3. b.                      4. c.                      5. c.

Group 2:

1. a.                      2. b.                      3. a.                      4. b.                      5. a.

#### 5. Pre-reading: general and psychology vocabulary

10 mins.

Ask the students to skim through the text quickly and match the synonyms and definitions to the key vocabulary in each paragraph.

Sources:

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2025/feb/16/why-cant-we-remember-our-lives-as-babies-or-toddlers>

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2016/mar/29/social-recall-factors-that-can-affect-false-memory>

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160726-the-mystery-of-why-you-cant-remember-being-a-baby>

<https://www.sciencefocus.com/news/baby-amnesia-memory-mri-study>

<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adt7570>

Group 1:

1. intrigued              2. fuzzy                      3. fading                      4. subconscious              5. implanted

Group 2:

1. testimonies              2. defendant              3. countless              4. obsessive              5. dementia

#### 6. Reading comprehension

Part A

5 mins.

Students should complete the task individually or in pairs. Encourage them to closely read the text and match the statements to the correct speakers.

1. Joseph                      2. Mandeep and Katrina              3. Clive                      4. Mandeep

Part B

5 mins.

Ask the students to choose the answer that most accurately reflects the question.

1. b.                      2. c.                      3. c.                      4. a.

#### 7. Talking point

10 mins.

Ask the students to discuss the questions in pairs or small groups.



## 8. Extended activity: close listening

Part A

5 mins.

Students should fill in the gaps in the transcript in pairs or small groups, then listen to the report again to check their answers.

- |             |             |                |                 |              |
|-------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 1. remember | 2. theories | 3. store       | 4. conversation | 5. smells    |
| 6. address  | 7. stable   | 8. complicated | 9. defined      | 10. function |

Part B

5 mins.

Students should discuss the difference between cognitive and developmental psychology in pairs. You may wish to do this as a class discussion.