

How My Grandparents Lived

Comparing everyday life decades ago with life today - and wondering why it changed

Everyday life has changed enormously in just a few generations - how we travel, what we eat, how we heat our homes, and what we throw away.

In this activity you'll explore some of those changes, and think about a real conversation you could have with someone older in your own family.

1

Then and now | 8 min

With a partner - read and compare

Read each pair of statements. Underline anything that surprises you.

Then (around the 1960s)	Now
Many families had just one phone - shared by the whole household, plugged into the wall.	Many people carry a phone with them everywhere, and households often have several devices each.
Milk, bread, and vegetables were often delivered locally or bought fresh most days.	Many families do a big weekly shop, often driving to a large supermarket.
Clothes were mended, handed down, or altered rather than replaced.	Clothes are often cheaper to buy new than to repair.
Most homes had one source of heating for the whole house, often a single fire or stove.	Many homes have central heating that can warm every room separately.
Most food packaging was paper, glass, or metal - and was reused or returned.	Much food packaging today is plastic, often used once and thrown away.

2

Plan your questions | 8 min

On your own or in pairs

Imagine you could talk to a grandparent, great-grandparent, or older neighbour about how they lived. Write three questions you'd want to ask them.

1.

2.

3.

3

What changed - and why? | 9 min

Small groups

Looking back at Stage 1 - which change do you think made life easier?

Write it here:

Which change do you think uses more of the Earth's resources than before?

Write it here:

4

One thing worth bringing back | 5 min

Whole class

If I could bring back one habit from the past, it would be...

Guidance for teachers

30 mins · Y5-6 (ages 9-11) · Pairs → Individual → Groups → Whole class

Before you start

This works well alongside any existing local history or 'then and now' topic. It can stand alone as a one-off lesson, or feed into a homework task where pupils actually interview a relative or older family friend using the questions from Stage 2.

Sensitivity note: not every pupil will have access to a grandparent or older relative to talk to - frame Stage 2 as 'imagine you could ask' rather than requiring pupils to actually have that conversation, unless you're confident every pupil has someone available.

1 Then and now · 8 min · Pairs

Read through the table as a class first, or let pairs read it independently - either works depending on your group's reading confidence.

"Underline anything that surprises you - maybe something you didn't realise used to be so different."

After reading, ask for a few examples of what surprised pupils most. The 'one shared phone' and 'food delivered fresh' rows tend to get the strongest reactions.

-  **If needed:** If pupils struggle to imagine life without mobile phones or supermarkets: use a quick show of hands - 'who has a phone at home that isn't a mobile?' often surprises them either way.
-  **If needed:** For pupils who already know a lot about this period (e.g. have discussed it at home): invite them to add their own 'then' example to share with the group.

2 Plan your questions · 8 min · Individual or pairs

Model one good open question before pupils write their own - e.g. 'What did you do when something broke instead of buying a new one?'

"A good question is open - it can't be answered with just 'yes' or 'no'. Try starting with 'what', 'how', or 'why'."

If any pupils do have a relative they could realistically ask, encourage them to take their questions home - this becomes a lovely extension task, but isn't necessary for the activity to work as a standalone lesson.

-  **If needed:** If a pupil has no living grandparent or older relative to think of: suggest a neighbour, family friend, or even a character from a book or film set in the past.
-  **If needed:** For early finishers: ask them to predict what they think the answer to one of their questions might be, based on Stage 1.

3 What changed - and why? · 9 min · Small groups

Groups discuss both boxes, drawing on the Then and Now table from Stage 1.

"There's no single right answer here - I want to hear your reasoning, not just your answer."

Useful discussion point if it doesn't come up naturally: many changes (cars, plastic packaging, central heating) made life more convenient, but also use more energy and resources than the older way of doing things.

-  **If needed:** If groups jump straight to 'plastic is bad': gently complicate this - plastic packaging also reduced food waste and spoilage, so it's not simply good or bad, just a trade-off worth noticing.
-  **If needed:** For groups who finish quickly: ask them to think of one modern convenience that uses fewer resources than the old way of doing something (e.g. video calls instead of long car journeys to visit family).

4 One thing worth bringing back · 5 min · Whole class

Quick-fire round - one sentence each, keeping pace brisk.

“Just finish the sentence - one thing from the past you think we should bring back today.”

This works well as a light, positive way to close - it avoids leaving pupils with a sense that the past was simply 'better', while still encouraging them to notice that some older habits had real value.

-  **If needed:** *If a pupil struggles to think of anything: prompt with 'what about mending things, or eating food that's in season?'*
-  **If needed:** *If a pupil doesn't want to speak aloud: accept a written answer instead, or let them whisper to a partner who shares for them.*

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