

thanks for the memories

Can you help your children remember more about their early lives? Actually, yes.

BY DAVID BRITTAN

### Once, when I was a small boy in England, I fell into a well.

We had an old greenhouse and the well, for watering the plants, was set into the floor. I bobbed in the greenish water observing the ferns until a handyman fished me out. That is my earliest memory. As my mother reckons (calculating by her degree of pregnancy at the time with my brother), I was around 19 months old. She assures me the water was shallow.

I am uncommonly lucky to remember so far back. Most adults, psychologists say, can summon no memories from before age 3 or 3½. Yet there I was, a toddler, having an experience that would stick with me forever. If our memories are the story of our life, then more memories—and richer memories—must translate into more life. Just as I wish my children longevity, I wish them a life story that is at least as vivid and meaningful and crowded with detail as my own.

Sometimes I wonder about Anna, she of the dimples and the amber hair who at this moment is dragging a hose around the house commanding it to “Come, doggie!” What will my 3-year-old remember of her life so far? Anything? Will she find a place for a few delicious minutes of summer on the Maine coast?

Anna was 2½, and I was tagging along with her and her older brother Jamie to a tide pool. Jamie was collecting hermit crabs and organizing them into a colony. He held one up for his sister to admire. “A crab! A crab!” she said, and her cheeks collapsed into those dimples a squirrel could hide nuts in. Surely it was a little girl’s recipe for bliss: a nature lesson from

her big brother, the shimmer of water at her ankles, and a chance to wear her favorite bathing suit, the blue one with the red flowers. If she can hold on to a single moment from her early life, let it be that one.

As it happens, science has given me hope here. Cognitive psychologists are learning that autobiographical memory—our capacity to remember the events of our lives—emerges by degrees as we pass certain milestones. One of those milestones is speech. Research shows that once our children learn to talk, we can help them find the words to build strong autobiographical memories. The more vividly we talk with them about the past, the more vividly they remember.

### The Path to the Past

Recollecting a visit to the tide pools with your brother ought to be a simple matter, but it is a major intellectual achievement. First of all, there has to be a self—a “me” distinct from all other people—to which events happen. “I did that.” “I saw that.” Otherwise, there is no one to whom a memory can attach itself. Adults can barely conceive of not having a self. Yet research shows that that is the state in which infants live until roughly the age of 1½ to 2. Once they can recognize themselves in a mirror, children are on the road to self-awareness. Anna, whose frequent primping reminds me why a bathroom mirror is called a vanity, passed that test long ago. (See page 30 for more on the “mirror test.”) <sup>0211</sup>

Over the next couple of years, children discover an equally important key to remembering: a sense that they remain the same person as time passes. Psychologists call this faculty extended consciousness. There is a classic test for extended consciousness, one that involves literally messing with a child's head. I tried it on my daughter.

As I distracted Anna by brushing her hair, I placed a sticker—a bright red price tag—on her brow without her knowing. Then I photographed her (“for Grandma”) with my digital camera. A few minutes later, I showed her the photo. Children who grasp that a photo taken a moment ago has some bearing on their lives in the present will investigate the thing stuck to their foreheads. Researchers at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette conducted this experiment on preschoolers: “When allowed to look at the photographs, young 3-year-olds did not reach up to search for the sticker, whereas older 3- and 4-year-olds did,” they found. My daughter, well shy of her third birthday (I know, a genius!) reached up to feel the price tag and said: “What’s this red thing?” I’m surprised she didn’t ask why she was only \$1.39.

Cause and effect—the idea that things unfold in a logical sequence—is another powerful concept that takes time to master. We can’t expect children to form coherent memories of an event when they don’t understand how it happened. David Pillemer, the author of an eye-opening book, *Momentous Events, Vivid Memories*, demonstrated this when he interviewed preschoolers (from the Wellesley College Child Study Center outside Boston) about a fire alarm that forced them out of their building. Shortly after the event, most of the older children, those around 4½, understood perfectly what had gone on. But the 3½-year-olds were all but clueless.

Not only did they claim to have gathered outside before the alarm went off, but they were shaky on the connection between the alarm and the burning popcorn that had preceded it. Seven years later, only the children who had gotten the event right in the first place had any clear memory of it.

These faculties—a sense of self, extended consciousness, and causal understanding—are all known to help a child’s ability to remember events. But speech is the rocket fuel that truly launches autobiographical memory. There is strong evidence that, once children learn to speak, their brains store memories in the form of language. As one researcher told me, “It’s the language, the narrative, that gives the memory its shape and meaning.”

This is where parents come in. Numerous studies point to the same conclusion: The strongest influence on the development of autobiographical memory is the amount and type of reminiscing that goes on between children and their parents. In other words, let’s talk.

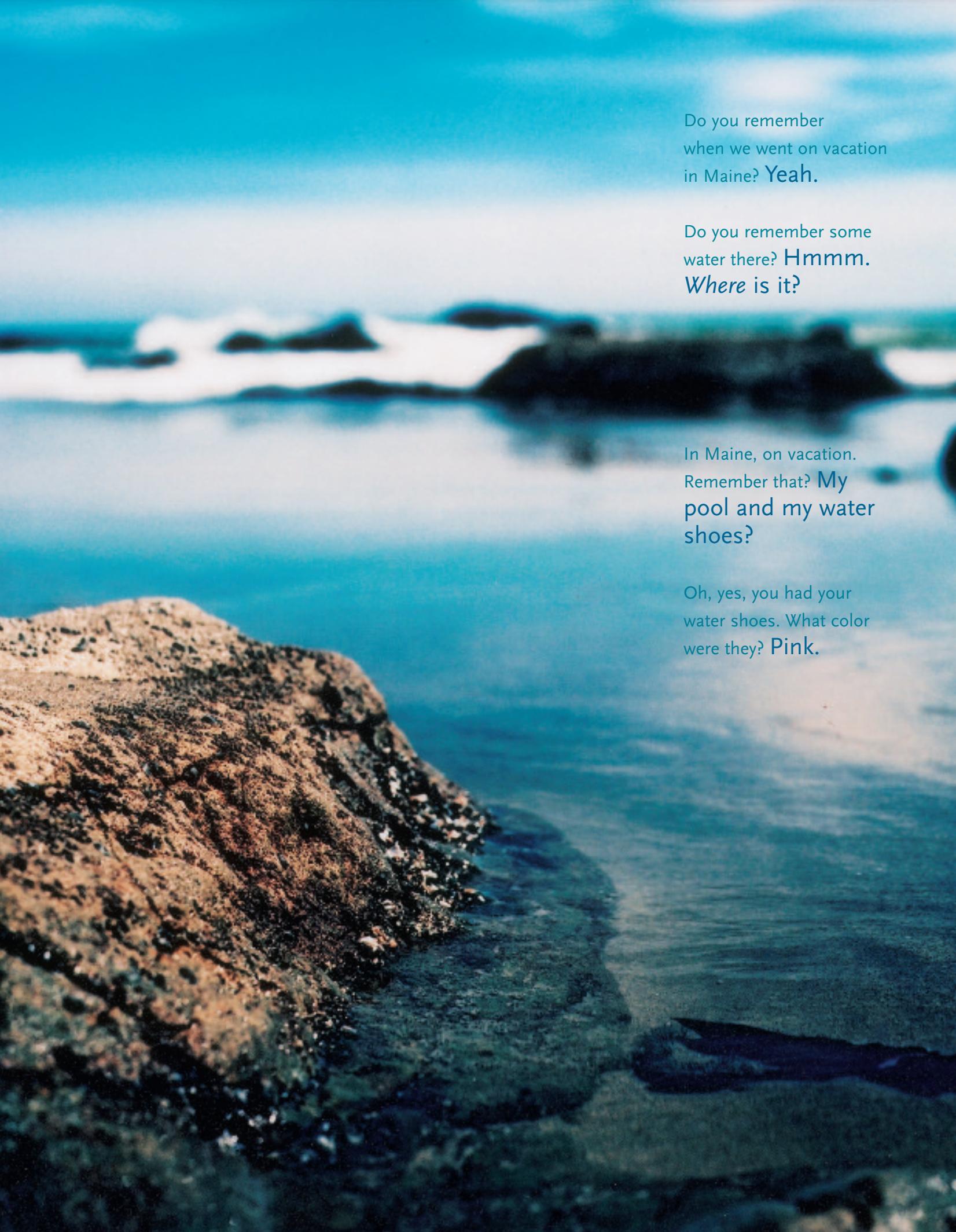
## So, to Elaborate . . .

At the age of 3½, Elaine Reese was happily taking a bath one evening at home in Texas when the furnace blew up. “I remember my mother pulling me and my younger sister out of the bath, wrapping towels around us, and carrying us quickly out onto the front lawn,” she tells me. “I was cold and scared.”

For Reese, that memory is the earliest (and, one hopes, the most jarring) of many that turned into family lore, thanks in large part to her parents. “My dad told lots of family stories,” she says. Reminiscing together “is just part of the way I was brought up, so memories are important to me.”

## Before You Can Remember, You Have to Know You Exist

In *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography*, Agatha Christie was observing her 2½-year-old grandson Mathew, who would narrate as he went downstairs, “This is Mathew. Mathew is going downstairs. This is Mathew going downstairs.” She remarks, “It is as though the body in which we have found our spirit lodged is at first strange to us. An entity, we know its name, we are on terms with it, but are not as yet identified fully with it. We are Agatha going for a walk, Mathew going downstairs. We see ourselves rather than feel ourselves. And then one day the next stage of life happens. Suddenly, it is no longer ‘This is Mathew going downstairs.’ Suddenly it has become / am going downstairs. The achievement of ‘I’ is the first step in the progress of a personal life.”

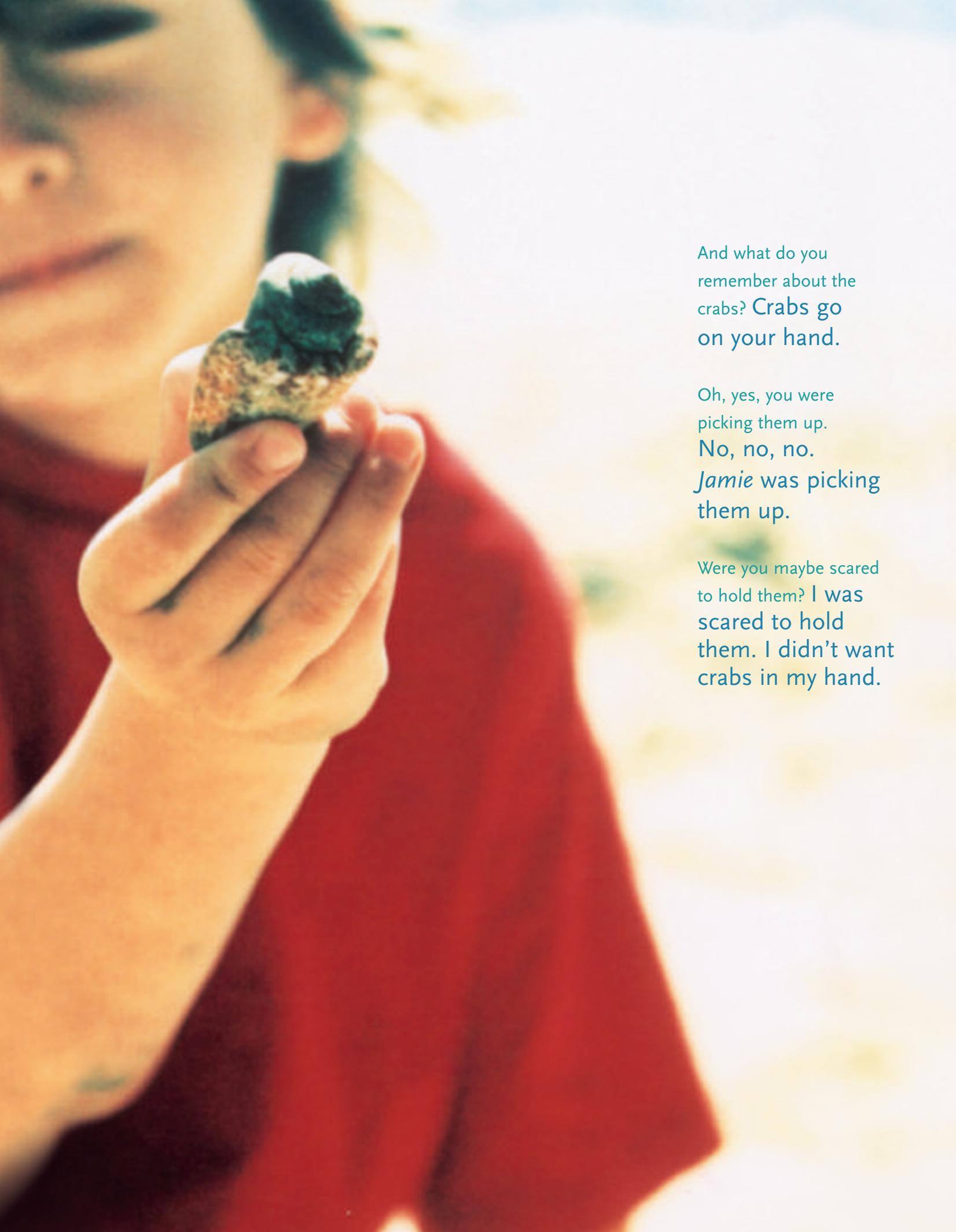
A scenic view of a rocky coastline. In the foreground, a large, textured rock formation is partially submerged in shallow, clear blue water. The water extends into the distance, where more rocks are visible under a bright, clear sky. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of blue and brown.

Do you remember  
when we went on vacation  
in Maine? Yeah.

Do you remember some  
water there? Hmm.  
*Where is it?*

In Maine, on vacation.  
Remember that? *My  
pool and my water  
shoes?*

Oh, yes, you had your  
water shoes. What color  
were they? *Pink.*



And what do you remember about the crabs? Crabs go on your hand.

Oh, yes, you were picking them up.  
No, no, no.  
*Jamie* was picking them up.

Were you maybe scared to hold them? I was scared to hold them. I didn't want crabs in my hand.

So important that she went on to become a leading authority on children's autobiographical memory.

Reese has had a chance to listen to hundreds of mothers and children engaging in memory talk, both in the United States and in New Zealand, where she is a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Otago. Over the years, she and her colleagues have noticed that a particular style of reminiscing helps children develop richer, more detailed memories. "Some mothers are much more likely to make a story out of past experiences, sequencing and evaluating them," she says. Those mothers practice what is known as an elaborative style. They encourage the children to elaborate, and they pinch-hit for the children when words fail them. (Dads can be just as elaborative, but have received less scholarly attention.)

Elaborative moms begin with gentle questioning. "They're inviting children to give their own perspective on an event, mainly through open-ended questions like 'What happened when we went to the zoo? Where did we go first?' A lot of 'W' questions."

When the child draws a blank, the keep-them-talking mom does not simply repeat the question,

but also offers cues. She embeds more information in each question. In the zoo example, Reese observes, "the mom might ask, 'What happened when we went to the zoo with Grandma and Grandpa, and your Aunt Betty was there, and remember you had an ice cream?' We have to realize how hard this is for preschool kids to do, much less toddlers. They're having to talk about something that exists only in their mind, or in what they can discern of the mother's mind. What [these] mothers are doing is making it possible for the child to say anything. And at first it might not be much—it may just be one word." But in time, the child will join more and more in telling the story.

Talking about feelings is crucial. Some events are memorable because they are exciting, or scary, or sad, or funny—laden with emotions that a child might need help processing. Reese says mothers can help etch memories by asking, "What was your favorite part? How did you like seeing the tiger?" She adds, "The parent is helping the child to create a sense of why the event was meaningful."

Of course, parent and child may not agree on what is meaningful. "Children notice different

## Helping Your Child Remember More

Children develop stronger memories for the events of their lives when they learn to convert those events into meaningful stories. Elaine Reese, a memory researcher at New Zealand's University of Otago, offers these steps for reminiscing to greater effect.

1. Think of an experience that you and your child shared: a trip to the zoo, a birthday party, the arrival of a baby brother or sister. Since you shared it, you can help your child reconstruct it.
2. Try to imagine what the experience was like from a kid's perspective. Kids and adults notice different things. What was meaningful to your child?
3. Help your child to think of the experience as a story. Stories are about experiences and emotions, not just events, and they should crackle with detail.
4. Ask open-ended questions. Where did we go? What did we do? What happened next? How did you feel about that? Why do you think you felt that way? "Questions where there's more than one correct answer invite children to give their own perspective on an event," says Reese.
5. If your child doesn't respond, offer cues. When the child answers, "I don't know, I don't remember," says Reese, "use that as an opportunity to give more information, often through open-ended questions."
6. Be prepared to do most of the storytelling at first. "For a preschooler, it's a very hard cognitive task to say anything about the past," says Reese. By age 5, your child can join in more of the storytelling with little prompting.
7. Keep it fun. There's no need to carve out a formal time to wax nostalgic. Just weave the talks into everyday life. "It works really well in the car, when you're taking a walk, at mealtime," says Reese. "It can be a nice distraction." —D.B.

things about the world,” Reese says, putting her finger on just why it is that my daughter can look at a *Newsweek* photo of a mother clutching her babies in the aftermath of a hurricane—a photo that left me speechless—and chirp, “Look, that baby’s holding a Taggie!” (Anna’s baby blanket of choice.) And therein lies the challenge for adults. To get those memories to stick, Reese explains, “you have to get down on the child’s level.”

How, exactly, does this draw-them-out style work its magic on children’s memories? Robyn Fivush, a psychology professor at Emory University, has a good idea. She helped pioneer the study of social influences on autobiographical memory. For one thing, Fivush observes, the child’s memory of a particular experience is reinforced. “The more you talk about an event in a detailed, embellished way, the more likely the child is to remember it over time, because talking helps rehearse the memory.”

At the same time, children learn a generalized skill, one they can use even when no parents are around. “What’s happening in these highly elaborative families,” says Fivush, “is that children are learning to think about their own personal experiences using this more elaborated framework. It’s like ‘Oh, this is something that’s important and fun to do.’”

And it’s not just autobiographical memory that improves. Both Fivush and Reese are quick to enumerate many other ways in which children benefit from elaborative memory talk: a stronger sense of self (because you are the star of your own memories), deeper familial bonds, better coping skills, higher self-esteem, more advanced literacy skills, and better performance on “strategic memory” tasks such as remembering items on a list or objects in a picture. And, yes, they are talking about actual, scientifically measurable effects.

## A Little Dialogue

By the time I learned all this, a few months had passed since that gorgeous day at the beach in Maine. If there was any hope of bolstering Anna’s memory of it, I’d better act soon. Snuggling on the bed with her, I marshaled my elaborative techniques (the open-ended questioning, the generous

prompting, the attention to feelings, the empathy with the child’s-eye view). I got it all on tape:

Hey, do you remember when we went on vacation in Maine? *What’s that?*

That’s just my little tape recorder. *I hold it for you?*

Um . . . I’d better hold it. But do you remember when we went on vacation in Maine? *Yeah.*

What did we do? *I don’t know.*

Well, what were some things that we did in the water? Do you remember some water there? *Hmmm. Where is it?*

In Maine, on vacation. Remember that? *My pool and my water shoes?*

Oh, yes. You had your water shoes. What color were they? *Pink.*

Pink ones. Where did you go in your water shoes? *I go water in my pool.*

I don’t remember bringing your pool. Didn’t we go to the ocean? To the beach? *Mm-hmm.*

Weren’t there some crabs? *Mm.*

And what do you remember about the crabs? *Crabs go on your hand.*

Oh, yes, you were picking them up. *No, no, no. Jamie was picking them up.*

Were you maybe scared to hold them? *I was scared to hold them. I didn’t want crabs in my hand.*

Do you remember what else you were wearing? *Bathing suit.*

Now, which one was that? *That was butterflies.*

Your bathing suit with the butterflies! You must have a better memory than I do. *No, no, no. I wasn’t wearing butterflies bathing suit. I was wearing flowers bathing suit.*

How did you like being in the water? Was it fun? *Mm. It was cold. Really cold, like snow.*

The water was cold, like snow. I had forgotten that. ▮

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**Bathing suit.**

Now, which one  
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**No, no, no. I  
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