



Medical Aspects of  
**Human  
Sexuality**

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**Earliest childhood  
memories**

**Q** *What are one's earliest recollections from childhood usually about?*

**A** People's earliest recollections from childhood vary widely in content. On average, the earliest memory is dated between the third or fourth year of childhood; however, autobiographical memory does not become continuous until around age 6 (probably the start of schooling has to do with this). The memories are predominantly visual in nature; and among nonpatients, at least, pleasant memories outnumber unpleasant ones. Just why one particular event is selected to be remembered, while others are forgotten, remains a mystery. Freud argued that early recollections were "screen memories," distorted by the operation of various defense mechanisms in order to aid the repression of memories tied to infantile sexual and aggressive impulses. From this point of view, the manifest content of early recollections is of little or no interest, and the memories must be analyzed by the free-association method before they take on any

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meaning. Adler, on the other hand, argued that the surface features of early recollections were interesting in their own right, as the memories relate in a fairly straightforward manner to the individual's current personality. No definitive test of these competing hypotheses has been performed, though most readers' intuitions will probably match Adler's rather than Freud's. In any event, there is no reason to believe that the very earliest recollection has any special significance. However, a series of early recollections might be of some help in revealing the way individuals currently construe their childhood and the effects of their upbringing. (For a bibliography, consult Kihlstrom JF, Harackiewicz JM: The earliest recollection: A new survey. *J Pers* 50:134, 1982.)

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