



## TALKING ABOUT THE FAMILY

A common topic of conversation and a standard IELTS topic is **The Family**.

Where do I come from? Many people are interested in their genealogy, their ancestors, their heritage and their roots. Constructing your family tree, going back several generations is important for many people.

### Answering questions about the family

When answering questions relating to the family, be sure to:

- identify family members correctly and explain the kind and degree of the relationships
- have something to say about your family, your immediate family, and maybe even your relatives

### IELTS Tips

To prepare for IELTS think of possible topic areas - major topic areas - and then think of related or sub-topics.

Consider the topic of **The Family**.

Think of yourself and your immediate or extended family. Practise talking about your family, your position and place in your family.

Make sure you know the vocabulary related to this topic and useful grammar and structures.

### Identify family members correctly

You need to be familiar with the particular name for the family relationship you might want to describe. Think about your family as a tree. This will help you organise your ideas in a systematic way.

You should first think about what perspective you are taking. If you are a parent, you might talk about your **spouse (husband or wife)** and **children (sons and daughters)**. If you are single, you might describe your **siblings (brothers and sisters)** and your place in the larger, more extended family. If you are in a relationship, but not married (**de facto**) you might talk about your partner.

### Family Tree Diagrams

Following are several tree diagrams representing the structure and organisation of a variety of families and therefore a variety of relationships:

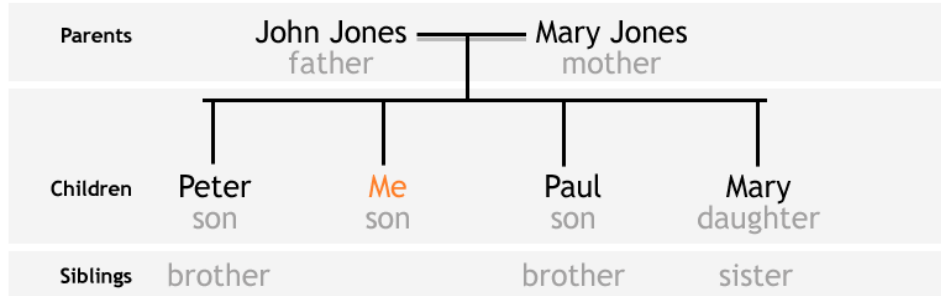
- Family Tree 1 – the children's perspective (parents, children and siblings)
- Family Tree 2 – the parent's perspective (spouse, husband and wife, children)
- Family Tree 3 – the extended family (grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins)
- Family Tree 4 – divorce and remarriage (step-parents, half brothers and sisters)
- Family Tree 5 – marriage and the in-laws

# STUDY ENGLISH

IELTS PREPARATION

How would you talk about yourself if this were your family tree?

## Family Tree 1 - the children's perspective



### Identification of family members

Sample responses:

- My parents have four children.
- My parents have three sons and a daughter.
- I am the second of four children.
- I am the second child in the family.
- I am one of four children.
- I have three siblings.
- I have an older brother, a younger brother and a younger sister.

These responses are all Simple Sentences. They can be joined to make complex sentences.

Examples: I am the second of the four children born to my parents, John and Mary Jones.

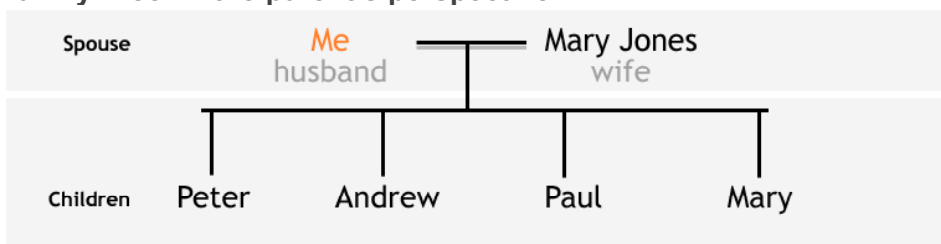
My older brother is called Peter, my younger brother is called Paul and my sister is called Mary.

This last response can be improved by removing the repeated language using ellipsis:

My older brother is called Peter, my younger brother Paul and my sister Mary.

From a different perspective we have the same family tree:

## Family Tree 2 - the parent's perspective



### Identification of family members

Sample responses:

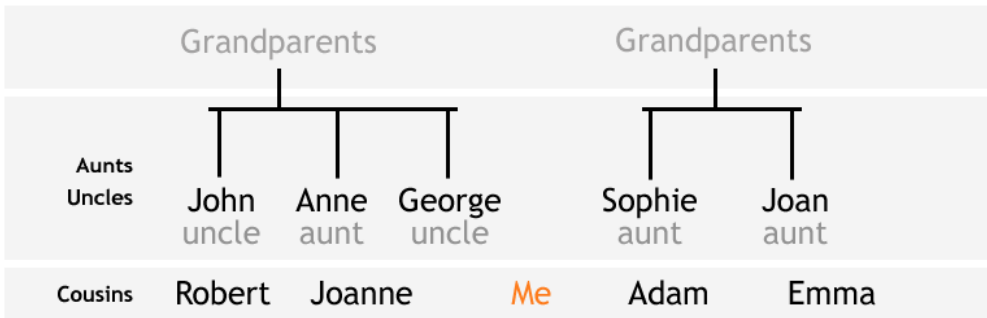
My name is John Jones. I am married. My wife is Mary Jones.  
 We have four children.  
 We have three sons and a daughter. Their names are Peter, Andrew, Paul and Mary.  
 Peter is 10 (years old), Andrew is 8, Paul is 5 and Mary is almost one (year old).

Again, these responses are all Simple Sentences. They can be joined to make more interesting sentences.

Example: I am John Jones and I am married to Mary. We have four children, three sons and a daughter, named Peter, Andrew, Paul and Mary, aged 10 (years), 8, 5 and one (year old) respectively.

Relationships in large families become complicated, especially when your parents come from large families. Look at the next family tree.

### Family Tree 3 – the extended family



### Identification of family members

Sample Responses:

I am an only child.  
 My father has a brother and a sister, Uncle John and Aunt Anne.  
 Uncle John and auntie\* Anne are my father's brother and sister.  
 Auntie Joan is my mother's sister.  
 I have two aunts and an uncle.  
 Uncle John is married and has 2 children, my cousins, Robert and Joanne.  
 Auntie Joan is also married and also has 2 children, my cousins Adam and Emma.  
 I have four cousins, two on my father's side and two on my mother's.  
 My grandparents on my mother's side (maternal grandparents) are both alive and are 87 this year.  
 My father's father, my grandfather or paternal grandfather, died a few year's ago, but his mother is still alive.  
 I still have three grandparents living.  
 My father has a nephew, Robert, and a niece, Joanne.



\* NB – **auntie** is the endearing or diminutive word choice for **aunt**.

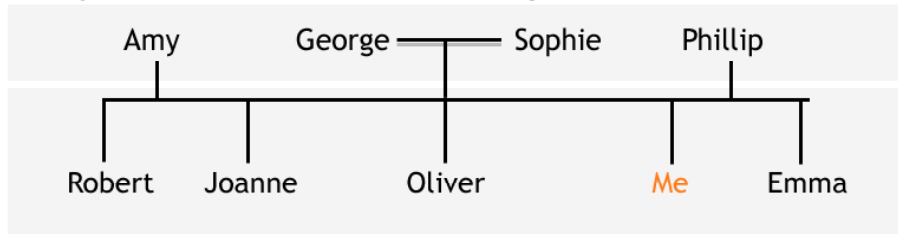
**Marital Status – single, married, divorced, re-married**

If you are engaged to be married, you refer to your future wife as your **fiancé**. You might use the word **partner**.

These days with all the work, financial and social demands on married couples, whether young or old, the **divorce rate** is increasing. Some divorced men and women **re-marry** and sometimes have children to their second (or even third) spouse. Family relationships in our modern world are getting quite complicated with **half-brothers** and **sisters** and **step- brothers** and **sisters**. What are these relationships?

Look at this family tree.

**Family Tree 4 – divorce and re-marriage**



**Identification of family members**

Sample Responses:

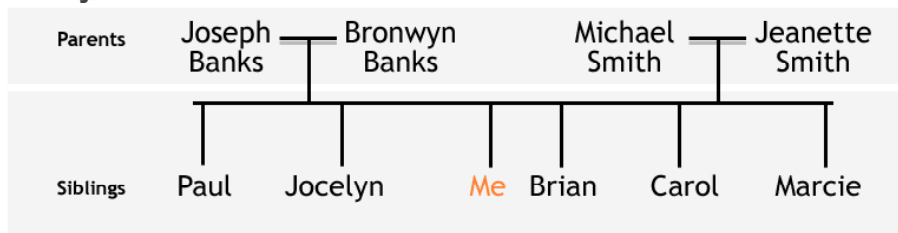
A few years ago, my mother (Sophie) divorced my father (Phillip), and remarried. Shortly before my parents divorced, they had another child, my little sister, Emma. My mother remarried a man called George, who had also been married before. My step-father is called George. His ex-wife is called Amy. Amy and George had two children, a son Robert and a daughter Joanne. Robert and Joanne are my step-brother and step-sister. My mother and step-father decided to have another child. My half-brother Oliver was born a few months ago.

**In-laws**

When you marry into another family, the **relatives** of your spouse become your **in-laws**. So your wife’s mother becomes your **mother-in-law**. Her brother is your **brother-in-law**, and so on. The brother-in-law’s wife is the wife of my brother-in-law.

Look at this next family tree.

**Family Tree 5 – the in-laws**



### Identification of family members

Sample Responses:

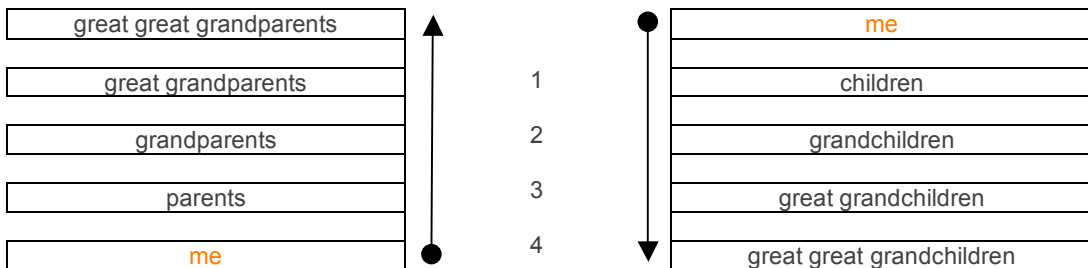
- I recently married Brian Smith.
- Brian has two sisters, now my sisters-in-law, Carol and Marcie.
- My parents-in-law are Michael and Jeanette Smith.
- I have a brother, Paul, and a sister, Jocelyn.
- Paul is the brother-in-law of my husband Brian, and Jocelyn is his sister-in-law.
- My parents, Joseph and Bronwyn Banks, are my husband Brian's parents-in-law.

### Generation Gap

The word **generation** means the time, usually 20-25 years humans take to reproduce themselves.

<b>Generation</b>	Parents
	Children

Here is a family with four generations.



People from different age groups can sometimes have difficulty understanding each other. They have different values, and sometimes different skills, or levels of familiarity with technology, and different tastes in fashion and music. This is known as the **generation gap**.

The different generations need to understand and respect each other, and learn from each other. What can you learn from the elders in your family? What can your grandparents learn from you? What can we teach each other? What can older generations hand down or pass on to younger generations?

Immigrants to a new country refer to themselves as **first generation Australian**, or **second generation Australian** – my parents immigrated here to Australia in 1990.

### Topics and possible questions

The topic of **family** seems fairly straightforward. However, there are many possible ways of asking questions on such a familiar topic.

Think about other topics and issues related to this larger topic – such as the benefits of living in an extended family compared to growing up in a small nuclear family.

It is always a good idea to brainstorm possible questions an examiner might ask.

Topic	Question
Nuclear versus extended families	Which is better, and why?
Role of the parents	Should children always obey their parents?
Discipline and punishment	Should parents punish naughty children?
Age of consent	When is the best age to get married? Should individuals choose their future husband or wife or should their parents?
Generation gap	What can older people learn from the young? Do you think the youth of today show enough respect for older people in society?

Notice, these different questions force you to use particular language functions.

Question	Language Function
Which is better, and why?	Making comparisons Explaining
Should children always obey their parents?	Giving an opinion
When is the best age to get married?	Identify Explain

### Expanding on your answer

When talking about our family, what can we say? Broadly speaking, in English, in our culture, we identify and refer to certain aspects and functions of family members.

For example:

Family member + age + position in the family + where born + where grew up

Sample answer:

My parents have five sons. I am the second of five boys. I have an older brother and three younger brothers. I was born in Northern Ireland, came to Australia in 1976 and grew up in Cronulla, a beachside suburb in the south of Sydney.

How else can we enlarge on our answer? Perhaps we might talk about schooling, what careers our brothers and sisters have, and maybe whether they are married or not.

For example:

Family member + where grew up + education + profession + marital status

Sample answer:

I grew up on the north shore of Sydney Harbour in a suburb called Mosman. I went to a small public school first, Mosman Primary School, and later to a private college. I passed the Higher School Certificate (HSC) and decided to go to the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) to study Business. I am now managing a small business, and I am still single.



## Prepositions

When talking about your family and background you will use prepositional phrases of time and place, using the prepositions **in**, **on** and **at**.

Prepositions of Place	
in	grew up in Sydney and lived in a beachside suburb in the south of the city in a small house in a friendly street in a quiet neighbourhood
on	went to school on the north side of the city lived on the 4th floor of an apartment block on the corner of a busy intersection on the outskirts of the city on the edge of a large forest on the side of a mountain on the banks of a beautiful river
at	studied at a public school studied at the University of Technology, Sydney played in the park at the end of the street was born at St Vincent's Hospital

Prepositions of Time	
in	was born in March in 1989 was born in summer in the morning in the afternoon in the evening
on	was born on a Sunday on the 19th July, 1952 on Christmas day
at	was born at midnight at a quarter to three at night at Easter at Christmas (time)

## Plural forms

Plural forms in English obey certain rules. Look at the plural forms of common words in this topic area, **the family**.

Spelling Rule	Examples
Regular + s	mother/mothers brother/brothers husband/husbands cousin/cousins uncle/uncles niece/nieces  sister-in-law / sisters-in-law brother-in-law / brothers-in-law father-in-law / fathers-in-law mother-in-law / mothers-in-law
y → ies	baby/babies
Irregular	child/children wife/wives