

Mum? Dad? What were the 90s like?

The rain tapped softly against the windows while the family settled into the living room. Mum sat at one end of the sofa, Dad at the other. Between them, Tom and Lily sprawled comfortably, their socks half-dangling from their feet. A glowing tablet lay forgotten on the coffee table.

Tom had been watching an old music video online moments earlier. He frowned thoughtfully.

"Mum, Dad," he said, "what were the 1990s actually like?"

Dad gave a slow, amused chuckle, as if Tom had just opened a dusty memory box.

"The 1990s?" he said. "Well... imagine life without the internet."

Tom blinked.

"You mean the Wi-Fi wasn't working?" he asked.

"No," Mum laughed, shaking her head. "I mean there wasn't any internet at all. No Wi-Fi, no social media, no YouTube, no streaming. If you wanted to talk to your friends, you had to call their house phone or knock on their door."

"Actually," Dad interrupted, leaning forward, "most of the time we just showed up and shouted their name outside."

"LEE! ARE YOU COMING OUT?" Mum added, grinning.

Tom and Lily laughed.

"That sounds chaotic," Lily said.

"Oh, it was," Dad said cheerfully. "But it was brilliant too."

"In the 1990s," Mum explained, "being a kid mostly meant being outside."

Tom raised an eyebrow.

"All the time?"

"Pretty much," Dad said. "The moment school finished, we were out the door. Bikes, scooters, football, climbing trees—whatever we could find."

"And if you wanted a football goal," Mum added, "you didn't buy one. You just put two jumpers on the ground and used them as goalposts."

"That's true," Dad said. "And arguments about whether the ball went between the jumpers could last longer than the actual match."

"You probably just Googled the rules," Tom said jokingly.

Dad shook his head.

“We couldn’t Google anything,” he said patiently. “If there was an argument, you either settled it yourself or someone’s mum shouted out the window to stop arguing.”

Lily giggled.

“So you just... figured things out?”

“Yes,” Mum said. “And you came home muddy. Very muddy.”

Dad nodded solemnly.

“Mud was practically a uniform for children back then.”

“What about TV?” Lily asked. “Did you just watch things whenever you wanted?”

“Oh no,” Mum said immediately. “That’s not how television worked.”

Dad leaned forward, as if delivering a lecture.

“In the 1990s, if your favourite show was on at nine o’clock on Saturday morning, you had to be sitting in front of the TV at nine o’clock.”

“Exactly,” Mum said. “No pausing. No rewinding. No streaming.”

“If you missed it,” Dad added dramatically, “you missed it forever.”

“That sounds tragic,” Tom said.

“It was,” Dad agreed. “But Saturday morning television was legendary. Bright cartoons, silly competitions, presenters shouting excitedly, and everyone across the country watching the same thing at the same time.”

“There was a kind of shared excitement,” Mum said thoughtfully. “On Monday morning at school, everyone would talk about the same shows.”

“Unless,” Dad added, “your parents made you do chores instead.”

Lily leaned forward eagerly.

“What about sweets?” she asked.

Dad placed a hand over his heart.

“Ah,” he said reverently. “Pick ’n’ mix.”

“What’s that?” Tom asked.

“You’ve never had proper pick ’n’ mix,” Mum said. “Not the real kind.”

“In Woolworths,” Dad explained, “there were long counters filled with bins of sweets.”

“Hundreds of them,” Mum added.

“You took a little paper bag,” Dad said, gesturing as though holding one, “and you chose exactly what you wanted. Gummy bears, cola bottles, chocolate raisins, fizzy worms.”

Tom’s eyes widened.

“That sounds dangerous.”

“It was,” Mum said. “You had to be very strategic.”

“Strategic?” Lily repeated.

Dad nodded.

“Yes. Because the sweets were weighed at the end.”

“So if you filled your bag with heavy chocolate,” Mum said, “you’d spend all your pocket money in seconds.”

“Which,” Dad admitted, “I did many times.”

Dad paused thoughtfully.

“Of course,” he added casually, “sometimes the journey around the sweet bins... made the bag a little lighter before it reached the scales.”

Mum raised an eyebrow.

“Oh really?” she said.

“Well,” Dad continued innocently, “quality control is very important.”

Mum gave a small, knowing smile.

Tom frowned.

“What do you mean?”

Dad cleared his throat.

“Just... checking the sweets were fresh,” he said.

Lily nodded seriously.

“That sounds responsible.”

Mum coughed suddenly to hide a laugh.

Tom picked up the tablet and tapped the paused video.

“These people,” he said. “The Spice Girls. Who were they?”

Mum gasped dramatically.

“Who were they?” she repeated. “They were everywhere!”

“They were a pop group,” Dad said, “but they were more than that. They were a phenomenon.”

“What’s a phenomenon?” Lily asked.

“Something so popular that it feels like the whole world is talking about it,” Mum explained.

“Everyone had a favourite Spice Girl,” Dad said. “Sporty, Scary, Baby, Ginger, or Posh.”

“And their message was ‘Girl Power!’” Mum added proudly.

“But here’s the strange part,” Dad said.

Tom waited.

“You couldn’t just press play on your phone to hear their songs.”

“So how did you listen?” Lily asked.

“We recorded songs from the radio onto cassette tapes,” Mum said.

“What’s a cassette tape?” Tom asked.

Dad held up his hands to describe a rectangle.

“A little plastic box with tape inside. If it got tangled, you had to rewind it with a pencil.”

Tom stared at him.

“That sounds incredibly inconvenient.”

“It was,” Dad said. “But it felt magical at the time.”

Lily glanced at Mum’s phone lying nearby.

“Did you have phones?” she asked.

Dad laughed loudly.

“Oh yes. But not like that.”

“Our first mobile phone,” Mum said, “was enormous.”

“Enormous?” Tom asked.

“Like a brick,” Dad said.

“You could only make calls,” Mum explained.

“No games. No internet. No camera.”

“Then why did you have it?” Lily asked.

“For emergencies,” Dad said.

“And also,” Mum admitted, “to feel very important.”

The room grew quiet for a moment.

Tom looked at the tablet on the table, then back at his parents.

“So life was slower,” he said.

“In some ways,” Mum replied.

“But also busier,” Dad added.

“How?”

“Well,” Dad said, “we didn’t sit staring at screens. We were outside, exploring, inventing games, riding bikes until it got dark.”

“And when the streetlights came on,” Mum said softly, “that meant it was time to go home.”

Tom thought about this.

“No internet,” he said.

“No social media,” Lily added.

“No streaming,” Tom continued.

Dad smiled.

“No distractions,” he said.

“And somehow,” Mum added, “we were never bored.”

Comprehension Questions

1. Why does the narrator describe Dad's chuckle as if Tom had "opened a dusty memory box"?

- A. Dad had forgotten what the 1990s were like
- B. Dad was remembering many old memories at once
- C. Dad was annoyed by the question
- D. Dad did not understand Tom's question

2. What does the word chaotic most nearly mean when Lily describes shouting outside friends' houses?

- A. Quiet and peaceful
- B. Noisy and slightly disorderly
- C. Dangerous and frightening
- D. Calm and organised

3. Why does Dad describe mud as "practically a uniform for children"?

- A. Children were required to play in mud
- B. Muddy clothes were fashionable
- C. Many children ended up muddy from playing outside
- D. Schools insisted children wear old clothes

4. What does the word legendary suggest about Saturday morning television?

- A. It was extremely memorable and exciting
- B. It was educational
- C. It was difficult to watch
- D. It was unpopular

5. Why did Mum say choosing pick 'n' mix sweets required being strategic?

- A. The sweets were difficult to reach
- B. The sweets were priced by weight
- C. You were only allowed five sweets
- D. Some sweets were expensive imports

6. What does Dad *really imply* when he says the bag became “a little lighter before it reached the scales”?

- A. The scales were broken
- B. Some sweets fell out of the bag
- C. He secretly ate some sweets before paying
- D. The bag was made of thin paper

7. Why does Mum give Dad a “knowing smile”?

- A. She understands the real meaning of his comment
- B. She thinks he is joking about Woolworths
- C. She is confused by what he said
- D. She is remembering buying sweets herself

8. What does the word *phenomenon* mean in the sentence about the Spice Girls?

- A. Something mysterious
- B. Something extremely popular and widely talked about
- C. Something rare
- D. Something complicated

9. Why does Tom describe cassette tapes as “incredibly inconvenient”?

- A. They were expensive
- B. They required effort compared with modern technology
- C. They were illegal to use
- D. They could only hold one song

10. What is the main message of the final section?

- A. Technology has ruined modern life
- B. Children today spend more time outside
- C. Life in the 1990s had fewer digital distractions
- D. The parents prefer old television shows

Answers

1. **B** – Dad is remembering many past memories.
2. **B** – “Chaotic” implies noisy and slightly disorganised.
3. **C** – Children played outside so often they were usually muddy.
4. **A** – “Legendary” implies something very memorable and exciting.
5. **B** – The sweets were weighed, so heavier sweets cost more.
6. **C** – Dad implies he secretly ate sweets before paying.
7. **A** – Mum understands Dad’s hidden meaning.
8. **B** – A phenomenon is something extremely popular.
9. **B** – Compared to streaming, cassette tapes required effort.
10. **C** – The section emphasises fewer digital distractions.