

# Families and Personal Property Inheritance

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Everyone has personal belongings such as wedding photographs, a baseball glove or a Lennox dish that contain meaning for them and for other family members. Planning to pass on such items can be challenging, and may lead to family conflict. Often it is personal property that creates the greatest challenges for families when estates are divided. When estate planning, families may speak about real estate or other financial investments; but, they often forget to plan ahead or discuss personal possessions. Do you know what items have special meaning or value in your family and why? Do you know how to get started to communicate and plan ahead?

## What's unique about personal possessions and inheritance?

- The sentimental meaning attached to personal possessions can make decisions more emotional.
- Personal belongings will have different value and meaning to each family member.
- Objects help preserve memories, family history, and family rituals.

- Being fair is complex.
- It is difficult to measure the worth or value of personal property.
- It can be impossible to divide items equally.
- Distribution methods and consequences are not widely understood or known.

## Tips for Talking About Inheritance

Helping family members talk about issues that they normally do not want to address or sometimes even acknowledge is not always easy. The following suggestions are outlined to help individuals plan for the passing of personal possessions.

A conversation regarding personal property inheritance could be initiated by the parent or by the adult children.

- Looking for a natural opportunity to talk is helpful.
- The timing of the discussion is important. Making decisions about personal property immediately after a funeral may be too difficult given feelings of grief and loss.
- Remember that listening is the part of communication we too often forget. Ask "what if" questions. For example, "Dad, what would you want to have happen with the things in the house if you and Mom were no longer able to live here?"

- Recognize that family members will have different feelings and opinions. Conversations should focus on discovering where those involved agree and disagree.
- When any family member raises the issue of possessions, be willing to listen and talk.
- Issues of power and control do not disappear in inheritance decisions. Unresolved conflicts among parents, adult children, siblings, and others are often at the heart of what goes wrong with inheritance decisions
- Identifying items that have special meaning can help avoid inaccurate assumptions about who should get what. Not everyone will find the same items meaningful.
- Putting wishes in writing, typically in a separate listing mentioned in a will, reduces the dilemmas and decisions for estate executors and surviving family members.
- Geriatric Care Managers or other trained professionals are also available to help mediate these and other family concerns before they begin to cause greater conflict within the family unit.