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Family items biggest issue in settling estates

■ *Financial planner says people should ask heirs which things are important to them*

It's the small items, not the cash or other major assets that most often tear families apart in settling estates, say experienced professionals.

"It's usually not the money that's the problem," said financial planner John Williams. "It's the things that are the problem."

In more than a decade since he founded Williams Financial Group in Charleston, Williams has seen families divided over possessions as seemingly inconsequential as tools and sugar bowls.

They may be small in size, but they are big emotional memories.

"The only way to nail it down is to ask the kids what's important to them," he said. "It is not the easiest conversation in the world to have."

No kidding.

Evadna Bartlett
Daily Mail
columnist



He is author of a 2004 book on dealing with the emotional issues of inheritance, "How to Preserve Relationships and Transfer Possessions" (www.hendlin.net).

Children do not want to contemplate their parents' death or appear to be greedy, Hendlin wrote.

"I don't want to think about it," our daughter said, when we first broached the topic.

Our son hesitated, seeking to explain he wasn't craving any of our possessions.

But their reservations don't make the discussion any less important, Williams said. His degrees are in chemistry and finance, but he has steered his

Our first approach to our son and daughter was daunting, fitting perfectly the categories

mentioned by psychologist and columnist Steven Hendlin of California.

agency in developing relationships with clients that extend beyond the financial planning.

He offers some very common sense, practical suggestions for family dialogue on the sensitive topic.

"I think it's a face-to-face conversation," he said. "If you do it over the phone, you're not as connected."

And don't hit them with everything at once, he suggested.

"Take it in stages," Williams said. Remind them of earlier conversations about the location of wills, powers of attorney, funeral plans and similar papers and then move on to possessions.

And document plans in a will, codicil, or a written note with the will, he said.

A co-worker told me her grandparents marked furniture in an inconspicuous place with a felt marker to indicate the recipient.

Columnist Jane Glenn Hass wrote that her grandmother sent a round-robin type letter to each of her five children listing her prized possessions for them

to choose one at a time.

My parents, who already had given my family some of their heirlooms after my brother died, later sent me instructions in a letter for quilts they completed on the quilting frame my dad crafted.

"We would like you to keep the Grandmother's Flower Garden, and if they show any interest, give the full-side Dresden Plate and the twin Maple Leaf quilts to the girls."

The girls were my brother's daughters, but through the years I forgot about the letter. Fortunately, my nieces' mother remembered after my parents moved from their home and I still had the letter. The girls have their quilts.

But Williams said many times, divvying up possessions doesn't go smoothly.

"I've had so many experiences over the years when no one knew anything, even where to start," he said. "I've seen these things. I get passionate about it."

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