



# Family Violence and the Reluctance to Speak Up

*This MysteryQuest examines the factors leading to the abuse and death in 1920 of Aurore Gagnon, a ten-year-old girl living in a small community in Quebec. Students learn to find evidence in witness testimony to better understand the community's failure to protect this desperate child.*

*A critical thinking challenge to accompany*

***Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History***

***Aurore! The Mystery of the Martyred Child***

**<http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/01/indexen.html>**

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*based on an approach developed by The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC<sup>2</sup>)*

**[www.tc2.ca](http://www.tc2.ca)**

**WARNING:** *Child abuse can be a very emotional and disturbing topic and the case of Aurore Gagnon is one of the most terrible on record. Teachers, please read through these documents before giving them to your students. Encourage students, if they need to talk to someone, to consult you, their counsellor, parents, or some other trusted person.*

## **Ages**

16-18

## **Courses**

Canadian history, law, social studies, civics

## **Key topics**

- child abuse and the reluctance to intervene
- psychological causation

## Critical Challenges

- What factors best explain the failure of key individuals to intervene on Aurore's behalf?
- Create an interior monologue for a fictional character, explaining how he or she was able to overcome inhibitions against helping Aurore when others did not.

## Broad Understanding

- Students will learn to find evidence in textual sources to support a causal explanation of an historical and contemporary phenomenon.
- Students will learn about the factors that inhibited individuals living in a rural Quebec community in 1920 from speaking up against child abuse.

## Requisite Tools



### *Background knowledge*

- knowledge of the social and psychological conditions surrounding the Aurore incident
- knowledge of the factors that inhibit disclosure of child abuse



### *Criteria for judgment*

- criteria for use of historical evidence (e.g., relevant to the topic, plausible conclusions drawn)
- criteria for interior monologue (e.g., explains characters' motives and internal struggle; expresses characters' emotions)



### *Critical thinking vocabulary*



### *Thinking strategies*

- data charts



### *Habits of mind*

- empathy

## Independent Study

This lesson can be used as a self-directed activity by having students individually or in pairs work their way through the guided instructions and support material found on <http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/01/indexen.html>.

## Whole Class Activities

On the following pages are suggested modifications of the self-guided procedures found on the MysteryQuest website for use with a class of students. For convenience, each support material and set of directions found on the website is reproduced next to the relevant suggestions for whole class instruction.

## Suggested Activities

### Introduce the Aurore case

- Using *Introduction* as a guide, explain to students the incident and the challenge that is the focus of their investigation.

#### INTRODUCTION

It is said that it takes a village to raise a child. Families and communities usually raise children in loving environments, protecting them and making sacrifices to give the very best life possible. But what happens when something goes terribly wrong, and instead of being loved and protected by their family, a child is harmed? What is the responsibility of individuals and organizations outside the family to notice abuse and stop it? What does it take for someone to break the silence and speak up?

Aurore Gagnon was a ten-year-old girl who died of abuse on February 12, 1920. Her story shocked her community and “Aurore, the Child Martyr” has become a famous figure in Québec popular culture. She lived and died in the small community of Sainte-Philomène de Fortierville. Much of what we know of her life is based on the testimony of those who witnessed her abuse and did nothing to save her. How did this small community become so dangerous for this young girl? Why did no one intervene?

- Using *The Task* as a guide, outline the activities that students will undertake.
- You may want to download and display pictures of Aurore and other key characters.

#### THE TASK

In this MysteryQuest, you will investigate what kind of person might have saved Aurore's life when so many others did not. Your first step is to understand the facts of the case. You will begin by reading about the murder and the shock across the province as the details of the case became known during the trial of Aurore's father and stepmother. Next, you will consider present-day explanations of why child abuse within a family may not be reported. Armed with this background information, you will analyse the behaviour of five witnesses in the trials of Aurore's parents as you answer the question “Why didn't they help Aurore?” Your final task is to select a fictional character who might have overcome the factors that prevent people from speaking out. In the role of this character, you will imagine the inner thoughts as this individual decides to “do the right thing” for Aurore by reporting the abuse. You will present these thoughts as a first person “interior monologue.”

### Provide background on the incident

- Present to the class the information about the case found in *Step 1: Learn About the Incident*.

#### STEP 1: LEARN ABOUT THE INCIDENT

Aurore Gagnon was a young girl who died February 12, 1920, under suspicious circumstances. She was born on May 31, 1909, in Sainte-Philomène de Fortierville, in the county of Lotbinière, Québec. When she was eight years old her mother died. Her father, Téléphore Gagnon, a farmer and logger from Fortierville, immediately married Marie-Anne Houde, a widow with four children from a previous marriage. Aurore died two years later at the age of ten. The coroner's inquest revealed that she had died of blood poisoning and general exhaustion, the result of a great number of untreated wounds covering her body.

With the death of Aurore Gagnon, the community was in crisis. Fingers quickly pointed to the stepmother, who had made no secret of the violence she and her husband inflicted on the child. Both were quickly brought to trial. Her stepmother was convicted of first-degree murder after her defence of insanity was rejected. She was sentenced to death by hanging, but the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment because she was pregnant with twins. She died in prison a few years later. Although Téléphore Gagnon was clearly involved in the violence against his daughter, he was convicted of the lesser crime of manslaughter. After serving a short sentence, he returned to Sainte-Philomène where he spent the rest of his life.

Before you continue further with this MysteryQuest, read more about the details of the case:

##### *Background to the case*

Look at two newspaper articles from *La Presse*, published in April 1920, just before Marie-Anne Houde was sentenced.

##### *Cast of characters*

##### *Timeline of events*

- Duplicate and distribute to students, individually or in pairs, copies of one or both of the newspaper articles found in *Evidence in the Case*. Ask students to summarize orally the main events and issues in the document(s).
- You may want to share with students the Time Line of events, and introduce the key characters involved in the Aurore mystery at <http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/gagnon/contextes/biographies/indexen.html>.

#### EVIDENCE IN THE CASE

##### Background to the case – Newspaper Articles

“The Gagnon Case at the Quebec Assizes: A Neighbour Testifies that the Accused Allegedly told her ‘I Wish Little Aurore Would Die Without Anyone Knowing About It’”, *La Presse*, April 15, 1920

“Why did the Authorities Not Intervene Until After the Little Girl Died?”, *La Presse*, April 17, 1920

##### Testimony of witnesses

Sworn deposition of Oréus Mailhot, Justice of the Peace, February 17, 1920

Deposition of Odilon Auger at the Trial of Téléphore Gagnon for the murder of Aurore Gagnon, no date

Deposition of Emilien Hamel (Téléphore Gagnon’s nephew) at the trial of Téléphore Gagnon for the murder of Aurore Gagnon, April 24, 1920

Testimony of Marie-Jeanne Gagnon (Aurore’s sister) at the Inquest of Aurore Gagnon, February 13, 1920

Testimony of Marie-Jeanne Gagnon (Aurore’s sister) at the Trial of Marie-Anne Houde for the murder of Aurore Gagnon, April 15, 1920

La Presse, April 15, 1920, p. 1

#### THE GAGNON CASE AT THE QUEBEC ASSIZES

### A NEIGHBOUR TESTIFIES THAT THE ACCUSED ALLEGEDLY TOLD HER, “I WISH LITTLE AURORE WOULD DIE WITHOUT ANYONE KNOWING ABOUT IT”

The same witness, Madame Arcade Lemay, testified that she saw the little victim in her room one day and that the child “was in a pitiful state.”- To her niece, Mademoiselle Marguerite Leboeuf, who was visiting at the time, the accused woman said about Aurore, “I will show you how well she washes the dishes when I beat her.”

#### COURTROOM PACKED DESPITE PROCEEDINGS BEING HELD BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Madame Octave Hamel, the sister-in-law of the defendant, said that the accused woman told her one day, while speaking about the deceased little girl, “We have to spend another \$50 on that child? Let her die! I would never shed a tear!”

### Introduce the reluctance to intervene

- Brainstorm with students why people might not report child abuse. When they have come up with a number of reasons, review the 11 factors suggested in the briefing sheet *The Reluctance to Report Child Abuse*.

#### MysteryQuest 1

##### Support Materials 1 (Briefing Sheet)

#### The Reluctance to Report Child Abuse

Adapted from “How widespread is child abuse in Canada?” <http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/childafs.html#widespread>

It is difficult to obtain a complete picture of child abuse in Canada because it often remains hidden. Most provinces and territories legally require professionals and members of the public who suspect the maltreatment of a child to make a report to the appropriate authority. Yet many cases of child abuse remain undisclosed, either because a child does not or cannot tell anyone what has happened, or because others who know of or suspect abuse choose not to report it.

##### Reasons why an abused person may not report

A child may endure abuse for a long time before telling anyone what is happening. Some victims never tell anyone about their experiences. There are many reasons why a child who is or has been abused may not report it:

- **Threats:** Abusers may manipulate, bribe, coerce, or threaten children to prevent them from telling anyone about the abuse.
- **Inability:** Abused children may not be able to communicate what has happened because of their young age or other difficulties.
- **Fear of dismissal:** Abused individuals may fear they will not be believed.
- **Guilt:** Young children may be convinced that the abuse is their own fault and that they will be punished if the information gets out.
- **Personal loss:** Children may fear that they or the abuser will be removed from the home or suffer other consequences.
- **Shame:** Abused individuals may feel ashamed and want to keep the abuse (and related family problems) a secret to avoid being publicly embarrassed.
- **Power imbalance:** Children may be reluctant to inform on someone they depend on or who has power over them.

##### Reasons why others may not report

Many children have experienced abuse while living in special needs institutions, child welfare facilities, youth detention facilities, and residential schools for Aboriginal children. Often, in these cases, many adults and other children know of or suspect that abuse has occurred.

There are many reasons why these individuals may not report suspected abuse:

- **Avoid involvement:** They want to avoid getting involved in a difficult situation.
- **Condoned punishment:** They may believe that severe physical punishment of children is acceptable.
- **Not serious:** They believe the abuse is not that serious.
- **Make matters worse:** They may believe that reporting would not be in the child’s best interest—fearing it may cause more harm than it would solve.
- **Wouldn’t stop abuse:** They may believe reporting would not stop the abuse.
- **Personal safety:** They may fear for their own safety—that they may also be harmed by the abuser.
- **Family matter:** They may be reluctant to intervene in what they see to be the private affairs of a family.
- **Self doubt:** They may doubt their suspicions because they lack knowledge of the signs of abuse.
- **Ignorant of responsibility:** They do not realize they have a responsibility to report abuse.
- **Ignorant of procedure:** They may not know how to report suspected abuse.
- **Official indifference:** They may be reluctant to report abuse because the authorities may be unlikely to take the accusation seriously.

## Consider why no one intervened

- Using *Step 2: Decide Why No One Intervened* as a guide, explain to students that they are to use the 11 factors presented above to try to understand why various community members did not intervene in the Aurore case.
- Distribute a copy of the chart *Interpreting Individuals' Reluctance to Intervene*. Direct students to record evidence they will find in testimony by communities to explain their inaction.
- Using one of the newspapers articles as an example, model for students what they are to record in each column.

Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History  
**MysteryQuest 1**  
**AURORE!**  
 The mystery of the martyred child

MysteryQuest 1 Support Materials 2 (Activity Sheet)

**Interpreting Individuals' Reluctance to Intervene**

Documents	Statements or explanation from the documents	Factors behind the silence about the abuse
<i>La Presse</i> article, April 17, 1920	<i>Defended community against accusations that they ignored the abuse of Aurore by providing example of someone who did go to the authorities and was ignored.</i>	<b>Official indifference:</b> <i>Authorities did not take complaints seriously in the past.</i>

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 MysteryQuest 1 Home Website - Aurore! The Mystery of the Martyred Child

### STEP 2: DECIDE WHY NO ONE INTERVENED

Despite the fact that many individuals in the community seemed to have known about the mistreatment of Aurore, no one stopped it. As it turns out, the silence of the people in Sainte-Philomène is not unusual. Child abuse often goes unreported. Your next task is to learn more generally about the factors that typically contribute to people's reluctance to act against abuse. You will then look specifically at the evidence from the Aurore case to determine which of these factors contributed to the lack of action by people in the community.

Read the briefing sheet *The Reluctance to Report Child Abuse* to learn why victims, and even people who suspect violence in a family, may not report child abuse. Of particular interest are 11 factors that seem to explain why adults may be reluctant to intervene:

- Avoid involvement
- Condone punishment
- Not serious
- Make matters worse
- Wouldn't stop abuse
- Personal safety
- Family matter
- Self doubt
- Ignorant of responsibility
- Ignorant of procedure
- Official indifference

Read five testimonial documents, found in the *Evidence in the Case*, and present the testimony of individuals associated with the case that will help you understand why these individuals did not intervene to save Aurore. Use the chart *Interpreting Individuals' Reluctance to Intervene* to help you complete this task:

- in the first column, record the title and details of the document you are analyzing;
- in the second column, record information from each document that suggests why people did not intervene;
- and in the third column, decide which of the 11 factors seem to be operating and explain why you believe this is the main factor.

The sample answers in the first row, which illustrate how to complete this chart, refer to information from the newspaper report in *La Presse*, April 20, 1920, that you read earlier.

## Examine the primary documents

- Explain to students that they will work individually or in pairs to examine testimony from one or more witnesses to understand why they did not intervene.
- If you anticipate that students may have difficulty with this activity, select one of the shorter documents and demonstrate this analysis with the entire class.
- Using *Evidence in the Case* as a guide, introduce each of the five primary sources and distribute one or two documents to each pair of students.
- After students have completed their analysis of the documents, arrange for them to share their findings with the class.

## Introduce the possibility of intervention

- Using *Step 3: Imagine an Intervention* as a guide, invite students to consider the possibility that someone might have intervened to save Aurore. Discuss why such a person might be motivated to act while others did not.

### STEP 3: IMAGINE AN INTERVENTION

Although no one in the community did so, imagine that Aurore was saved because someone spoke up. Instead of being silenced by the factors that prevent people from intervening in child abuse, suppose that something was triggered in one individual that caused that person to do the right thing.

Select one of the fictional characters listed below or create a historical character of your own. Your task is to capture that person's inner thoughts as he or she overcomes at least three factors preventing others from acting on Aurore's behalf. You will write an interior monologue as though you are the individual thinking through your dilemma and eventually deciding to do something about the abuse. Suggested fictional characters include:

- *Humane Society representative* — Historically, the movements for the humane treatment of animals and the protection of children against child abuse emerged at the same time as a result of work by some of the same people. Imagine that the person investigating Aurore's case sees things that he or she does not ignore.
- *Visiting nurse* — In rural Canada, the system of visiting nurses was sometimes the only health care available. Imagine that one of these nurses, on a routine visit, sees what is happening and decides to speak up.
- *Neighbour* — In the Aurore case, a neighbour knew what was happening but did not speak out. Imagine a neighbour who did.
- *Priest* — Imagine that you are a priest who has been told about the parents' treatment of their daughter. How would you intervene?

- Using *Step 4: Prepare an Interior Monologue* as a guide, explain to students that their task is to create a first-person “interior monologue” explaining how a fictional character might overcome at least three of the factors that impede people's willingness to intervene in child abuse.
- Arrange for student volunteers to read or present dramatically their completed interior monologues to the rest of the class.

### STEP 4: PREPARE AN INTERIOR MONOLOGUE


An interior monologue is a written representation of a character's inner thoughts as though directly overheard. Once you have chosen your character, communicate the person's action or inaction and the reasoning behind it using the kind of evidence you have assembled on the chart. Imagine the character reliving his or her interaction with Aurore. What would the person think or say to her? Explain how your character was able to overcome at least three factors that inhibited others from acting. Prepare a 500-word monologue to explain your character's action, showing his or her inner motives, struggles, and emotional response. Your character should speak as though talking to himself or herself.

The following links discuss and offer samples of interior monologues:

- <http://www.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/intranet/englishbasics/DramaLanguage01.htm>
- <http://www.answers.com/topic/monologue>
- <http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/LTStreamConNar.html>

## Evaluation

- Use the rubric *Assessing Inferences Drawn from Evidence* to evaluate student completion of the chart. Use the rubric *Assessing the Internal Monologue* to assess students' accounts of their fictional character's thinking.




MysteryQuest 1 Evaluation Materials 1 (Rubric)

### Assessing Inferences Drawn from Evidence

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
<b>Identifies relevant and important evidence</b>	Identifies the most important and relevant statements in the documents.	Identifies the required number of relevant statements, including most of the important ones in the documents.	Identifies some relevant statements in the documents, but the important ones are omitted.	Identifies some relevant statements in the documents, but none of the important ones are included.	Identifies no relevant statements in the documents.
<b>Draws plausible inferences</b>	Draws highly plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides convincing reasons for the inferences.	Draws plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides good reasons for the inferences.	Draws generally plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides reasons for some of the inferences.	Draws some plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides little justification for the inferences.	Draws generally implausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides very little justification for the inferences.



MysteryQuest 1 Evaluation Materials 2 (Rubric)

### Assessing the Internal Monologue

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
<b>Rationale for character's action</b>	Sophisticated understanding of the character's role in the historical context; excellent discussion of overcoming various factors that prevented others' involvement.	Complex explanation of the character's role in the historical context; good discussion of overcoming two or more factors that prevented others' involvement.	Character's context is developed and used to show what other options were; open; some discussion of overcoming one factor that prevented others' involvement.	Limited attempt to explain the character using the historical context and events; very limited discussion of overcoming inhibitions that prevented others' involvement.	No discussion of the character's circumstances or motivation in overcoming inhibitions that prevented others' involvement.
<b>Personal tone and emotion</b>	Highly sophisticated and moving narrative that evokes clear and complex emotions as the character might have experienced them.	Very good use of narrative to develop the character's train of thought and the range of emotions experienced.	The narrative captures the character's train of thought and expresses emotions that the character could have experienced.	Redundant attempt to communicate the train of thought and to convey the emotional response through use of vague words such as "happy" or "sad".	No attempt to communicate the character's train of thought or emotional response. Voice of the character is not developed.
<b>Writing style</b>	Superb writing and delivery; style makes the project a pleasure to read or view.	Demonstrates a consistent and mature ability to integrate information in an interesting and informative narrative.	Grammar and style are okay. Errors are infrequent and vocabulary is appropriate for the character.	Errors are frequent, but style and vocabulary are mature.	No evidence of editing and proofreading. Numerous grammatical errors and spelling errors. Lack of clarity.

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## Extension

- Invite students to work individually or as a class to pursue the suggested activities listed in *Extension*.

### EXTENSION

#### *The main reasons for neglect*

Based on your analysis of the reasons why people in the community did not intervene to protect Aurore, determine the three most significant factors that explain their neglect. If you were to prevent further incidents of this kind, what policies would you recommend to overcome these three factors?

#### *Bias in the media*

Study a selection of the newspaper coverage of the two trials to decide whether or not the media was biased against the "wicked stepmother":

- Coverage of the trial of Marie-Anne Houde
- Coverage of the trial of Téléspore Gagnon

#### *Was she a victim, too?*

In the months following her trial, Marie-Anne Houde's sentence of death by hanging sparked calls to reduce her sentence. Examine the documents to explain the case against hanging this convicted child murderer:

- Coverage of the campaign to commute Marie-Anne Houde's death sentence