



UNIVERSITY OF
FLORIDA

IFAS EXTENSION

Family Relationships in an Aging Society¹

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Aging in the 21st Century

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by the year 2050 the nation's elderly population will more than double to 80 million, and the more frail, over-85 population will quadruple to 18 million.

Currently, Florida ranks first in the United States in the percent of the population that is full-time and seasonal residents over the age of 65. Older Floridians, their families and communities face a myriad of issues related to aging.

Aging in the 21st Century is an eight-topic program that addresses issues such as:

- health and medical care
- family relationships
- economic concerns
- caregiving
- home modifications
- retirement
- nutrition and diet

Institute on Aging core faculty from the Colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Health Professions, and Liberal Arts and Sciences joined Extension faculty from IFAS as educators for this series.

1. This document is FCS2210 FY625, one of a series of publications from the distance education in-service "Aging in the 21st Century," coordinated by Carolyn Wilken, PhD, MPH, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, UF/IFAS. First published: September 2003. Reviewed by Candice King, formerly coordinator of Research Programs, Institute on Aging. University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

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WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- **GENERATION VS. COHORT:**
Definitions and differences between these two terms
- **FAMILY STRUCTURES:** How the family structure is changing through the years
- **INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS:**
What the major types of intergenerational relations are and support for the elderly within the family.

INTRODUCTION

Many of the issues we will face in our aging society are new to us. Never in the history of America, or the world has the population distribution included more older adults than children.

This publication will discuss these issues and look at the roles of the family and intergenerational relationships supporting our aging society.

As baby boomers begin to retire the issues of older adults will become more pressing and will demand solutions.

For example: How will the smaller workforce cope with providing for a very large retired community? Who will be responsible for long-term care? What is the role of the family in caring for more than one generation of elders? How will modern families decide how to distribute and share resources with aging parents and step-parents?

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

Almost all of us will live our entire lives in the context of a family. It is our family that provides us with important resources we need to help us grow into independence as children, and remain independent as older adults.

Throughout our lives we exchange help and support within the family. Often that exchange is financial, other times it involves providing emotional and physical care.

For the elderly the family becomes more and more important as the need for support increases. Yet one must remember that the aging person and the family are all part of a larger society. Society impacts the resources and services available to older adults and their families.

Two terms, *generation* and *cohort* are frequently used when discussing aging. These terms help explain family and societal aspects of aging.

We use the term generation to better understand the impact of aging on the family.

Generation is a group of people at the same step in the line of the family.

In a family, children, parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents are different generations.



A four-generation family

People in the same generation have common roles, responsibilities and expectations. For example, those in the 'parent generation' are responsible for 'raising' their children. At the same time they may also be caring for their own parents and grandparents. They may also be working and have community responsibilities. Family members from different generations often have different ideas about life in the family and what it should be like.

When talking about society instead of the family, we use the term cohort.

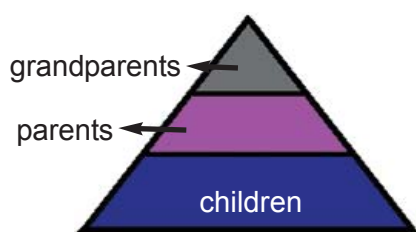
A **cohort** defines a group of people who were born during the same time in history.

Because they were born at the same time, people in the same cohort have traveled through time and history together. They have common experiences, and often common beliefs. The 'baby boomers', born between 1946 and 1964 are a cohort. They experienced the years of the "traditional family" (mom, dad and children), and the Viet Nam era. The cohort born in the early part of the 19th century shared two world wars as well as the Great Depression.

Having these common experiences molds a cohort's expectations of aging. Clashes between cohorts occur when people from different cohorts fail to recognize the differences in their lifelong experiences.

CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE FAMILY

In the 1900's it was very common for families to have many children. It was also common for the grandparents to die before their grandchildren reached adulthood. The family structure looked like a pyramid with a large number of children and parents and very few grandparents.



Family Structure 1900

Today, however, the family model is more like a lop-sided rectangle. There are a more generations alive at the same point in time. Families have fewer children, but more living grandparents and great-grandparents.

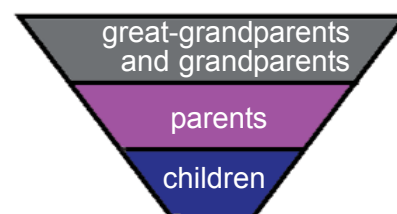


Family Structure 2000

By 2030 the boomers will be grandparents and great-grandparents making the top of the

pyramid quite broad; there will be fewer parents and children.

These changes are important for families and society. More members in the older generation may help families raise children. But, older members may require care and support. Policy makers must consider these changes as they plan for schools and health-care.



Family Structure 2030

INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS

We have all seen the ideal image of family that is often portrayed by the media. On television, family members rarely argue. And, when they do, the problems are solved before the program ends. In real life, family members often disagree. Sometimes they may decide to leave the family entirely.

Frequently, the disagreements are between people from different generations. Relationships between children and their parents or parents and grandparents, or children and their grandparents are called intergenerational relationships.

Generations interact differently in different families. Some are emotionally close, others are emotionally distant. Some families spend a great deal of time together while others rarely see one another.

Researchers look at three dimensions of intergenerational

interactions to better understand families: 1) *emotional closeness*, 2) *frequency of contact*, and 3) *social support*.

Using these three dimensions we see five types of intergenerational relations in families:

- **TIGHT-KNIT** families are emotionally close and have frequent contact with one another. If they live close together they see each other often. If they live farther apart, they remain close emotionally with frequent phone calls, letters and more recently, by e-mail. These families take care of one another across generations.

- **SOCIABLE** families are emotionally close across generations and have frequent contact with one another. They are less likely to provide care for one another.

- **INTIMATE** families describe themselves as emotionally close but

don't visit frequently and may live far away from one another. They rely on others to provide care for family members.

- **OBLIGATORY** families see one another frequently and provide support across generations. These families don't feel especially close emotionally but provide care and support if necessary.

- **DETACHED** families are not close emotionally, don't see one another often, and do not provide support or care for one another.

DID YOU KNOW?

1. Adult children are more likely to have a *tight-knit* relationship with their mothers than their fathers.

2. Adult children are also more likely to have a *detached* relationship with their fathers or divorced parents.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Older people often rely on family members for help. They may need help with the demands of everyday life, a chronic illness or during a crisis. Adult children have a strong sense of responsibility and commitment toward their aging parents. In some cases, adult children even provide assistance to aging parents who abused or neglected them as children. Many adult children provide caregiving in spite of the pressures of time, distance and competing responsibilities.

The help provided to older adults is called **social support**.

Family members provide four basic types of social support:

- **INSTRUMENTAL:** housework, transportation, shopping and personal care
- **EMOTIONAL:** confiding, comforting, reassuring, listening to problems
- **INFORMATIONAL:** advice in seeking medical treatment, referrals to agencies, sharing family news
- **FINANCIAL AND HOUSING:** help paying bills, sharing a home

There are two ways of understanding how older adults get help:

1. The *Principle of Substitution*, and
2. The *Task Specific Model*.

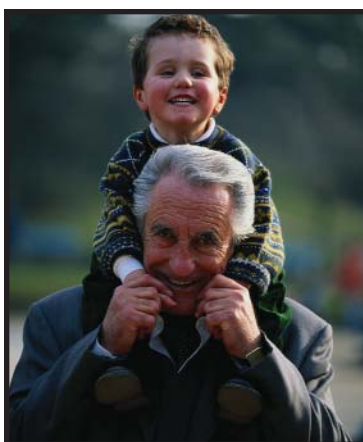
We know that families provide most of the help for frail and disabled elderly who live in the community. Family members and the elderly prefer it that way.

The ***Principle of Substitution*** describes the order in which older adults choose their care providers. Married older adults prefer to

receive help from their spouses. If a spouse is not available, or unable to help, they turn next to their children, and other relatives. Friends and neighbors help out by driving, picking up groceries and medicines and checking on the older person. Older adults turn to professionals as a last resort.

The ***Task Specific Model*** states that different tasks require the help of different people. For example, spouses and close family members provide the kind of help that requires a great deal of time and energy. They also perform personal tasks such as bathing. Friends and neighbors help with errands, provide transportation and offer leisure activities. Professionals are called only when the tasks of social support become too time consuming, too technical or too difficult.

If that time comes, institutionalization, such as a nursing home, becomes the only choice. That choice is only made when the people identified in the *Principle of Substitution* are no longer able to continue managing in-home care.



PUBLICATIONS IN THIS SERIES:

- ***The Future of Aging is Florida***
Jeffrey Dwyer, PhD
- ***Safe Return***
Meredeth Rowe, RN, PhD
- ***Financial Issues***
Jo Turner, PhD, CFP
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- ***Adapting the Home***
Pat Dasler, MA, OTR/L
- ***Family Relationships in an Aging Society***
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Aging in the 21st Century is co-sponsored by the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; and the College of Medicine's Institute on Aging. It is supported by a grant from the Associate Provost for Distance, Continuing and Executive Education, Dr. William Riffe.

