

Developing Intergenerational Relationships¹

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The make-up of our society is rapidly changing as the aging population increases at an unprecedented rate. Since 1900, the percent of Americans ages 65 and older has tripled. In the year 2000, there were 3.5 million people in Florida over the age of 60. This number is expected to nearly double by 2020.

When people are raised in different time periods, their values and perceptions of the world can be quite different, and this can lead to difficulties in understanding one another. Because of this gap in understanding between generations, it's important to find links between younger and older generations. This can be accomplished by helping children learn how to relate to older adults, and vice versa. Parents and caregivers can facilitate this process in many ways. For instance, they can create opportunities for children and older adults to spend time together in order to build a relationship. Research shows that what matters most is the quality of the visits between children and older adults.



Benefits of Intergenerational Relationships

According to Erik Erikson, one of the first psychologists to describe social development across the lifespan, the final stage of emotional development is experienced around the age of 60 and older. During this stage, people seek to find meaning in their lives and make sense of the lives they have lived. Developing connections with a younger generation can help older adults to feel a greater sense of fulfillment. In fact, linking older adults with youth can provide advantages for both groups. For example, such relationships can:

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- Provide an opportunity for both to learn new skills
- Give the child and the older adult a sense of purpose
- Help to alleviate fears children may have of the elderly
- Help children to understand and later accept their own aging
- Invigorate and energize older adults
- Help reduce the likelihood of depression in the elderly
- Reduce the isolation of older adults
- Fill a void for children who do not have grandparents available to them
- Help keep family stories and history alive

Barriers to Intergenerational Relationships

Social

In the recent past, extended families often lived within the same home or very close to each other; however, this does not occur as frequently today. Even though people live healthier, longer lives, they expect to be self-sufficient. The trend in recent decades is for older Americans to live alone. As a result of this desire for independence, either by nuclear families or older adults, only one in eight single elderly adults now lives with extended family. The paradox is that although children today are more likely to have healthy, active grandparents, they are also less likely to know their grandparents well or visit with them frequently. These patterns do vary by ethnic group. For example, African American and Hispanic families are more likely than Caucasian families to have multiple generations residing in the same home or close to one another.

Another social barrier is created by the messages that society provides regarding older adults. Many advertisements promote youth and seem to suggest that growing older is a negative thing: something to fear or feel bad about. At the same time, people are living longer than they ever have. The increasing number of older adults, along with societal messages that aging is bad, may lead to negative thoughts or feelings about older adults.

Developmental

According to Piaget, an important child development researcher, children's cognitive abilities are developed as they build, refine, select, and interpret information using their current understanding of the world. They modify that understanding based on their life experiences. Young children are very concrete in their thinking: what they see is what they know. This means that if children don't interact with older adults, they will have difficulty understanding them. Research shows that the earlier children are made familiar with older adults, the better their perceptions of them are. Children's negative perceptions about the elderly increase as they grow older, so developing positive relationships at an early age helps reduce negative perceptions.

Relating to older adults can be particularly challenging for adolescents. Adolescents tend to be focused on the present and think mainly about themselves, so they may be less interested in learning about older adults. Also, recent studies have shown that the brain is still developing through adolescence and into early adulthood. This means that the ability to make decisions and control impulsive thoughts and behaviors is not yet fully developed in adolescents. As a result, teens may display negative behavior that is hard for older adults to understand. Adolescents will need guidance and encouragement to help them relate to older adults and understand the implications of aging.



Facilitating Intergenerational Relationships

Here are some ways for parents to help children form rewarding intergenerational relationships:

Set reasonable goals for the relationship

Findings indicate that it's the nature of the contact that is the most important quality of the relationship. Personal relationships develop over time and cannot be hurried or forced. In the beginning, your children may not want to develop this new relationship. Be patient and model respect and admiration for the older individuals in your child's life.

Plan appropriate activities

Again, it's the quality of the time spent together that is most important. Frequent, one-on-one visits enable the two generations to bond more readily than occasional visits or group activities. Be aware of children's limitations (attention span, needs for food or sleep, etc.) as well as older adults' physical limitations, and try to find activities that are of interest to both generations in order to ensure a positive experience.

Activities that Initiate, Build and Strengthen Intergenerational Relationships

Few communities have programs that encourage and facilitate intergenerational relationships between children and older adults. However, parents can encourage

relationships between their children and older family members (or, if no older family members are available, older adults in the community). Here are some activities that could help nurture the relationship:

- ❖ *Storytelling.* Swapping stories is a great activity and can help build a connection.
- ❖ *Letter writing/pen pals.* If transportation presents a problem, writing letters is another great option. Everyone loves to get a letter in the mail! If there are no appropriate family members, your church or any number of local organizations may be able to provide you with potential pen pals. It is good to choose a pen pal who lives in the community. An introductory meeting is ideal, and correspondence can be supplemented with occasional visits. They can ask each other questions. For example: What can/could you buy with 10 cents, 25 cents, 50 cents when you were my age? What can you buy now?
- ❖ *Talking about "firsts."* What was your first bike ride like? Where was it? Did you fall? Did you ride with a friend? What did the bike look like? They could also talk about their first time swimming, the first school they attended, etc.
- ❖ *Playing board games* (if applicable)
- ❖ *Learning skills.* Many older adults have skills or talents that would be interesting for children. Perhaps your child could learn to weave, crochet, fish, bake, or even take care of animals.
- ❖ *Reading* to each other.



- ❖ *Planning/preparing a meal* (if applicable).
- ❖ *Scrapbooking.* Would an organization in your community that has older members like a scrapbook of their activities? You and your child could begin this project together with a member from the organization. Many children like to cut and paste and many people like to talk about their experiences.
- ❖ *Establishing phone pals.* This activity can connect older community members with children who are alone after school.
- ❖ *Talking about ethnic heritage.* Share ethnic customs, discuss the meaning of a name in native language, or relate special stories passed down about culture.
- ❖ *Planting seeds or gardening.* This illustrates the stages of the life cycle. A container garden can be created if bending or space are issues.
- ❖ Weather watching.
- ❖ Telling jokes.
- ❖ Discussing hobbies and sharing examples.

Recommended Resources and Reading for Parents

Teaching Your Kids to Care: How to Discover and Develop the Spirit of Charity in Your Children, by Deborah Spaide. (2002, Replica Books.) (Applies to middle-school aged children.)

The Influence of Grandparents and Stepgrandparents on Grandchildren:
<http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/yf/famsci/fs548w.htm>

PBS's American Family: Journey of Dreams:
<http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/index.html>

Generations United: <http://www.gu.org/>

Generations Together: <http://www.gt.pitt.edu/>

Activities for Children and Older Adults to Do Together

Conduct an interview:
<http://www.siu.edu/offices/iii/Publications/iold.html>

Make a greeting card:
<http://familycrafts.about.com/od/greetingcards/>

Make a worry stone:
<http://www.teachers.net/lessons/posts/790.html>

Make a family tree:
<http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/tree/>

Books for Young Children and Elementary-Aged Children

Song and Dance Man by Karen Ackerman (2003, Knopf)

Roots for Kids: A Genealogy Guide for Young People by Susan Provost Beller (2007, Genealogical Publishing Company)

I Have an Olive Tree by Eve Bunting (1999, Joanna Cotler)

Mr. Jordan in the Park by Laura J. Coats (1989, Simon & Schuster)

How Old is Old? by Ann Combs (1987, Price Stern Sloan)

Miss Rumphius by Barbara Cooney (1985, Puffin)

Coal Mine Peaches by Michelle Dionetti (1992, Orchard Books)

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Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge by Mem Fox (1995, Kane/Miller)

Gramma's Walk by Anna Grossnickle Hines (1993, Greenwillow Books)

Grandpa's Song by Tony Johnston (1996, Puffin)

The Sunsets of Miss Olivia Wiggins by Lester L. Laminack (1998, Peachtree Publishers)

Knots on a Counting Rope by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault (1997, Henry Holt)

Annie and the Old One by Miska Miles (1985, Little, Brown)

Love You Forever by Robert Munsch (2001, Red Fox Books)

The Old Woman Who Named Things by Cynthia Rylant (2000, Voyager Books)

The Grannyman by Judith Byron Schachner (2003, Puffin)

That's Exactly the Way it Wasn't by James Stevenson (1991, Greenwillow Books)

Kevin's Grandma by Barbara Williams (1991, Puffin)

Books for Ages 10-13

Rules of the Road by Joan Bauer (2005, Corgi Children's)

A Small Elderly Dragon by Beverly Keller and Nola Langner Malone (1984, William Morrow & Company)

The Old Man Mad About Drawing: A Tale of Hokusai by Francois Place and William Rodarmor (2004, David R. Godine)

Heidi by Johanna Spyri (1998, Children's Classics)

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