

# Making Connections: Children and Frail Elders

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Interactions between children and the frail elderly can benefit both generations. Children can gain an understanding of aging and develop meaningful relationships with older persons. Frail elders can enjoy the happiness and satisfaction of a relationship with a child.

Within families, visits between frail elders and children can be especially important. Such visits help children and frail loved ones stay connected. When a relative is very ill or dying, parents may feel uneasy allowing a child to visit. Although it's natural for a parent to want to protect a child from sadness, remaining connected with a frail relative can help the child learn about aging, loving, and caring.

## Positive visits

The most positive outcomes of visits between children and the frail elderly occur when children are interacting with and learning about both active and frail elders, and when children are prepared and supported. If children know *only* very frail elders, they are more likely to believe that all elderly people are frail. In fact, most elders live 20 or 30 years past retirement in relatively good health. Only 20% of older people need regular assistance, and only 5% live in long-term care facilities. Interactions with both frail and active elders can help children understand the great differences found among older people.

## Creating positive interactions

Teachers, youth group leaders, and parents can create positive visits between children and the frail elderly. Five steps are always important:

**1. Think about your attitudes about aging.** Before you arrange visits between children and frail elders, answer the following questions:

- What do you know about aging? Are you willing to learn more in order to

help children have a positive experience with the frail elders?

- What do you remember about past experiences with the frail elderly? Which experiences were positive or negative for you? What made these experiences positive or negative?

## 2. Know the purpose of the visit.

What do you want the children to gain from the visit? How will the interaction benefit both elder and child? Can both elder and child participate? Are you willing to prepare and support children? Will you address children's questions and concerns?

**3. Design visits that create interaction.** Well-designed visits can help children learn about the special needs and resources of individual elders. The best visits are built around *shared* experiences that both the older person and child can enjoy. The best interactions:

- Emphasize one-to-one or small group interaction
- Provide a shared experience such as petting a puppy, looking at photos, playing a game, celebrating an event, going for a walk, telling stories about the past, or other activities
- Recognize the frail elders' limitations, if any; short, frequent visits are often better than longer, but infrequent (or "one-shot") visits
- Allow the elder to say when he or she prefers to visit or to decline visits
- Finally, remember the importance of touch and music. It can be wonderful for a frail elder and a child to share a gentle hug, a handshake, or an arm around the shoulder. A singing voice or sharing a familiar song can bring pleasant memories.

**4. Prepare and support the children.** *Learn what the children believe.* Before the first visit, find out what the children believe about aging and the frail elderly. One way to do this is to

ask, "What ideas or words do you think of when I say 'old'?" "How does a grandpa look?" "What will you do every day when you are old?" Children may want to draw pictures or write stories about their experiences with older people. Children of all ages may want to share ideas about body changes, illness, or death. Discuss the children's ideas and talk about the diversity of the elderly.

*Describe the experience.* If the elderly person you'll be visiting is ill, children should be given a simple explanation of the illness. For school-age children and teens, the explanations may be more detailed. Reassure the children that they cannot "catch" diseases during visits. If the elder uses a wheelchair, walker, or hearing aid, explain and, if possible, demonstrate the uses of this equipment.

If the older person lives in a nursing home, describe the various sounds, smells, and sights that might be encountered. For example, you might say, "Try not to be frightened if you hear someone yell. A yell can be like a sneeze. Some old people can't help yelling just like sometimes you can't help sneezing." Or, "You may smell the chemicals used for cleaning." Children should be told that many of the people who live in the nursing home may not be feeling well, so it's important to be calm.

*Respond to children's concerns.* Encourage children to ask questions or talk about their feelings before and after a visit. Answer all questions as honestly and thoroughly as you can. After visits, encourage children to talk about their experiences.

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*Rehearse a visit.* Role playing a visit, especially a first visit, can help children understand some of the problems faced by frail older people. Role playing also can help children talk about their ideas and feelings about aging. Because role playing can be a powerful way to teach, it's important to remind children that most older people are not frail and that people who have limitations usually adapt to them.

Some older people experience partial or complete loss of vision, hearing, or other senses. It's helpful for children to understand these losses. Demonstrate these losses by having children eat or watch TV while blindfolded or while wearing glasses smeared with petroleum jelly. Tape recorders set on low volume can sound like hearing loss.

Discuss how to respond to these changes. For example, to improve communication with someone who has a hearing loss, children should speak clearly, face the person, repeat sentences patiently if needed, and avoid "slang" words. Other ideas for learning about sensory changes are found in "For more information" at the end of this page.

#### **5. Plan for special circumstances.**

Some situations require special attention. These include visits to relatives who are very ill or who live far away, visits to someone with dementia, or the death of an elderly friend or relative.

*Declining health.* Visits may be difficult when an elderly friend's or relative's health declines. Comments such as "Remember Grandpa as he was, not as he is" can confuse children. Children need to be prepared for what they might see. Explain the elder's physical and mental condition and use of any medical equipment. Remind the children that the elder person can be comforted by their visit, even if the person cannot respond.

*Long-distance relatives.* Connections between a child and a long-distance relative can be a challenge. Encourage the child and the elder to stay in touch by telephone or by mail between visits. Weekly or monthly postcards with one or two sentences or a small drawing may be all that is needed. If visits are possible, prepare the child for physical and mental changes that may have occurred.

*Dementia.* Major declines in memory and learning ability are *not* the result of

normal aging. Some persons, however, develop dementia, which causes brain damage and leads to serious declines in memory, attention, and judgment. Alzheimer's disease is the most common dementia. Dementia usually progresses from memory loss to the inability to care for oneself. Depending on the stage of the disease, persons with dementia may:

- Forget who people are
- Lose the ability to care for themselves
- Feel angry or depressed because of their losses
- Cry, laugh, stare, or withdraw without a clear reason
- Talk about people or events in their past as if they were happening now.

A caring environment is important to persons with dementia. Reassure children that they can comfort the elder even if the person doesn't seem to know them or confuses them with someone else. Remind children to introduce themselves at the beginning of every visit. Leaving notes with the elder can be a gentle reminder of visits. Several of the publications listed at the end of this fact sheet offer other ideas for improving visits to persons with dementia.

*Death of a relative or friend.* Death is a reality of life. Children cannot be protected from this reality but they can be supported in their grief. If a death is anticipated, talk about it before it occurs. You support children when you encourage them to share their feelings and memories and to ask questions; listen and respond to these. Remind them that it's normal to feel very sad when someone dies, and that happiness will come again.

A child may want to attend a funeral or to remember the person who has died in some other way. Launching balloons, drawing pictures of times they want to remember, attending religious ceremonies that are part of the *child's* tradition, or other activities can be important ways of saying goodbye. Children may suffer when a frail elder dies. Adults can help make the reality of death easier by offering support.

#### **Summary**

You can design positive visits between children and frail elderly if you:

- Know your attitudes

- Know the purpose of the visit
- Design visits to encourage interaction
- Prepare and support the children
- Consider special circumstances.

#### **For more information**

For information on intergenerational programs in Oregon and elsewhere, contact Oregon Generations Together, 12705 SE River Rd., #315B, Milwaukie, OR 97222.

*A Guide to Community.* Yvonne Merseureau and Mary Glover. A friendship program between young people and nursing home residents; a workbook and video series are available. Contact: Coordinator, Community Project, 4701 North 35th Way, Phoenix, AZ 85018, (602) 957-7007

*On Growing Older: Activities for Grades One through Six; and Talking With Children and Teens About Alzheimer's Disease: A Question and Answer Guidebook for Parents, Teachers and Caregivers.* Contact: Generations Together: An Intergenerational Studies Program, University of Pittsburgh, Center for Social and Urban Research, Pittsburgh, PA 15260.

#### **OSU Extension Publications**

*Helping Memory-Impaired Elders: A Guide for Caregivers*, PNW 314.  
*Sensory Changes in Later Life*, PNW 196.

*Understanding the Grief of Children*, PNW 391.

*What Do You Know About Aging? Facts and Fallacies*, PNW 453.

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