Promoting Intergenerational Relationships

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 feel a greater sense of fulfillment. In fact, linking older adults with youth can provide advantages for both groups. For example, such relationships can:

- 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 isolation and likelihood of depression in the elderly
Barriers to Intergenerational Relationships

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.

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.

Another 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.

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.
Activities that Initiate, Build, and Strengthen Intergenerational Relationships

Parents can encourage relationships between their children and older family members. Here are some activities that could help nurture the relationship:

- **Storytelling.** Swapping stories is a great activity and can help build a connection.
- **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.**
- **Scrapbooking.** Many children like to cut and paste and many older adults like to talk about their experiences.
- **Planting seeds or gardening.** This illustrates the stages of the life cycle. A container garden can be created if bending or space are issues.
- **Discussing hobbies and sharing examples.**

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. 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.

Source: [http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/fy/fy100700.pdf](http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/fy/fy100700.pdf)

Healthcare Decisions

In 2010, the Associated Press found less than 30 percent of Americans reported having an advance directive, yet according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a 2005 study found nearly 70 percent of Americans die in a hospital, nursing home or long-term-care facility, and only 25 percent die at home.

Concerns about care at the end of life are as unique as the individual receiving the care, but we commonly defer to loved ones and health care providers hoping beyond hope that they will instinctively know how to carry out our wishes. This shifting of onus can wreak havoc on survivors’ well-being, negatively impacting relationships and finances well beyond the loss of a loved one.

One way to navigate complex issues is by using The Five Wishes® materials. Inspired by the work of Mother Theresa, this document is written in everyday language. It promotes peace of mind, off-sets guesswork and guilt, and gets you the care you want and deserve.
The Five Wishes® program helps people express their final wishes in five important areas:

1. Who I designate to be my healthcare agent
2. Medical treatments I do or do not want
3. My expectations for comfort care
4. How I want people to treat me
5. What I want my loved ones to know

It meets the legal requirements for an advance directive in 42 states (including Florida) and the District of Columbia.

Even if patients have an advance directive, physicians or loved ones may not know about it. According to a 2007 study published in the Critical Care Journal, only 25 percent of physicians knew their patients had advance directives on file.

By considering advanced directives ahead of time, we begin to determine our own futures by normalizing discussions. For more information, read Final Wishes: End of Life Decisions:  [http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy874](http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy874). Another helpful resource has been developed by the National Institutes of Health:  [http://nihseniorhealth.gov/endoflife/preparingfortheendoflife/01.html](http://nihseniorhealth.gov/endoflife/preparingfortheendoflife/01.html) .

Not all health care providers are trained or comfortable talking about end of life issues. Request a palliative care consultation. Ask direct questions about your diagnosis, prognosis, and goals of care. Guilt, shame, conflict, unnecessary provisions, and costly treatments can be minimized or even avoided through better understanding and thoughtful planning with advanced directives.

After you have completed your Five Wishes®:

- Provide one to each of your health care providers and loved ones
- Discuss your wishes
- Keep it readily available in your home
- Carry your wallet card

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