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Intergenerational Relations¹

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Intergenerational relations result from interactions between people of two or more different generations. These may be parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren or great-grandchildren, or any older person and a younger person whether related or not. Relationships between people who are not in successive generations may be referred to as relations between skip generations.

The Influence of the Middle Generation

Relationships between skip generations are often controlled by the generation between. Parents, especially mothers, are able to influence the amount of interaction between the grandparents and the grandchildren. The quantity of interaction affects its quality. Relationships between grandparent and great-grandchildren are screened by two middle generations.

If parents are divorced, then the relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren is extremely dependent on the custodial parent. This intergenerational relationship is sometimes strong enough to withstand such strain. However, many grandchildren have lost the privilege of a close

relationship with grandparents because of the parent's divorce. Relatively recent legal action has assured many grandparents and grandchildren the opportunity to develop and maintain their relationship.

Intergenerational Relations Outside the Family Unit

Positive relationships have been established between older adults and children who are not related. These may be the result of informal acquaintanceships or programs designed specifically to encourage such interaction. Because these programs have had positive results, they are increasing in number. In those states where retirees migrate, intergenerational relations among nonrelatives fill needs for each generation. Adults help children develop self-esteem and values to make sound moral judgement. Children help older adults feel that the next generation is capable of carrying on responsibilities and traditions to their satisfaction. This helps the older adults feel that their generation has done a good job of rearing younger people. A feeling of serenity emerges from the care and concern for the next generation. This care and concern is called generativity and integrity.

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Benefits for Children

Older adults are often able to give an unconditional love that contributes to the development of children's self-esteem. Grandparents and other older adults are not required to be responsible for children in the same way that parents are. This freedom from responsibility allows them to accept children as they are.

Older adults may be less hurried, thus able to give children time and attention. Children of employed parents may especially benefit from interaction with an older person who can tell or read a story to them; play games with them; or just listen as the children relate daily activities.

Children can be helped to feel connected when older adults explain events that have gone on before. Sharing past experiences also helps children understand time frames better. Understanding the concept of time helps children feel more in control.

Benefits for Older Adults

Older adults, even with limited resources, are able to give love and time to young children. This has been found to be important in maintaining the morale of older people. Intergenerational relations expand the support network for the older adult.

Interaction with children allows the adult to feel comfortable knowing that another generation will carry on. This may be especially true for grandparents who can see their blood line continued through grandchildren.

Older adults may enjoy the accomplishments of children. These can provide the adult a focus or purpose for living and a positive outlook.

When Grandparents Are Far Away

It is important that parents recognize the important role that older adults can play in helping children develop. Even when grandparents are far away, children can be helped to develop a strong relationship with them through visits, letters, and telephone calls. Keeping pictures of grandparents where children see them every day and talking about

the grandparents can help children feel close to them.

Encourage grandparents to interact with their grandchildren. This requires a minimum of financial resources. Caring about grandchildren can be expressed through letters. Parents can foster this relationship by expressing appreciation to grandparents for their effort to stay close to their grandchildren, and by encouraging children to respond.

Another way that parents can help their children experience skip-generational relations is to adopt a grandparent who lives near the family, or involve children in an organization that provides for interaction between older adults and children. If no such organized activities are available in your community, parents may wish to initiate a program. This can be carried out through 4-H clubs, other organizations that serve children, churches, or schools. The organization of such a program will require the networking effort of a number of people who are willing to devote considerable time to it.

When the Grandchildren Are Many Miles Away

Some interactions seem to be one-way. Grandparents wanting pictures of grandchildren is a classic example. Yet mutually sending pictures may help develop a strong relationship between these generations. Pictures of grandpa in his workshop making a toy for the child will help the child learn that grandpa is well and active. Grandma's picture posted by the telephone will help the child know who is calling. Keep these pictures coming. And be sure that the exchange is reciprocal.

Writing letters is another excellent and inexpensive way to promote your relationship with your distant grandchild. Make them fun rather than a lesson in grammar. For the young child, try printing a simple letter with illustrative pictures that the child can understand. This helps the child know that you are able to relate with her. It helps reduce the distance between you. Make some letters a story about some event in your life. This helps the child learn about family history. A story about the day the

child's mother was born, or some other wonderful event in your life, helps to connect the child to you.

Send the child directions for making a simple item. Remember the parent's comfort and convenience when you do this. This will prompt the child to write to you to tell you how the item turned out. Ask the child to write his favorite story to you so that you can enjoy it too.

If your grandchildren are unable to visit often, then you can "adopt" neighborhood children as your grandchildren. Be sure that you discuss this with the parents of the children so that they can encourage this relationship. It will be easy to develop once the children know how good your ginger cookies are, or that you make the best lemonade in the neighborhood. You will not have to rely entirely on food as an enticement to draw the children. A story hour at your house once a week can be popular. Bubble blowing, finger painting or play dough will be equally attractive to young children. These activities can be conducted outside so that clean up is easy. School-age children may simply enjoy talking with you about what is happening in their life. They may want to learn how to make your ginger cookies or lemonade.

If there are no children in your neighborhood, then contact your school system, local clubs for children including 4-H Clubs, or your church or synagogue. There are many programs today being conducted to foster relationships between children of different ages and older persons. Organizations for older persons may also be sponsoring such programs.

Even if you think that you may not enjoy such activities, give it a try. Many older persons have found that once they try interacting with children, they find it so fulfilling that they enjoyed continuing this activity.

Why Develop Intergenerational Relations?

Though the motivation for initiating these relationships should not be selfish, we should recognize that older people do, at times, need some assistance from younger, more able-bodied people.

If you do not have relatives nearby, it is important that you establish friendships that you can rely on to help in case of need. Good relationships with relatives also makes asking them for help easier. Older adults can assist in the process of socializing children to function productively. Positive intergenerational relationships serve each party well.

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