

A Thank You to Maya, Teddy, Sophie, and Lyla
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Many of my readers are aware that my June article is my last column until September. As I express each June, I remain very appreciative of the feedback, questions, and insights received from my readers. My main goal in writing these articles continues to be to convey information and ideas that might serve as a catalyst for self-reflection and self-change.

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I recently spoke with all of the faculty and administrators in the Scarborough, Maine Public School District. This presentation held special meaning for me since two of my granddaughters, Maya and Sophie, have grown up in Scarborough and both are students at the high school. I had dinner with them the evening prior to my talk and joked that I would attempt to do a very good job so as not to taint their fine reputations with their teachers. Fortunately, my presentation was well-received by a truly warm and responsive group of educators, and my granddaughters informed me of the positive feedback they heard following my talk. Whew! Their reputations were not compromised.

Speaking in Maya and Sophie's school district reminded me of the numerous times I have presented in Needham, MA where both my sons were students and where I now have two grandkids in attendance, Teddy completing eighth grade and Lyla sixth grade. More so than with the grandkids, I think I was even more anxious when giving presentations for Needham school staff when my sons Rich (Maya and Sophie's dad) and Doug (Teddy and Lyla's dad) were students. All I could think about in those days was that these teachers to whom I am offering my expertise actually KNOW my sons! I wondered what do they think of them and, by association, my fathering capabilities.

I do recall that several teachers kept in regular touch with my wife Marilyn and me via academic "warning slips" during the time Rich viewed homework as optional rather than mandatory. With all of those warning slips in the past and seeing Rich's many post-high school accomplishments, I can now state with greater confidence that high school grades and homework completed are not the best predictors of success in life!

I am certain some of the school staff viewed a Father's Day television segment I did on a show that aired in the Boston area. My sons were invited by the producer to be on that show and eagerly accepted the chance to do so. At one point the host asked Doug, age 11, about me. With little hesitation on this "live" show, which meant that no comments could be edited, Doug replied, "Oh, what my father says on television and what he does at home are entirely two different things." Ouch!

I was flooded with these and other memories during the drive home from my presentation in Scarborough. I was amazed at how quickly my grandkids had grown (I felt the same way when I realized one day that my sons were men). It seemed like yesterday that I held each of my grandkids for the first time and now Maya will soon be 17 and is driving, Sophie will soon be 15, Teddy is 15, and Lyla is 12.

I realized how fortunate Marilyn and I have been to have the family nearby, Maya and Sophie a two-hour drive from Needham and Teddy and Lyla just a mile down the road from us. The close physical proximity has allowed us to attend a variety of their sporting, theatrical/talent shows, and other events. And, of course, it's been easier to arrange family get-togethers at holidays and other times. Our grandkids have provided much joy in our lives.

Children and Seniors Interacting

As I considered the intergenerational ties that transpired and continue to transpire in our family, the psychologist in me thought about specific research about and practices related to leading a resilient lifestyle—namely, the benefits that accrue to both seniors and children when they experience positive interactions with each other. Such interactions have the power to fortify a sense of purpose and meaning in the lives of seniors, while children benefit from having additional adults who can provide them with time and caring and from whom they can be exposed to new learning experiences.

Before expanding on these ideas, I want to emphasize that intergenerational relationships are not limited to family members. Even if one does not have children or grandchildren or if family members live across the world so that visits are limited, there are many other opportunities for seniors to engage children. This is not a new idea. I remember hearing many years ago of programs involving retirees who volunteered in

schools to read to elementary school children, with both groups being enriched by the experience.

Programs to support intergenerational connections have blossomed in various forms during the past several decades. My intention in writing this column is not only to call attention to these programs but to voice hope that they continue to flourish. In an article “What Happens When Old and Young Connect,” author Marc Freedman, CEO and president of Encore.org., highlighted the improvement in well-being when these groups interacted. The article, published by The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California—Berkeley, is based on Freedman’s book *How to Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting the Generations*.

Freedman has devoted his work “to find new ways to match the untapped resource of older adults with the unmet needs of our nation’s youth.” He added, “I’ve seen intergenerational connections help children learn to read, graduate from high school, and go on to accomplish their dreams. . . . But it’s only recently that I’ve come to realize some of the biggest benefits of bringing old and young together—the intergenerational relationships built are a route to success in early life and a key to happiness and well-being in our later years.”

Freedman cited studies that confirm that a fundamental underpinning for children to become resilient is the presence in their lives of at least one caring, supportive adult. Such an individual, whom the late psychologist Julius Segal labeled a “charismatic adult,” defined as an “adult from whom a child gathers strength,” can strengthen a young child in many ways and change the trajectory of that child’s life forever.

The advantages for senior citizens when engaged with young children were also addressed by Freedman. He referred to the Harvard Study of Adult Development, initiated in 1938, that tracked the lives of approximately 700 men at the college. Psychiatrist George Valliant who oversaw the study for more than 30 years highlighted the essential role that relationships played not only with partners and peers but those that span the generations.

Valliant noted, “Masters of Generativity tripled the chances that the decade of the 70s would be for these men and women a time of joy and not of despair.” Freedman wrote, “Generativity means investing in caring for and developing the next generation;

older adults who did so were three times as likely to be happy as those who did not.” Similarly, a study conducted by Johns Hopkins professor Michelle Carlson discovered that six months of tutoring students “improved brain and cognitive functioning” in senior citizens.

Clifton Parker, in an article posted in the *Stanford News*, described a report authored by Laura Carstensen and her colleagues that parallels the findings noted above. Carstensen, a Stanford University psychology professor and Director of the Stanford Center for Longevity, highlighted the gains to youth, especially those from seemingly vulnerable backgrounds, of having older mentors in their lives—mentors who reinforced skills necessary for success in life such as those pertaining to critical thinking, problem solving, and social interactions.

And what are the gains for seniors when working with children? Carstensen answered, “The aging population has distinctive qualities to meet the needs of youth. Older adults are exceptionally suited to meet these needs in part because they welcome meaningful, productive activity and engagement. They seek—and need—purpose in their lives.”

Programs to Promote Intergenerational Relations

Parker wrote that given their research findings, Carstensen and her colleagues advocated a national movement to “encourage intergenerational engagement between the young and old alike.” Freedman identified several innovative programs that currently exist or are being planned to facilitate this kind of engagement. A couple of common practices involve senior citizens volunteering in schools or young children visiting nursing homes.

On a more comprehensive level, Freedman described the impact of intergenerational housing. For example, “the Treehouse Foundation in Easthampton, Massachusetts, brings foster and adoptive families and older adults together in a supportive, intergenerational community of about 100 people.” As I read about this arrangement, I recalled that years ago an attendee at one of my presentations mentioned that in several countries in Europe it was not unusual to have nursing homes adjacent to nursery or elementary schools so that the two populations could more easily interact.

I wondered what projects are currently operating that nurture contact between young and old by having the populations in close proximity with each other. A Google search revealed several such programs. An article written by Beth Baker and posted on the nextavenue.org website described the Grace Living Center nursing home in Jenks, Oklahoma. Residents shared space with pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children from the local public school that had classrooms directly located in the nursing home.

The vision for this arrangement arose from Don Greiner, head of Grace Living Center. He thought the idea was important enough to allot \$200,000 to build two classrooms, a playground, and an ice cream parlor. The school pays \$1 annual rent and the primary expense is the salary of a liaison to the school. Scott Bushong, administrator of the nursing home, announced that the "intergenerational curriculum focuses on three areas that benefit young and old alike: lifelong learning, wellness and physical fitness, and the arts and humanities. Activities include joint exercise class, reading buddies, shared learning such as creating self-portraits and friendship bracelets, and dramatic play and singing."

The outcome of these intergenerational activities is noteworthy. The students at Grace Living Center were found to be at a higher reading level at third grade than a peer group in the traditional school. A woman who both teaches pre-K and is the mother of a kindergartner at Grace Living Center said she witnessed first-hand how attending such a program helped her children to be more empathic and compassionate towards people of all ages. A staff member working with residents suffering from dementia observed, "Something is hardwired in us, whenever those little kids are around, those with dementia flip a switch. They may not remember what they had for breakfast, but they are happy when they hear these babies. They are almost completely different people when the children are there."

In her article Baker also quoted Donna Butts, executive direction of the nonprofit Generations United. Butts cautioned that limited research has been undertaken on the long-term benefits of intergenerational programming in nursing homes, but added, "What we hear is that young people who have been around older adults have a tendency to be more patient and be more accepting of differences than people who have not been socialized around older adults."

Butts advanced the position that intergenerational programming for nursing home residents helps to decrease loneliness and isolation, while providing connections and a sense of purpose.

Susan Bosack helped to found the Legacy Project with the goal of promoting opportunities for intergenerational interactions. In an article posted on the group's website, she captured the impact of such interactions:

The richest forms of human development are most available to those willing to interweave their needs and potential with the needs and potential of others, especially those younger or older. The success of isolated intergenerational projects and programs across the country clearly demonstrates the significant benefits of intergenerational contact to both children and adults.

We often hear in this age of technology that people are more connected and yet less connected than ever before. As evidence of the weakening of connections, witness the number of cellphones being used by families at any restaurant or the number of hours spent by a child or an adult on the computer screen. Add to this kind of isolation the number of times families move from one city to another. Given these circumstances, intergenerational events experienced in families are likely to be limited. It is not surprising that loneliness at all ages is reported to be on the rise.

I support Carstensen's recommendation for a national movement, although I would suggest that we would be wise to subscribe first to the often quoted statement "think globally, act locally." We should educate ourselves about existing programs in our communities that promote intergenerational contact (perhaps sponsored by schools, places of worship, or different public and private organizations) and then to plan and initiate one or two realistically achievable new programs.

We are fortunate if supportive and caring intergenerational experiences are an integral feature of the fabric of our own family. Sadly, these experiences are absent in the lives of many, making it even more important to consider what steps we might take as a community to begin to create these opportunities. And let us remember that even if we do have the benefit of living in a family that is characterized by positive generational relationships, engaging in similar encounters outside the family serves as an additional source of emotional nourishment that enriches the lives of all of those involved.

I hope the next several months prove to be relaxing and satisfying for you and your families.

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