

The Benefits of Mingling Generations: Top 5 Things Kids Learn From Their Grandparents

When yesteryear's youngsters lived with grandma or grandpa in the house, they had many informal yet important opportunities for learning that are often missing today. Less people than ever before live close to their extended families, let alone in the same house or on the same block. Luckily we have more technologies than ever to stay in touch, but in our busy daily lives, building close ties to distant relatives, and grandparents in particular, can be challenging.

According to research, interaction with older adults plays a key role in children's maturation. "Relationships with caring, interested adults are a key factor in helping young people to grow up. Just one person who listens to a young person's opinions, concerns, and feelings without judging can create a lifeline to self-respect," according to Susan Perlstein and Jeff Bliss, in "Generating Community: Intergenerational Partnerships Through Expressive Arts."

Licensed clinical social worker Kristi Johnson specializes in working with older adults and is passionate about connecting youth with our elders. "Everyone's lives are enriched with stronger inter-generational bonds," says Johnson.

Here are the top five things kids learn from their grandparents or through meaningful exchanges with other senior adults. Children who have a connection to elders:

1. **Develop greater empathy.** Helping kids to develop a bond with their grandparents or other elder adults can be one of the best ways to ensure that they grow a sense of understanding and compassion that adults need to maneuver healthily through life. This helps them have more trust and tolerance for those different from themselves.
2. **Grow up being more respectful.** Research has shown that kids who have a relationship with an older adult grow up holding appropriate esteem for others and have a higher regard for their elders. Keeping kids connected to the elders in their life will help them care for not just their grandparents but help them recognize other elders that may be in need. For instance, going over to visit an elderly neighbor or helping them with their yard work.
3. **Develop greater manners.** Research on intergenerational programs found that kids engaged with an elder had better manners than their peers who didn't have an elder connection. Today as concerns mount about how the growing use of technology has lessened face-to-face interactions and created more incivility, one of the best lessons on being polite is learned around older adults, who not only model it, they often demand it. Grandma can ask for those "magic words" of please and thank you with a twinkle in her eye, and is often met with less resistance than a parent.
4. **Are more comfortable with the aging cycle.** Kids who have first-hand experience around elders show less fear of some of the trappings that can come with the aging process, such as wheelchairs, canes, oxygen, etc. Kids in intergenerational programs showed less fear of seeing an elder with oxygen tubing, walkers and other assistive devices. In fact, kids could see right past it. Exposing kids to elders or grandparents (and certainly not all have a need for assistive devices) helps kids look beyond a person's disease or disability and appreciate who the person is, vital for interacting with people of all abilities throughout life.

5. **Know they are part of something bigger.** By including children in the telling of the family stories, or hearing about what life was like when grandparents were younger, children feel connected through time if not by geography. Parents often think the children will be bored by senior's stories yet these same fidgety kids are often the ones who end up most entranced. Don't make it difficult or time consuming; just try to facilitate some of these discussions occasionally. Kids grow and feel connected to their larger story when they hear and know about past generations.

What's a Busy Parent to Do?

If you do live far apart, don't let all this add guilt to your days, but simply use the information as inspiration to look for opportunities for your children to be around elder adults or try to make time to foster your child's grandparent connection.

“Whether it is through travel, discussion, or other activities, shared experiences are gratifying for both grandchild and grandparent. These experiences also help lay the groundwork for strengthening family, a benefit to be enjoyed by future generations,” according to Matthew Kaplan, PhD, in “The Changing face of grandparenthood: Ideas for Intergenerational Living article series Article 10.”

Three Steps to Connect Over Distances

What is a busy parent to do to help their kids stay connected to their grandparents who live distant from them? Try these three ideas, for starters.

- 1) Have your kids send a piece of their artwork or their school work to their grandparents.
 - Be sure to have them add a paragraph about why they did that project, what they are learning, if they enjoyed it or not.
 - If they are in preschool, send a picture they have drawn, but stop and ask your child a few questions about it and write the answers in quotes on the art, to give a sense of your child's personality to go with it.
- 2) Ask grandparents to write a short story from their past that would be meaningful, funny or even surprising for their grandchildren to know about these older adults and mail it to your kids. If you like, suggest they focus on stories from when they were near in age to your children.
 - What did a five-year-old do in their times?
 - What was their favorite activity at school?
 - What did they do for play?Include a self-addressed and stamped envelope, if that would help.
- 3) Don't let grandparent's letters go unanswered! This is the best way to encourage more communication. Even if you wait some time, do have your kids write back. Suggest they write even just a paragraph about
 - one of their friends
 - a recent sports activity or school accomplishment
 - a funny family moment

These letters are also a great opportunity for kids to practice the parts of a letter (salutation, closing, etc-- remember those?) and even the basics of how to address an envelope.

Taking more opportunities to connect between generations provides everyone with a bountiful sense of belonging and understanding, that fuels compassion on all sides of the age spectrum.

RESOURCE BOX: Generations In Touch offers a unique gift opportunity through its Mail Club Connecting Kids and Grandparents, featuring Sammy the Mail Snail. The subscription comes with a fun and educational packet of mail for kids and a pre-addressed and stamped envelope to write a letter to their grandparents. More information at www.generationsintouch.com.