

# Elders in Early Childhood Programs

## A Reality, an Opportunity

by John Surr

I am an old man who lives for my opportunities to spend time with young children. They energize my life and give me hope for the future, especially when my body, mind, or general outlook might send me a different message. This article is intended to encourage closer connections between child care programs and elder adults.

### Tradition

Elders caring for young children is an ancient, essential tradition, going back to humanity's earliest days as hunters and gatherers. Small, wandering groups found that young mothers and fathers were more adept than elders in hunting and gathering, but that the older people could keep the fires burning and take

care of the young (Hrdy, 2004). As the tribe's survival was helped by child care and extra hands finding food, an evolutionary niche existed for human elders. In contrast, studies of our chimpanzee relatives, whose elders do not take care of baby chimps, show that those elders usually die soon after menopause (Didier et al, 2016).

### Mutual Benefits from Care

When our own children or grandchildren grow or move away, we elders often miss them and wish we had more regular contact with young children. We especially miss the children's lessons to us on how to play, without any focus other than mutual delight and understanding.

Generally, when elders care for young children it benefits the physical and mental health of both (Musil and Ahmad 2002, Pulgaron et al, 2016; Kaplan and Larkin 2004). In *Exchange's* "Gardening with Grandpa" (2016), Francis Wardle illustrated how interaction between elders and young children can generate significant bene-

fits for both. For many years, Docia Zavitkovski often shared meaningful stories about happy intergenerational relationships as a column in *Exchange*. Larkin and Newman (2001) also wrote of the benefits of intergenerational staffing in preschools.

Generally, children can help adults of all ages remember how to play and refresh themselves in focusing on maximizing the immediate moment, without having a focus on the outcome.

**Larkin and Kaplan (2010, 90) found that:** *Intergenerational relationships benefit not only the individuals involved, but also the society that nurtures these emotional connections. When a culture passes along values and traditions and keeps them intact from one era to the next, social identity is protected through the passage of time ... Social interventions that recognize the value of our interdependence engender coherence and strength within our respective communities.*



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In that play the children make a positive connection to the adult as a whole person and partner, not just a commanding presence. Both children (Yogman, AAP 2018), and adults (Klugman 2018) grow through play in social skills, empathy, creativity and executive function, and reduce the toxic effects of stress.

Children benefit from what Hrdy (2004) calls “alloparenting” by a non-parent, which can be better for the child than parental care if the parents do not match the child’s needs. An elder can give a child the kind of caregiving that the child needs from birth onwards to be able to thrive.

## Elders in Child Care

Retired elders, especially those with pensions, are often not as pressed as younger adults to seek full-time jobs and may be willing, even eager, to get involved in a child care program. They may enjoy volunteering in a caregiving role, as many grandparents and other older relatives do with children related to them (Barhyte 2018). Others might appreciate additional income from part-time or substitute staff work in a child care, preschool, or a Head Start center. Connections to these centers can come from families or friends.

A teacher or director of a child care center can encourage children’s grandparents or other older relatives or friends to come to the center to read to/with the children, share their special interests or skills, or share stories of their adventures with the children. This is but a small extension of the parental involvement that many centers encourage. In addition, such ad hoc events can grow into longer lasting relationships of mutual benefit, bringing in the elders’ caregiving as well as other skills, such as accounting.

Some former parents or grandparents become licensed family child care providers, caring for other people’s children for pay in their own homes. The family child care license provides these elders access to an array of practical supports unavailable to unpaid caregivers, such as child care subsidies, free or subsidized training, mentoring, networking, and so on.

## Intergenerational Programs

Many local governments have agencies helping elders and other agencies facilitating high quality child care. When these bureaucratic silos can be overcome, wonderful connections can be made. National organizations such as Generations United work on building synergistic connections between the



Photo by Clara Barton Children's Center

### How Elders Might Differ from Younger Staff

Everline and Schmitz (1989) concluded that elders often serve as good role models to staff and the children in their care, through a good work ethic, a willingness to pitch in wherever needed and strong values.

**Kaplan and Larkin (2004, 157-158) observed that:** *Whereas younger staff members more readily assume professional responsibilities for curriculum development and classroom management (i.e., guiding children’s behavior), senior adults tend to exhibit more natural, familial-type behaviors and relate to children in less formal ways. Even when lacking formal training in early childhood education, senior adults, drawing on insights derived from their own experiences raising their children and grandchildren, frequently demonstrate a great capacity to be effective, nurturing caregivers and educators. Yet, for them to be fully integrated members of the child care team, there needs to be some sort of a structured planning and staff training process.*

**Larkin and Kaplan (2010, 90) also noted that:** *Children who wanted a special relationship with the older volunteer were rewarded with caring attention and those who did not seek out the volunteers were not jealous. The emotional connections emerged whenever an adult struck a responsive chord with a child, and vice versa. The professional staff supported the evolving relationships and gave the elders some insights about the educational goals for the children, including socioemotional growth.*

old and the young. Some private sector senior groups and child care organizations have been known to collaborate to bring the generations together. Examples of intergenerational child care programs include:

- Co-located child care centers and continuing care communities or nursing homes (Jansen, 2016) <https://www.gu.org/explore-our-topics/intergenerational-programs-spaces/>
- The AARP Foundation's Experience Corps, <https://www.aarp.org/experience-corps/>
- Children's Disaster Services, <http://www.brethren.org/cds/>, a nonsecular ministry of the Church of the Brethren, providing child care at FEMA and Red Cross disaster sites, using mostly senior volunteers.

## Age-Related Limits

As elders lose their ability to get down on the floor and back up again, or to pick up items from the floor, they may need to be shifted to activities such as reading and supervising table play. Occasionally, an elder may begin to lose eyesight, hearing, or memory, or may have frequent medical appointments (Seuss, 1986), reducing their usefulness in the classroom. A recent *Exchange* article by Linda Crisalli (2018) noted that center directors can adapt their communications and management practices to older child care staff, who may be less computer-literate but more responsible and reliable than younger staff.

## Training and Educating Elders

Elders interested in child care may be willing to take early childhood development and curriculum courses, or engage in other activities that help them meet requirements for child care profes-

sionals, in order to develop the quality of their care. Some localities have programs to give this training to elders, through community colleges or resource and referral agencies. Some elders may need training in child care basics, such as:

- positive discipline techniques;
- placing infants and toddlers on their backs to sleep; and
- updated hygiene regulations (Source: Zero to Three, 2017).

Caregiving by elders for young children, including those in child care, can yield strong and lasting mutual benefits, including many for a child care center where the children spend their days. Careful attempts to encourage these relationships at any scale can be worth the effort for the program, for the children, for the elders, and for the community.

## Resources

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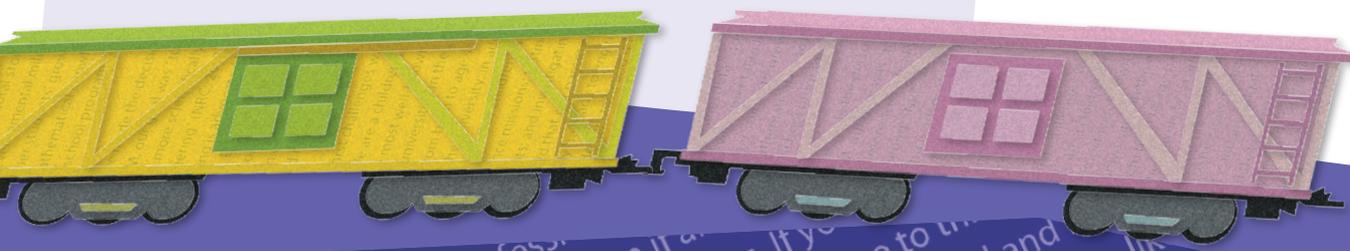
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I want to share this quote by Alex Haley, which I read long ago in an Exchange Every Day. "Nobody can do for little children what grandparents do. Grandparents sort of sprinkle stardust over the lives of little children." I remember that quote very prominently and it is one of my favourite quotes.

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Professional relationships. If you build and more like go.