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PREVIEW

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**The effect of an intergenerational program on children's attitudes  
and the well being of nursing home residents**

**Adam, Justine E., Psy.D.**

**Pace University, 1992**

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300 N. Zeeb Rd.  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

PREVIEW

**The Effect of an Intergenerational Program on  
Children's Attitudes and the Well Being of Nursing  
Home Residents**

by

Justine Adam

A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology  
in the Department of Psychology at Pace University

New York

1992



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PSY.D. PROJECT  
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## Abstract

The present investigation measured children's attitudes toward the elderly. Some fifth and sixth graders from a Long Island school district made visits during the school year to a neighboring nursing home. Children's attitudes toward residents were measured using the semantic differential scale of the CATE (Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly). The study also examined whether there was an effect on well being of nursing home residents. Well being was considered to be a function of level of depression, life satisfaction and self concept.

Results showed no significant differences in well being of the nursing home residents as an effect of the children's visits. However, upon interview, residents stated that they enjoyed the visits and commented that seeing the children reminded them of their own youth. The children's attitudes were affected. Those children who visited the nursing home had significantly more positive attitudes toward the elderly than children who made no visits. These results suggest that contact with the elderly can break stereotypes and inculcate positive attitudes toward aging and the elderly.

## CHAPTER 1

### The Effect of an Intergenerational Program on Children's Attitudes and the Well Being of Nursing Home Residents

Since everyone will eventually grow old, one area that is of concern is the attitudes held by society toward the elderly. Early researchers found that the attitudes held by society toward the elderly were similar to those they held toward other minority groups (Barron, 1953). Eisdorfer and Altrocchi (1961) conducted a study in which undergraduate students completed a semantic differential scale regarding their attitudes toward "Average Man", "Average Woman", "Old Man", "Old Woman". They found that young people's attitudes were more negative toward the elderly than toward average persons.

College students have not been the only age group to view the elderly negatively. Over the last forty years research has shown that both young and old are prejudiced against the elderly (Click & Powell, 1976; Rosencranz, McNevin, 1969; Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper & Serlock, 1977; Tuckman & Lorge, 1953). These studies indicate that a negative attitude toward growing older is prevalent in our culture as well as a fear of aging.

This is called ageism (Butler, 1975 as referenced in Murphey, Myers, & Drennan, 1982).

Generally, old age is perceived as being a time characterized by isolation and social withdrawal, by passivity as well as psychological and physical problems (Nardi, 1973). Stereotyping older persons creates negative views of both the elderly and the aging process. The elderly are stereotyped as unproductive, grouchy, tired, forgetful, mentally slower and isolated (McTavish, 1971).

Ideas such as these are passed on to our youth and perpetuated by literature, humor and the media (Pratt, 1984). The media focuses on the young, staying young and being youthful, while the elderly of society are ignored or appear in advertisements for laxatives, and dentures (Sartore, 1976). By the time children graduate from high-school it is estimated that they have spent 22,000 hours in front of the television set (Moody, 1980). This suggests that the media plays a role in perpetuating stereotypes and negative attitudes toward the elderly. In fact, young people who completed self report measures evidenced similar stereotypes to those which appeared in the media (Fillmer, 1984).

Judith Burke (1982) conducted an investigation which examined how children viewed the elderly. The 102 students in her study were from schools in a Midwestern

city. Their ages ranged from four to seven. The children were interviewed and participated in a photo discrimination task to determine their ability to differentiate older people from younger ones. The children in this investigation were asked questions such as: Who's sad, lonely?, Who's Happy?, Who's busy?, Who would you like for a teacher?, etc. The answers selected by the children indicated that younger adults were perceived as knowledgeable, busy, happy and desirable as teachers. Older adults were seen as having a lot of free time, lonely and less happy. Seldom did the children prefer older adults as someone they would like for a teacher.

Forty-four percent of the children viewed old people as being involved with passive activities such as watching TV, sitting, or waiting for visits. The children were interviewed regarding their grandparents, and most of them reported that their grandparents were "nice" people who would share activities and provide them with treats. However, when the children were asked to consider adults they did not know the elderly were viewed as passive and as having few positive attributes. They were seen as lonely, getting little mail, having few visitors and as less happy than young people. According to Burke, the way in which the children viewed the elderly mirrored a Harris polls of adults in which

61% of adults under age 65 saw loneliness as a "very serious" problem for the elderly. This was in sharp contrast to how those over 65 viewed loneliness. Only 12% of people in the over 65 age group agreed that loneliness was a serious problem for the elderly. When a group views itself differently from the way others view them a stereotype exists. The data collected by Burke indicates that children begin to take on the stereotypical views of society at an early age.

#### Our Aging Society

The issue of ageism and the negative stereotypes that are associated with the elderly become of central importance when considered in view of the lower birth rate in the United States. Since there are fewer babies being born than in previous generations the ratio of young persons to older persons will decline (Murphey et al., 1982). Due to the lower birth rate and the advances in medical technology there will be more elderly in our society than ever before.

The average age of the population in the United States has been rising steadily over the years. In 1900 the average life expectancy was 47 years and has risen steadily to an average of 74 years; with millions of people living into their 80's and beyond (Pratt, 1984). It is expected that by the year 2000 12 percent of the population may be over 64 years of age (Serlock,



Seefeldt, Jantz & Galper, 1977), and that by the year 2030 the elderly will comprise 21 percent of the population (Feinson & Thoits, 1986).

At the present time, there are 1.5 million elderly living in nursing homes. This number is expected to double in the next 30 years (Rovner, German, Brant, Clark, Burton, & Folstein, 1991). Statistics indicate that almost half of the Americans who reach their 65th birthday will live in a nursing home. For most people, the thought of entering a nursing home is terrifying (Kane & Kane, 1991). Often those who reside in nursing homes have no family who can care for their needs, or they are in need of specialized medical care which the family is unable to provide.

In our society people seem to be increasingly segregated by age (Liebman, 1984). The extended family, where several generations of a family lived in the same household or community, is no longer the norm. The extended family has been replaced by small nuclear families, usually consisting of two parents and their children. In many cases grandparents live out of state, or reside in nursing homes, limiting the amount of exposure that young children have to the elderly. Divorces and separations between parents often result in severed ties between children, parents and grandparents. Segregation between old and young has also been caused

by the decrease in the number of family owned farms and the movement of younger people into the suburbs, leaving a disproportionate number of elders in both rural and urban areas. Specialized services like senior citizens groups and retirement communities further segregate old and young (Pratt, 1984). It has been suggested that the result of this segregation is the loss of meaningful roles for the elderly within the family (Mitchell, Wilson, Revicki & Parker, 1985). As our society continues to age and the number of persons confined to nursing homes increases, it is important to ascertain how positive attitudes regarding aging, the elderly, and nursing homes and their residents can be developed.

#### Children's Perceptions of the Elderly

Attitude research has shown that the attitudes that children develop early in life are relatively enduring and exert a powerful influence on their actions in later life (Mussen, Conger & Kagan, 1969). This was also concluded by Thomas and Yamamoto, "It follows that the perceptions children hold of age may have a strong influence upon their own adult roles" (1975, p. 117).

As previously mentioned, attitudes predispose people to act in either a positive or negative way toward people and/or situations (Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper & Serlock, 1977). The way in which a particular generation perceives itself and perceives another

generation governs how older and younger generations will function and interact together (Britton & Britton, 1969). For this reason, it is important to understand children's attitudes toward nursing home residents and the elderly in order to encourage the development of positive attitudes toward these groups. Through the inculcation of positive attitudes toward the elderly, children can be taught to be socially responsible and caring toward older persons. In addition, research conducted by Sheehan (1978) indicated that children who interact more frequently with the elderly are better able to identify characteristics associated with old age.

Serlock, Seefeldt, Jantz and Galper (1977) interviewed a sample of 189 children regarding their feelings about growing older. Subjects consisted of 20 at each age level between three years of and eleven years. The research findings indicated that children at all age levels had limited knowledge of old people and less than half of the children were able to name an older person outside their family unit. Eighty-nine percent of all the respondents in the study viewed aging negatively. They did not want to get old. They believed if they got old, life would hold few pleasures for them and that death would soon follow.