

# Connecting Generations

Encouraging grandparents and other elders  
to share their values and experiences

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PHOTOGRAPH BY LENA JACKSON

Whether elders are grandparents, neighbors, aunts, or uncles, they have much to offer to children. Most cultures in the world honor elders and their ability to pass on values and a sense of historical connection. It is the human-to-human interaction and storytelling that create a sense of belonging from generation to generation and develop a continuity of values.

Early childhood education programs can take an active role in connecting generations and by doing so, affirm the gifts that elders can bring into young children's lives. Some programs create special activities such as "Special Person's Day" or "Grandparent's Day" when elders come for a short visit.

In our work as part of the NonViolence in the Lives of Children Project, we found that building relationships is the foundational piece in passing on our values and creating genuine community. It is our vision that elders are included as an essential part of the child-family-program triad:

■ In parent meetings or parent letters, we can remind families how elders can be special people in children's lives.

■ We can invite elders into our programs for more than just 'short' visits.

■ In order to help the elders feel comfortable attending our programs, we can offer assurance that their presence is valued.

■ We can provide guidance to elders for interacting with young children in our

program during a welcoming orientation, as well as by providing a guidance handout created to meet our program's needs.

## Listening Respectfully to Children

We might ask elders if they have childhood memories of someone with whom



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Gus Gold holds a Master's degree in Organizational Management. He was an Equal Employment Opportunity and Diversity trainer for NASA, and in younger years a certified Temple School teacher, camp counselor, and after-school program leader. He is currently a

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they loved to share ideas and thoughts, someone they knew was interested in what they had to say. We could let them know how they can be that special person to the children in their lives.

We can share the concept that a fundamental aspect of relationship-building is learning how to listen and encourage children to be open and share with us. Listening to a child builds trust, and within these trusting relationships we have opportunities to experience the joy of seeing the world through the eyes of a child. The following story is an example of that kind of trusting relationship.

One Thanksgiving while adults were catching up, Grandpa Jake followed four-year-old Elisa into the bedroom and observed her playing with a doily that she had taken off a chair. She was talking about 'the prince.' Grandpa Jake put the doily on his head and became 'the prince.' "Tell me about this prince," he said. She started to tell him a whole fantasy story about this prince. As she talked, Grandpa Jake acted out the part. He was totally available to her. He was not afraid to be silly and soon they were both laughing. He learned a lot about his granddaughter that day and she learned that she could be herself, trust him not to take over the play . . . and he was fun.

As educators, we can describe for elders how to spend quality time in our programs. For example, one of the ways we become skillful listeners is to ask open-ended questions. These are questions that don't have a right answer, require more than a one-word response, and encourage children to think. Examples are "What do you think?", "I wonder . . .," "What's your idea?", "Tell me about . . ."

We can share with our senior visitors that opportunities for listening are likely

to happen when children are engaged in some kind of activity such as riding in the car, side-by-side walking, playing, or working together on a project. We have heard stories of a shy grandchild talking non-stop while sitting in the backseat of a car, and another grandchild sharing his new experience with a school-age crush while working on a building project with his grandpa.

For example, Mordecai visits his grandparents every Monday and Wednesday. One day while playing with his trains (which was a daily routine), Grandma asked, "Tell me about your trains." That was all the three year old needed to invent a lengthy story about each train, what it was carrying, where it was going, and how one of the trains was stronger than the others and was helping to push the weaker train up the hill. Grandma learned so much about how her grandson saw the world and that he had begun to internalize the values that his family was teaching him. She was able to reinforce the values of helping, using your strength for good, and sharing that he expressed in the story he had created.



*Mordecai tells his grandpa "Swinging really high is very fun and a little scary."*

## Sharing Experiences and Values

We can ask elders what childhood memories they have of an elder imparting values to them. We could ask if these values are still significant in their lives. Are these values ones that they want to pass along to the younger generation?

Susan grew up hearing stories of how her father and uncle ran Davis Brothers Grocery Store in the summers to earn the money to go to college. The many lessons learned were often told while sharing the values of hard work, taking initiative, solving problems, and developing confidence.

regarding food and then remind the children about gun safety.

Inviting visitors into our program creates challenges that may surprise us. The teacher's role is to create an environment in which everyone feels safe. The children can learn that different people bring different experiences to them. The elders can find opportunities to share their lives with others. The teachers have the responsibility to create the safe container for both young and elder to develop relationships.

## Telling Personal Stories

An important point we can make with elders is that one of the most powerful

ways we can share our values is through personal storytelling. The story might relate to something that is, or could be happening in the child's life. It needs to be a story that is presented simply enough for the child to hear the message and be able to imagine it.

A grandmother volunteers in the classroom, offering to help the children bake muffins. This kind of activity models the values of a good deed — kindness, consideration, effort, and respect for others. In the midst of this cooking activity, the grandmother might share that she used to make cookies with her children to take to a housebound neighbor, and now her neighbor's children are mommies and daddies.

A teacher could document the elder's visit and invite the children to dictate a story, perhaps including an illustration. The children would then have a personal keepsake that they can go back to as a memory of a special time with a special and trusted adult. Or, teachers could prepare a documentation panel illustrating the elder's visit and cooking activity to share with the entire program.

## Reading Children's Literature

Reading books is an important way to enrich children's learning experience, as well as reinforce values. Classics likely to be familiar to elders, such as the book *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* (Virginia Lee Burton, 1939), can lead to conversations that reinforce several values such as loyalty (Mike Mulligan's loyalty to his steam shovel), newer is not always better, and being useful (the transformation of the steam shovel into a heating source for the building and Mike's

new job as the superintendent). The values presented in another classic, *The Story of Ferdinand* (Munro Leaf, 1936) include being gentle, being true to yourself, and standing up for yourself.

In closing, the NonViolence in the Lives of Children Project is built on values that elders might want to share with the children in their lives and in your program. Foremost is peace. Peace within and peace among people. We also treasure values such as respect for differences and caring for yourself, others, and the world. Please check out our website, [www.nvpchildren.org](http://www.nvpchildren.org) to find a list of children's books that support these values.

NonViolence in the Lives of Children Project is in the process of changing its name to "Educators for Peaceful Classrooms and Communities."

