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The Benefits of Intergenerational RELATIONSHIPS

by Betsy Storm

"The simplest toy, one which even the youngest child can operate, is called a grandparent." —Humorist Sam Levenson

The love affair between grandchildren and grandparents burns brightly in the hearts, minds and spirits of most every Nana, Pop-Pop, Gramps, Granny, Zayde, Bubba, Glammy and Pops. In truth, this particular combo may reign as the pinnacle of intergenerational relationships.

And while the grandchild-grandparent twosome is the most talked about and naturally occurring intergenerational relationship, there are many other ways for seniors to enhance their lives by spending time with those who are young in chronological years. (More on that later.) There's even a publication devoted to the topic, *The Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*.

The grandmother of 14, Family Practice Physician Deborah S. Clements, MD, Northwestern Medicine, said there are many reasons why grandkids and their grandparents are natural magnets. "Once people are 65 or older, most have accomplished what they want to accomplish, whereas their adult children are in high-productivity mode, working hard to keep the lights on. Grandparents, however, are asking themselves, 'What difference can I make in the world *now*? What legacy will I leave?' The period of life they're in is a perfect match for little ones, who often wonder, 'What is *my* place in the world?'"

Clements, who practices out of Grayslake and Lake Forest Hospital, adds that the younger and older generations often share mutual and complimentary characteristics—a natural result of being part of the same family. There's frequently a set of shared beliefs and interests.

And the icing on the cake? The grandparent-grandchild relationship, she says, usually is one of the least conflicted. As the old joke goes, "Spending time with the grandkids is the best. You all have fun, you get to spoil them, and then you send them home to their parents."

Therapist Tamara Newell, LCSW, works with many seniors at Northfield's Josselyn Center, a provider of counseling and mental health services. The boons to seniors resulting from spending quality time with the younger set are obvious: "Kids and young people offer lots of stimulation to the brains of older people. Children are often lively and happy. They have new ideas. And because kids are quick in just about every way, older adults have to pay a lot of attention when they're with them. It's a great diversion for the older brain."

Plus, because grandparents are often fortunate to have free time to share, they're able to just relax with the kids. They're not usually responsible for driving them around or making sure homework is complete. Instead, said Newell, they can simply ask the kids how they'd like to spend their special time together—be it a snuggling session while reading on the couch or a trip to the park.

Finnegan Brown, age 8, of Barrington, concurs with therapist Newell. "I especially like to go on outings with my grandparents. One set of grandparents lives in Florida, and my grandmother, Lulu, is a great gardener. She teaches me a lot about plants. My Chicago 'Nanny' shows me the classic city stuff, like taking me to the Field Museum. She's helped me learn how to read."

Even though he's only eight years old, Finn said he understands that "Grandparents are special. They're not just my friends; they're my family." The second grader shares his knowledge, too. "When I was five, I taught my Lulu how to play video games. She liked it."

Older individuals who may not have grandkids or other young people in their lives on a regular basis can seek out these fulfilling interactions, often with the help of community-based programs and offerings. For example, the powerful force of music has been adopted as a bridge builder for intergenerational connections. The abstract of a paper published in *The Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* (December 2017) stated: "The benefits of learning through intergenerational singing extend well beyond the vibrancy of lifelong learning and improved singing, and include the mutual, reciprocal, and valued friendships between the younger and older participants that develop during such programs."

Kathryn Augustine, a freshman at Medill School of Journalism at Evanston's Northwestern University, spent last summer as an activities assistant at a senior living facility in Weyland, MA. "Part of the reason I wanted to work with seniors is that I was very close to my grandparents while growing up." Augustine shared fond memories of her grandparents attending her school and athletic activities. As part of her summer job, Augustine helped a male resident, a widower, create a set of digital postcards of his wife's paintings.

"I really enjoyed hearing his stories about his wife and their life together," she explained, adding that the relationship was reciprocal. "I taught him something about technology while I learned about his past. Older adults are great about sharing advice, life lessons and stories."

Top 10 Benefits of Forging Intergenerational Relationships

1. Provides both younger people and older adults a sense of purpose.
2. Assists kids and younger adults in developing an understanding of—and later—an acceptance of their own aging.
3. Rejuvenates older adults.
4. Offers an opportunity for both young and old to learn new skills.
5. Prevents the isolation that often plagues older adults.
6. Sharing family stories further strengthens bonds and advances a sense of identity and family connection by keeping that history alive.
7. Aids in cognitive stimulation and enlarges social circles.
8. Enhances the mental health of older adults.
9. Boosts the morale of older adults, as they usually look forward to time shared with kids and younger adults.
10. Increases seniors' feelings of self-worth by allowing them to contribute to someone else's growth and a sense of well-being while participating in positive and reciprocal relationships.

