

Your future is in the past - benefits of intergenerational relationships

By Rita Hitching, B.Sc M.Sc.

School holidays are well underway by now, what have you been up to? Traveling to see friends and family? Maybe your grandparents? Like every teenager you are probably more focused on your peers than anyone else, but if you look at your extended 'friend circle' closely you'll find some hidden gems. Are you lucky enough to have grandparents, step-grandparents, foster-grandparents or other loving adults in your life? If so, you probably love to spend time with them. Older loving adults offer unconditional love and warmth that generates a special bond between the two generations. Research is showing the brain benefits of 'intergenerational relationships'. What, my grandparents are affecting my brain?! It might seem unexpected, but let me explain the benefits of loving bonds across generations. Spoiler alert - it's good for everyone.

Your teenage brain is glorious - if you didn't know that already. Neuroscience has shown that the brain goes through critical periods of growth and development - while in the womb, the first year of life, and the early years, right into adulthood. What scientists have more recently discovered is that the brain undergoes a 'secret mission' of change during the period between the ages of 12 to 19 years that is truly unique.

Multi-generations a New Phenomenon

The existence of a multigenerational society is very new. What I mean is that grandparents and other loving older adults is a recent development in human evolution. According to paleontologists, humans seldom lived past the age of about 30 years. That's not long enough to be grandparents, when you consider an average reproductive age of 15 years. Yes, early humans had children as early as their mid-teens. Research has shown that the increase in lifespan leading to the existence of grandparents only occurred about 10,000 years ago, and coincided with our development of complex societies, communication and language. It seems like the ability of elders to share knowledge, experience, and to support younger generations has been key to our human development. The "Grandmother Hypothesis," as it is known, suggests that the presence of grandparents leads to increases in social and economic resources for their children, increasing the chances of their grandchildren's survival (e.g. what foods are poisonous or how to build a roof).

Research has shown that teenagers that have a relationship with a grandparent or an older caring adult demonstrate greater empathy and willingness to help others, have higher self-esteem and are more positive in their outlook. Hanging out with the 'oldies' makes you happier, leads to greater academic success, ability to manage emotions, learn a new skill, and to make better decisions. Your grandparents can teach you about your heritage, and how your ancestors persevered in times of hardship. I bet they also have a funny story or two about your mom or dad.

Impart Knowledge & Wisdom

Older adults have a lifetime of experience at problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork, organization and planning - skills that you can learn from them, paving the way for you to become a successful adult. Loving older adults in your circle can help you develop your talents, knowledge, passions, can provide guidance on relationships, and conflict management when it arises. Basically, the 'oldies' have "been there done that". Grandparents and older adults have a greater sense of perspective and focus on what matters. If you are anxious or worried about a school assignments or exams, they can be a great source of stress reduction and someone to talk to.

If your grandparents are not around, or live in another state, consider making friends with an older neighbor or volunteering in an organization that focuses

on helping older adults (e.g volunteer at the local senior center) and find out for yourself the joy and unique skills that older loving adults can give you.

Benefits for All

If you have a grandparent that has spare time, consider telling them about the Foster Grandparent Program - a nationwide program where caring older adults can support and mentor young people, or perhaps ask them to consider a local non-profit such as Mentor Tutor Connection based in Los Altos. Let your grandparents know that intergenerational relationships are good for the immune system, enhances their social intelligence, and gives them a sense of purpose. Older adults that interact with teenagers are fitter and more active. In addition they remain physically and mentally younger (e.g. less Alzheimer's disease and dementia). Research has shown that older adults that interact with youngsters are less isolated and lonely and they live longer. As I said at the beginning, intergenerational relationships are a win-win.

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