



AGESHARE

CENTER FOR UNDERSTANDING AGING

WHY TEACH ABOUT AGING?

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Children learn about aging whether we teach them or not. The issue is not whether they learn, but rather what they learn about the lifelong process of growing up and growing older. If left to happenstance, children learn about aging in the same ways they learn about so many things—simply by absorbing whatever they hear or see, often without being able to distinguish between fact and fiction. We might call this learning by osmosis. All too often, what children learn about aging is based on myths about the aging process and on stereotypes of older people that are deeply entrenched in our culture. These myths and stereotypes are transmitted from one generation to another in our language, humor and literature, and through all the media by which we perpetuate the knowledge, values and attitudes of our society.

Not everything that children learn about aging is negative. As with adults from whom they learn, children's attitudes about aging are complex and ambivalent. Yet research shows that, even at a very early age, children may already have internalized ideas that can serve as a breeding ground for ageism (age prejudice) and gerontophobia (fear of aging).

Similarly, not everything young children learn about the process of aging is false. Yet, again, research demonstrates that what children know about the process of growing up and growing older is a mixture of truth and misinformation. Like many adults from whom they learn, their perspectives on life in the later years (and of their own future as people who will someday grow old) is often dominated by a view of aging as a process of decline, rather than one of growth and fulfillment. A child's view of what it means to grow old frequently emphasizes physical and mental handicaps, loneliness and isolation, institutionalization,



and dependency. What is missing is the vision of life at all ages as characterized by wellness of body and mind, involvement with others, and independent lives connected to the community at large. In other words, children fully understand the problems that often accompany old age. What they do not understand is the great potential for happiness and wellness throughout long life in a society that provides opportunities for them in later years to remain active participants in the mainstream of life.

Children today are expected to live longer than any previous generation and, barring unforeseen circumstances, to live out their lives in a progressively aging society. Since the beginning of the century, average life expectancy at birth has steadily climbed from 47 to 75 years, which means that half the children born in the 1980s should live to their mid-70s, even if no new breakthroughs in medical technology and health care develop to extend their lives further.

When today's elementary school children become tomorrow's older adults, they will be among those one out four Americans who already have passed their 60th birthday. This longevity revolution of the 20th century brings vast implications for all aspects of life. Greater longevity and changes in the age composition of the population have had, and will continue to have, an enormous impact on the family, careers and retirement, education, medicine, business, government and the

Why Teach about Aging, continued

distribution of public resources. All living Americans, and especially the young, will live out the rest of their lives facing new challenges on the age-related issues that will require intelligent decisions based on knowledge and comprehension, not on myth and misinformation.

For all these reasons, children need to learn about aging. It is better to prevent than to cure, easier to learn than to un-learn. Children should begin at the earliest possible age to develop a healthy and realistic view of aging, to understand

that they can maximize their own opportunities for quality of life, and to develop understanding of the complex issues of living in an aging world. None of us, and least of all young people, can afford to face our individual or collective future(s) guided by ageist myths and stereotypes or by patterns of age discrimination and gerontophobic behavior. If preparation for the future was ever a goal of education, then education about aging should clearly be a high priority for all who play a role in educating and socializing the young.

Goals for Aging Education

The rationale set forth above logically suggests three major areas of focus for aging education: attitudes about aging, the aging process, and issues of an aging society. Below are a set of suggested goals for each of these areas of focus. The goals are stated as concepts which can serve as guides for planning curriculum and developing learning activities which will achieve the purpose of preparing people for long life in an aging society.

Attitudes

- Perceive long life as an opportunity for continuous growth and development, not simply as a late life process of decline.
- Recognize the unique individuality of all people as they grow and mature.
- Appreciate the roles that older people can and do play as human resources in service to others.
- Understand ageism and the harmful consequences of age prejudice and discrimination.
- Recognize that the quality of life for people of all ages depends largely on choices made by the individual and the society.

The Aging Process

- Comprehend aging as a continuous life-long process of growing up and becoming older.
- Become conscious of one's own potential for long life.
- Understand the aging process as a complex interaction of genetic, life style and environmental factors.
- Recognize that personal choices about mental and physical health habits affect the quality and length of life.
- Recognize that the way people age involves a complex interplay of physical, psychological and social factors.
- Appreciate that each individual grows old in a different way.
- Understand the relativity of the terms "young" and "old."

Issues of an Aging Society

- Understand that advances in nutrition, medicine and health care have made it possible for most people to live long lives.
- Be aware that growing longevity is increasing the number and percentage of older people in the population.
- Recognize that an aging population creates changing economic and social circumstances which demand intelligent and informal decisions by individuals and society.
- Be aware that growing longevity presents opportunities as well as problems, depending on how the challenges are perceived and met.
- Appreciate that both individuals and society can alter their behavior and policies in ways that improve the quality of life for all generations.
- Understand that positive intergenerational relationships are needed to meet the demands that growing longevity places on the family and society.



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Creating a better environment for people growing up and growing old.