The Effects of Preschoolers’ Visits to a Nursing Home

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Each day across the nation, large numbers of preschool children are taken to visit nursing homes for infirm elders on the assumption that both groups will benefit. Intergenerational contact may indeed be sensible because preschool children in this country appear to have limited contact with elders and seem to hold negative attitudes toward the elderly and their own aging (Bekker & Taylor, 1966; Caspi, 1984). Children from the ages of 3 to 11 state that old people are unhappy, passive, and unable to enjoy life (Seefeldt et al., 1977).

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of visits to infirm elders in a nursing home setting on preschool children’s attitudes toward the elderly. First: Do preschoolers’ visits to infirm elders in a nursing home setting promote positive or negative attitudes toward the elderly and their own aging? Second: How do the visits affect the adults involved, the elderly in the nursing home?

Although the number of intergenerational programs involving preschoolers and elders in a nursing home proliferates, there is limited evidence to indicate that these programs are beneficial in fostering children’s positive attitudes toward elders or in promoting intergenerational contact (Struntz & Reville, 1985). There is the strong belief, however, that contact between preschoolers and the old in a nursing home setting is beneficial to all. Despite the lack of statistical evidence, many believe that such visits can serve to restore the caring connections between generations that are thought lacking in American culture (C.E.S.A.E., 1984; J.O.Y., 1984; Liebman, 1984; Pollack, 1985; Pratt, 1984). Testimonials, anecdotal data, and narrative descriptions are given to support these beliefs.

The results of studies have indicated that contact between young and old is beneficial for both groups. Sheehan (1981) found that preschoolers with the greatest contact with an older person within the family unit were more accurately able to perform age discrimination tasks. Contact between 26 school age children and elders was found by Cartensen (1980) to result in more positive attitudes toward the elderly. Spedula (1973) reported children in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades held more positive attitudes toward the elderly than did those children without contact. Suggested by other data is that intergenerational contacts are ineffective in promoting children’s positive attitudes toward the elderly. Baggett (1981) found that a group of children from kindergarten through the third grade responded more negatively to an attitude measure following experiences with elders than children without this experience. Following participation in the program “Off the Rocker,” children rated elders as less active than did children without the experience (Baggett, 1981). Immorlica (1980) also concluded that the greater the intergenerational interactions between elder volunteers and 120 elementary school children, the more unfavorable were children’s attitudes toward the elderly. Contact with elders was associated with mixed results by others. Seefeldt and Jantz (1977) concluded that children from kindergarten through the sixth grade were less likely to stereotype elders than did children without contact. Olejnik and LaRue (1981) found that middle school children, following eating lunch with elders over a period of 2 months, were more positive in rating the physical and security aspects of aging, yet were less likely to want to be with elders following the contact.

Benefit to the elderly from contact with children is supported by others. Elders have reported that they enjoy the company of children (Seefeldt et al., 1977).
that visits of children to nursing homes do, in fact, contact with children. Whitely et al. (1976) suggested through the state and both were church-related. curriculum. Both met the same criteria for licensing four- and five-year-olds. The samples drawn were stated that children would make good friends for old people and are fun to be with. "It's better than any medicine" is the way one elderly woman described contact with children. Whitely et al. (1976) suggested that visits of children to nursing homes do, in fact, benefit the elderly.

Nevertheless, that preschoolers' visits to infirm elders who are confined to nursing homes lead to positive outcomes for both old and young has not been fully documented. When no interaction takes place between the young and the old, does either group benefit from contact? Or does children's contact with this unrepresentative sample of the elderly population serve to confirm their preconceptions and attitudes towards old age as a time of illness, passivity, and something to be avoided?

Method

A two-group randomized participants' posttest-only design was selected to examine the effects on preschoolers of visiting infirm elders in a nursing home setting. Given the elders' infirmities and inability to respond in any way, the effects of the preschoolers' visits on the elders were determined through the use of structured interviews with the staff of the nursing home and the child care center.

Samples

Two large-child care centers were identified for the study. Both centers were located within the greater Washington, DC metropolitan area and each cared for approximately 150 children between the ages of two and five. The child care programs were similar in staffing patterns, qualifications of staff, and curriculum. Both met the same criteria for licensing through the state and both were church-related. One center (NH Center I) was located within walking distance of a nursing home for infirm elders. This center has an established program of visiting the NH Center I sample and eight in the Center II sample. From each of the two child care centers, NH Center I and Center II, 30 four- and five-year-old children were randomly selected from the total population of four- and five-year-olds. The samples drawn were similar in a number of ways. The NH Center I sample consisted of 14 four-year-olds, 16 five-year-olds, and 15 males and 15 females. The sample of Center II consisted of 16 four-year-olds, 15 five-year-olds, and 19 males and 11 females. There were seven blacks in the NH Center I sample and eight in the Center II sample.

After the samples were drawn, the amount of contact with elders outside of the day care center experience was determined. There were no differences in amount of reported contact with elders between the groups: 23 of 30 children in the NH Center I group reported contact with elders within the family and 27 of 32 children from Center II. Only four children in each group reported knowledge of elders, or contact with an elder not in the family unit.

The adults who were interviewed to determine the effects of the visits on the infirm elders included the director of the NH Center I, three staff members from NH Center I, and the director and six staff members of the nursing home.

The Program

The director of NH Center I had arranged for the children and staff to visit the nursing home every Tuesday morning. Following the morning child-care activities, four- and five-year-old children and staff prepared to visit the home. No child, nor staff member, is required to visit; however, all four- and five-year-old children do participate in the visits. Children and staff walk two blocks to the nursing home. On the way, the staff and children sing songs, make up chants, or stop to observe and talk about things of interest. Once in the nursing home, the children are taken to a large recreation room where the elders are placed. The elders sit around the perimeter of the room and the children are taken to the center and seated.

The majority of the elders are infirm and immobilized in some way in wheel chairs. They are in need of total care. A few of the more mobile elders may be present and are seated at tables or around the room. They too, however, are ill and in need of continual care. The total number of elders varies during each visit. The nursing home staff administers to the physical, medical, and emotional needs of the elders as the children are present.

Once seated, the child care director leads the children in singing songs as she plays the guitar. Children suggest songs they wish to sing and sometimes the director initiates a song. The director attempts to involve elders by asking them to join in singing and acting out familiar folk songs. After a few songs, the children share something they brought to the home, or tell about something of interest to them. They might show a favorite toy, tell about a trip they took with their family, or relate some event that was of importance to them. Occasionally the director would read a short poem, story or finger play to the children, again inviting the elders to join in by reciting a refrain or following the actions of a finger play.

The nursing home staff and child-care staff members joined in the activities. One or two of the elders smiled or laughed as the children sang songs and told their stories, but even this type of reaction was rare. After about 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the interest and attention span of the children, the group leaves and returns to the child care center and prepares for lunch.

Instrumentation

Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly (The CATE) (Jantz et al., 1980) was selected to assess children's attitudes toward the elderly. This measure serves to determine the effects of the visits on preschoolers.
The CATE is based on the definition of attitudes as having an affective, behavioral, and cognitive component. It consists of three subtests: 1) a Word Association subtest; 2) a Semantic Differential; and 3) a Picture Series.

The Word Association subtest asks children to respond to a series of questions designed to tap their knowledge and feelings about age and the elderly. Responses to the questions were recorded and coded: 1) What can you tell me about old people?, 2) What old people do you know?, 3) Can you give another name for old people?, and 4) How will you feel when you are old? Coefficients of inter-rater reliability on category scoring for this subtest range from \( r = .79 \) to \( .98 \) and test retest reliability from \( r = .53 \) to \( .76 \).

Following the open-ended questions, a Semantic Differential was administered. Children were asked to rate the concepts of Old People and Young People on ten bi-polar adjectives reflecting the affective or evaluative dimension of attitudes. Test retest reliability of the SD has been established for the total score, \( \text{YP}, r = .81; \text{OP}, r = .84 \); and for individual items on both scales, \( r = .48 \) to \( .76 \).

The Picture Series involved showing children a picture of a man at 20, 40, 60, and 80 years of age. Children are asked to select the person they would most like to be with and to tell the things they would do with the person. They are then asked to tell what they would do with the oldest man, how they will feel when they are as old as he is, to seriate the pictures from youngest to oldest, and to ask an age of each of the men pictured. The score correlation between two administrations of the combined Picture Series indicated a test retest reliability of \( r = .53 \).

In addition to The CATE, children in NH Center I were interviewed. They were asked why they go to the nursing home, what a nursing home is, what they will do there, and who will be there. They were also asked how they felt about going to the nursing home.

The director of the day care NH Center I and her staff and the director of the nursing home were administered structured interviews designed to assess the effects of the preschoolers' visits on the elders. The questions asked were similar to those asked of the children: Why do the children go to the home, what do they do there, and who benefits from the visits? As the elders were unable to respond themselves, other questions, asked of the nursing home director, were designed to determine the reactions of the elders to the children's visits. The interviews were taped for later analysis.

Two doctoral students in human growth and development were trained in administration of The CATE and tested the children on an individual basis. The NH Center I sample was tested during the beginning of August 1983, following one full year of participation in the nursing home visits. The sample from Center II was tested during the month of August 1983 as well. One of the students interviewed the child care and nursing home staff during the end of July and beginning of August.

**Results**

Responses to the question, “What can you tell me about old people?” indicated that children in the NH Center I held more negative attitudes toward age and the elderly than did those children in Center II. Children in NH Center I described the elderly as more passive (\( p < .01 \)); in need of more help (\( p < .001 \)); and with more physical disabilities (\( p < .001 \)) than did children in Center II. Few of the children in either group were able to give another name for old people. When asked how they would feel when old, 90% of children in NH Center I responded “bad,” and 10 said “It didn’t matter,” in comparison to children in Center II of whom 70% responded “good,” 10% “bad,” and 20% “It didn’t matter.”

Using the Hotelling t-test, differences on the total score for the Semantic Differential were also present. The children in NH Center I rated the concept of Young People more positively (\( \text{Mn} = 46.4 \)) than did those in Center II (\( \text{Mn} = 37.3 \)), (\( p < .01 \)). There were no differences, however, in the total score for the concept Old People.

Differences between the groups were found for several individual items of the Semantic Differential. Children in the nursing home group rated the concept Young People as more helpful (\( \text{Mn} = 4.5 \)) than did those in Center II (\( \text{Mn} = 3.5 \)), (\( p < .001 \)), and as healthier (\( \text{Mn} = 4.8, \text{NH Center I; Mn} = 4.0, \text{Center II} \)), (\( p < .02 \)). Children in NH Center I also rated Young People as friendlier (\( \text{Mn} = 4.7 \)) than did those in Center II (\( \text{Mn} = 3.8 \)), (\( p < .001 \)), and as more right (\( \text{Mn} = 4.9, \text{NH Center I; Mn} = 3.6, \text{Center II} \)), (\( p < .001 \)). Differences were also present on the items happy or sad, with children in NH Center I having rated Young People as more happy (\( \text{Mn} = 4.8 \)) than did those in Center II (\( \text{Mn} = 3.7 \)), (\( p < .001 \)), and as more good (\( \text{Mn} = 4.8, \text{NH Center I; Mn} = 4.0, \text{Center II} \)), (\( p < .00 \)).

When rating the concept Old People, three differences on the individual items were found for the two groups. Children in NH Center I rated Old People as more terrible (\( \text{Mn} = 4.5 \)) than did children in Center II (\( \text{Mn} = 3.9 \)), (\( p < .05 \)); as more unfriendly (\( \text{Mn} = 4.5, \text{NH Center I; Mn} = 3.9, \text{Center II} \)), (\( p < .05 \)); and as sicker, (\( \text{Mn} = 3.5, \text{NH Center I; Mn} = 1.5, \text{Center II} \)), (\( p < .001 \)).

One difference between the groups was present on the Picture Series subtest. Children in NH Center I group responded more negatively than did those in Center II when shown the picture of the oldest man and asked how they would feel when they were this old (\( p < .001 \)). No other differences were present on this subtest. The majority of children in both groups indicated they would prefer to be with the youngest man pictured (\( p = .08 \)) and 73.3% of children in NH Center I and 60% in Center II were able to order the pictures from youngest to oldest (\( p = .41 \)).

Nearly 87% of children in both groups was able to identify the oldest man pictured (\( p = .27 \)). There were no differences between the groups when children were asked what they would do with the oldest man (\( p = .19 \)). Ninety percent of children in NH
Center I gave stereotypic behaviors such as “You could push him in his wheel chair,” “Find his glasses,” “He can’t do anything, he’s too old,” or suggested physically passive types of activities such as “walking,” “sitting,” or “talking.” Seventy-nine percent of children in Center I reported the same types of stereotypic responses.

Interviews with the children, day care director and staff, and nursing home director and staff were analyzed. Children in NH Center I did have a clear idea of why they were visiting the elders. When asked why they visited the nursing home, 17 of the 30 children responded by saying they wanted to go to visit the old people and nurses and “I like to go.” Only 3 of the 30 children said they went because “Teachers tell us,” or “I have to go.” The children also seemed to know what a nursing home was, with 21 of the 30 saying “It’s a place where old people live,” or “where sick people stay.” All of the children said they go to the home to “share,” to “sing,” or to “show and tell,” and all said they see old people and nurses and doctors at the home.

Of the 30 children, 25 said they feel “good, fine, happy” about going to the home and most of them said “I like to go,” “It’s fun to be there.” Twenty of the children explained their visits on the basis that “It feels good to make other people happy,” or in ways that suggested an altruistic function for the visits.

The child care director and the three staff members, and the nursing home director and staff members responded to the interview questions similarly. All indicated only positive benefits of the preschoolers’ visits to the nursing home for the children, the elders, and themselves.

Children were believed to benefit on the grounds that they “learn about age and the elderly,” “Children learn to do things for others,” or “They enjoy the visits.” The nursing home director and the child care staff also expressed the belief that the elders benefit from the visits as well. “It’s a joy to see the patients smiling and happy,” “All of the patients look forward to seeing the children,” “It makes them feel wanted.”

Although not asked directly, the staff also volunteered that they themselves found the visits to be of high value. They said, “When the children are here, everything changes”; “All my personal worries disappear and I can only think of the children”; “It’s magic when the children visit”; and “Maybe it’s my religious background, but I enjoy seeing children learn to do things for others.”

The staff of the child care center and nursing home also held similar goals for the visits, stating the goals were to help both children and elders. The goals seemed focused on teaching children to do things for others, as well as exposing children to the concept of age. “Children can learn the pleasures of doing things for other people.” “Visiting the home is something children seem to enjoy.” “Children accept the differences in elders so readily, they aren’t frightened at all, but want to do things for others.”

Goals for the visits for elders focused on the perceived benefits of contact with children.

In summary, the adults from the child care center and nursing home held similar goals for the visits and viewed the visits as of great benefit to children, elders and themselves. They expressed the belief that the visits were of immeasurable and long-lasting benefit to all.

Conclusions, Discussions and Implications

The complexity and multidimensionality of children’s attitudes toward their own aging and the elder are documented by the results of this study. After a year of weekly visits to infirm elders in a nursing home, preschoolers seemed to hold more negative attitudes toward their own aging than children without the visits. The visits also seemed to confirm for children that elders are indeed passive, physically disabled, and in need of help. Children who visited elders felt more positively about Young People, and evaluated Old People as more terrible, unfriendly, and sick than did children without the experience.

On the other hand, children in both groups said they preferred to be with the youngest man pictured and both stereotyped the oldest man on the basis of physical characteristics. There were also no differences between the groups in ratings of Old People on 7 of the 10 items. Further, there were no differences between the groups on items of The CATE designed to assess the cognitive dimension of attitudes. Children in both groups were able to identify the oldest man pictured and to seriate the pictures from youngest to oldest.

Although the elders were unable to respond themselves, the staff of both the child care center and nursing home overwhelmingly agreed that the visits were of immense and significant value to the elders, children, and themselves. Nevertheless, the staff could not offer any evidence other than their beliefs that the visits were of benefit.

Certainly the results of this study need to be viewed with caution for they represent the experience of one child care center only. Nevertheless, the results also suggested caution for the design and implementation of intergenerational programs. The elders in this study were infirm, confined to wheel chairs, and totally passive. The majority appeared to the researchers to be unaware of the presence of the children. Because of the passivity of the elders and lack of interaction between elders and children, it might be feasible to consider the contact hypothesis of Amir (1969) when planning for contact between young and old. Amir (1969) advanced the contact hypothesis as a possible explanation for the fact that many programs which are designed to increase contact between groups of people failed and, therefore, negatively affected attitudes and relationships between differing groups.

The contact hypothesis asserts that a number of conditions must be present in order for contact between groups to result in positive attitudes developing between groups. Among these conditions are: (a) equal status between groups, (b) intimate, rather
than casual contact, (c) contact that is pleasant and rewarding for both groups, and (d) functional interaction taking place, with both groups involved in goal-setting and participation in important activities.

Nevertheless, even if the interaction between the young children and the elderly in this study had met some or all of these conditions, the degree of infirmity and sickness in nursing homes could still cause children’s attitudes to be more negative. Seeing sick, infirm, passive elders may only act to reinforce children’s already stereotypic beliefs in the futility of old age.

Because the nursing home staff and child care professionals did express strong belief that the visits were of value, balance is suggested when planning intergenerational contact. If children are taken to nursing homes and brought into contact with infirm elders, then such visits should be balanced with contact with elders who are competent, active, and able. Providing contact and experiences with elders who represent the majority of old in ability and physical health might be seen as necessary.

References