



Matthew Kaplan, Ph.D.

State Extension Specialist
Intergenerational Programs and Aging
Department of Ag & Extension Education
(814) 863-7871

Ideas for Intergenerational Living

*a series of articles devoted to promoting cooperation
and exchange between the generations*

Article 10 (1/02)

THE CHANGING FACE OF GRANDPARENTHOOD

Last year marked a milestone in American history that many people missed. The first of the 76 million Americans born between the years 1946 and 1964 – the well-known “baby boomer” generation – have reached the age of 55. This landmark occurrence signals some interesting changes in the enterprise of grandparenting.

First, we will see a surge in the numbers of grandparents. In their book, “The Nanas and the Papas: A Boomers' Guide to Grandparenting,” Kathryn and Allen Zullo note that by the year 2005, there will be an estimated 80 million grandparents. Of those, nearly half will be baby boomers, and they are likely to be quite different from the grandparents of previous eras. They should be more liberal (after all, this is the Woodstock generation!), healthier (thanks to dietary and medical advances), more active, and wealthier. Further, they will identify with different historical events, have different ideas about work and play, and have different heroes.

All of these differences translate into anticipated changes in the way grandparents spend time with their grandchildren. For example, it will be more common to see grandparents and grandchildren, side by side, engaging in high-octane activities such as mountain biking and martial arts. And many grandparents and grandchildren will be looking for opportunities to learn together. One such example is the “Grandparents University” summer program at the University of Wisconsin. After two days of intensive indoor and outdoor activities together, participants reported that the experience had enhanced their relationship. Over 98% of the participants in the 2001 program noted their intent to return the following year.

Other organizations are also waking up to the vast possibilities of catering to growing numbers of grandparents and grandchildren looking for shared activities. Elderhostel, a 25-year-old non-profit educational organization for people over 55, is now planning educational trips for older adults who wish to bring along their grandchildren. They can choose from a wide range of activities, including stamp collecting, bird watching, hiking, and touring museums around the world.

“Grandtravel” is a new commercial, vacation travel program for grandparents and grandchildren who wish to share the pleasures of traveling together. Destinations are planned with school curricula in mind, and are both domestic and international. The agency does all the planning and teachers provide learning experiences along the way for the children. For more information, see their website: <http://www.grandtrvl.com>).

Seagull Schools, a 30-year-old private, non-profit corporation in Hawaii, has plans to construct a new \$2 million intergenerational facility that will include a childcare center, an adult community center, and a training center for senior adults interested in mentoring young people. It will also offer tourism programs and packages designed to attract grandparents and grandchildren looking for combined vacations. Seagull Schools director Chuck Larson says, "If I were one of those grandparents, one of the places on the top of my list would be Hawaii. Because this is a resort area, it lends itself to a large variety of activities that could be adapted to meet different abilities and interests for both children and older adults."

Not everybody can go to Hawaii; nor do they have to. There are various resources closer to home that provide helpful suggestions for how to nurture the bonds between grandparents and grandchildren.

Just visit any bookstore; you are likely to find books such as "Grand Activities: More than 150 Fabulous Fun Activities for Kids to do with their Grandparents" by Shari Sasser (Career Press, 1999). Among the activities which emphasize family connections is "Comfy Genes;" this involves looking at photos of family members from different generations and listing the origins of each of the child's facial features (for example, "grandma's nose").

The "Connecting the Generations during the Holidays" program, developed by Penn State Cooperative Extension, focuses on some of the things that can be done to strengthen family relationships during the holidays. At family get-togethers, stimulating topics for discussion include: earliest holiday memories, happiest holiday memories, thoughts about how holiday celebrations have changed over the years, and philosophies about shopping and gift-giving during the holidays. Another resource, "The Holiday Activity Kit – 2001," developed by the *Something to Remember Me By*--Legacy Project, provides other family-strengthening activity ideas during the holidays; for a listing of these activities, see their website: <http://www.tcpnow.com/holidaykit/intro.html>.

A surefire way to help grandchildren and grandparents appreciate family stories and memories is the "oral history" interview. The interview can be focused on the grandparent's life experiences either in a general way, or with an emphasis on a particular theme (e.g., how people dressed) or historical event (e.g., Woodstock). Any tape-recording or written record of the interview should be treated as a valuable family keepsake.

Whether it is through travel, discussion, or other activities, shared experiences are gratifying for both, grandchild and grandparent. These experiences also help lay the groundwork for strengthening family, a benefit to be enjoyed by future generations. Each family has its own identity, traditions and rituals for celebrating family. It's never too late to start a new family tradition.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

The Pennsylvania State University is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. It is the policy of the University to maintain an academic and work environment free of discrimination, including harassment. The Pennsylvania State University prohibits discrimination and harassment against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Discrimination or harassment against faculty, staff, or students will not be tolerated at The Pennsylvania State University. Direct all inquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policy to the Affirmative Action Director, The Pennsylvania State University, 201 Willard Building, University Park, PA 16802-2801, Tel 814-865-4700/V, 814-863-1150/TTY.

© The Pennsylvania State University 2001