

Commentary

Reading as an intergenerational Activity for intergenerational wellness

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Abstract

Wellbeing of the Grandparent

Intergenerational reading activities offer an avenue for cognitive exercise & social interaction, which may help support a senior's sense of purpose & self-worth. Extra-large print books enable some elders with low vision to continue to enjoy reading.

Wellbeing of the Grandchild

Intergenerational reading activities may contribute to an enriched environment with a combination of intellectual engagement and familial bonding and thus may help support healthy development.



Figure 1. Grandmother reading to grandchild. Artwork from Fiverr.com

Wellness for the Grandparent

“The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved.”
— Mother Teresa [1]

“If you're lucky enough to still have grandparents, visit them, cherish

them and celebrate them while you can.”

– Regina Brett [2]

Research points to possible links between disability, loneliness, depression, and cognitive decline [3,4,5]. However, frequent intergenerational, familial contacts promote the wellbeing of the elderly – as long as the demands placed on the elders are not overwhelming [6,7]. Spending time with the grandchildren may offer protection against the epidemic of loneliness among elders that is too often the case today [8,9]. Reading to young children may also provide a sense of meaningfulness and purpose in life to retirees and may also help to preserve cognitive function in the elders [10,11]. Reading, itself, can be a form of enjoyable cognitive exercise that may help to support healthy aging [12,13]. Many seniors suffer from age related declining visual acuity – an obstacle to reading [14,15]. However, extra-large print may allow some seniors to enjoy reading again [16]. A sense of purpose and meaning in life, enjoyable cognitive engagement, and not being lonely can promote a healthy, positive mental state. A positive mental state might also support wellness by supporting epigenetic integrity and slowing epigenetic aging [17]. In addition, a positive mental state helps support healthy dopamine levels, which in turn, promotes brain health [18,19].

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Figure 2. Explanation of epigenetics. Think of the genome as being like a cookbook. The genes are like recipes. Each cell has the entire cookbook (genome). However, just as different luncheon and dinner events call for specific foods, gene expression is specific for the cell type and may also adapt to the environment. Just as a chef might use sticky notes to remind him of how many servings of which recipes to make, the cell uses epigenetic markers to regulate gene expression. However, if the chef's sticky notes get mixed up and he prepares dinner for five when there are actually 50 guests, the dinner party will not go well. In a similar manner, when epigenetic markers get disordered, there is a negative impact on health. Many different lifestyle factors influence the integrity of the epigenome and the rate of epigenetic aging [20,21]. Artwork from Fiverr.com

Wellness for the Grandchild

“Some of the world's best educators are grandparents.”

–Charles W. Shedd [2]

It has been asserted that the psychological wellness of the current generation of youth suffers due to a deficiency of relaxed, joyful family time and bonding [22,23,24,25,26,27]. Recent studies hint that healthy familial bonding and care supports the development of a healthy epigenome in children and may have lifelong implications in health outcomes [28,29]. While reading to a grandchild, a devoted grandparent can also engage the child in conversation and small talk. A child's opportunities to have light, enjoyable conversations with adult family members have been found to be key factors for success later in life [30].

Let us consider the special case of Down syndrome children. Chromosomal duplication can cause in a chain of events resulting in the dysregulation

of diverse genes. Dysregulation of the epigenomic DNA methylation machinery is believed to contribute to some of the phenotypic traits seen in Down syndrome [31,32]. However, it has also been asserted that environmental factors – such as familial environment, social connections and opportunities for cognitive engagement – also influence the epigenome [33,34,35,36,37,38]. Could environmental enrichment attenuate some of the epigenetic dysregulation seen in Down syndrome and aid these individuals in fulfilling their potential? Could intergenerational reading activities be one of many possible examples of such environmental enrichment? Over the course of western history, statism has focused on hypercognitive utilitarianism and conformity to the regime and thus eugenics, institutionalization, and even genocide for certain individuals such as those with Down syndrome [39,40,41,42,43,44]. However, biblical wisdom tells us that we are the handiwork of the LORD, and we are to see the LORD in others, even those whom the world considers to be the least of these [45,46]. Reports reveal how – when raised with familial love and opportunities for developing talents – individuals with Down syndrome can be vital threads in the colorful, vibrant tapestry of a spiritually healthy society [47,48,49,50].

Summary

“The family, as a community of persons, is thus the first human ‘society’” – John Paul II [51]

In our ever changing society, there remains the biological and spiritual need for healthy, strong familial bonds. Taking time for relaxing, enjoyable intergenerational activities may help support this process.

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