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# AGING IN AMERICA

What  
Should  
We  
Know  
about  
Aging?

What younger generations learn about aging has an impact on the older person they will become. Further, the workforce will experience an increasing number of older clients. Are we prepared to serve them? Do we understand aging?

# Teaching Children that Growing Old is a Natural Part of Life

Robert N. Butler, M.D.

If we are to become a society that values its older citizens, we must teach our children by instruction and by example, for nowhere do we find a greater potential for change than in education. If we teach children that growing old is a natural part of life, and raise them to appreciate and value the contributions of older people to their world, ageist stereotypes and fears of growing old will become obsolete.

Our children will inherit the gains that have been made in the field of longevity over the past fifty years. It is our responsibility to equip them to benefit from the many years of healthy and productive living they will have beyond the age of 65. How they respond will depend in large measure on the way our schools teach them about aging. (Excerpts from *Learning for Longer Life*)

Robert Butler is Professor of Geriatrics at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine and President and CFO of the International Longevity Center, New York

## Why Teach about Aging?

Fran Pratt

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 other things—simply by absorbing what they 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

For all these reasons, children need to learn about aging. It is better to prevent than to cure, easier to learn than to unlearn. 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 the young, 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 aging education should clearly be a high priority for all who play a role in educating and socializing young children. (Excerpts from Fran Pratt, *Why teach about aging?* Center for Understanding Aging, 1992, Framingham, MA)

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# Aging Education for the Future

Donna Couper and Fran Pratt

Children in elementary and secondary classrooms today have the potential of living longer than any previous generation. Barring some catastrophic development, it is possible that large proportions of these students will live into their eighties, nineties, or beyond. All around them will be people who will also be living longer. Population aging will affect virtually every aspect of society, including families, businesses, and government. Will these older adults of tomorrow be capable of taking advantage of their unique opportunity for long life? As family members, voters, and citizens of the community, how well will they deal with the challenges posed by the graying of the population? The answers will depend heavily on whether, when, and to what extent the educational community responds to the critical need for education about aging.

While education serves many purposes, one key objective is to prepare people for what lies ahead. Education not only gets people ready for what may happen in the future, it also creates an individual's potential for shaping the future and making it what they want it to be. On an individual level, the person with the broadest knowledge base and most developed skills is likely to be at the head of the line for career of

choice. On a broader level, the society whose people are well educated is able to offer everyone a high quality of life. This is why the cost of building and maintaining schools is typically the highest budget outlay for cities and towns. This is why parents scrimp and save for years to put their children through college. The assumption of parents and society is that "getting ahead in life" depends on education.

When educators lose sight of the future, they lose sight of their mission. In a constantly changing world, it is never possible to know exactly what lies ahead. However, it is possible to look at ongoing developments, make plausible estimates of what the future holds, and plan accordingly. Leaders of business and government do this all the time. So do educators. Preparation for the future means that education must be continuously in the process of reform.

Often, a significant lag exists between the emergence of a situation and general recognition of its relevance to education, especially if the situation develops gradually over time. Such is the case with education about aging. In spite of the fact that growing longevity and issues of population aging are constantly in the public eye, the topic of aging has so far received only scattered attention in schools and colleges. Over the past 25 years, teachers across the country have experimented with aging

education in settings that range from primary grades to graduate school. Yet, most young people still reach adulthood with little preparation for their own aging. Nor do they recognize the enormous implications of population aging as the longevity revolution of the twentieth century spills over into the twenty-first.

This situation will not continue. First, whatever is important to society eventually finds its way into the classroom. Just as issues of environment, race, ethnicity, and gender have been embraced by educators in recent decades, aging will be recognized as a relevant topic. Excerpts from *Learning for Longer Life: A Guide for Developers of K-12 Curriculum and Instructional Materials* by Donna Couper and Fran Pratt

*Donna Couper, Ph.D., is a consultant on lifespan aging-related issues for education, corporate, health care, and social service organizations since the late 1980s. She developed secondary curricula called Schools in an Aging Society, authored Children's Images of Aging, and Aging and Our Families.*

*Fran Pratt, M.A., is the founder and former executive director of the Center for Understanding Aging and the acknowledged aging education guru. He has authored several intergenerational books and manuals. He is retired and living in Maine.*

# Aging Across the Curriculum

*Aging Across the Curriculum* was developed in 1989 to address the need for learning about aging. *Aging Across the Curriculum* (AATC) provides P-20 curricula for teaching aging in sciences, arts, humanities, math, and social sciences. Currently, AATC is being revised but the earlier version is still available at [www.siu.edu/offices/iii](http://www.siu.edu/offices/iii) . . . Click publications. The following summary visits the four levels of education with thoughts on curricula.

## Aging Across the Curriculum

- Gives teachers and professors preschool through postsecondary suggestions to incorporate aging concepts into their existing classroom work.
- Integrates aging concepts into general studies, language arts, math, science, social studies, and creative arts.
- Targets all educational levels: preschool, elementary education, secondary education, and postsecondary education.
- Gives teachers an opportunity to plan aging education as an ongoing continuum preschool through postsecondary levels. Teachers and professors can observe how other levels of education are using aging education curricula, what precedes their instruction and what follows.
- Suggests activities that bring older persons into the classroom as volunteers.

### Preschool

Helene Block, Emerita  
Oakton Community College

We know that our children will grow up in an aging society; but research shows that ageist attitudes begin very early in life. Too often preschool children pick up myths and stereotypes about aging from their families, the media, and even in the school. Since

teachers are a potent force in the lives of young children, they can help dispel these myths by including life-cycle activities in their day-to-day programs. Children need models of healthy and productive aging so that their emerging self-concepts and worth as individuals can continue throughout their lives.

### Elementary Education

Ann Gale, Chicago Department on Aging and Disability

Children in the primary grades today will enjoy an unprecedented longevity stretching for eighty or more years. A curriculum on aging for elementary school children needs to provide information about the aging process and offers experiences with older people. Fifteen to twenty years from now, these experiences will help the children, who have become adults, relate effectively to older persons. The intergenerational contact now will also assist students with their own continuous aging.

### High School

Fran Pratt, Director  
Center for Understanding Aging  
Framingham, Mass

Many of the same concepts introduced in preschool and elemen-

tary classes are important to high school students. The definitions, vocabulary, and basic physiological and mental aspects of aging should be understood by the time a student graduates from high school. High school students can study the aging process with more depth, and it can be included during regularly scheduled classes in language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science classes.

Direct contact with older people will reinforce their knowledge and provide additional educational experiences for secondary students.

### Postsecondary

Jane Angelis and Joanne Kaufman  
SIU Carbondale

Goals for aging education at the postsecondary level resemble those of elementary and secondary education. College and university students have passed through several of the life stages and have experienced aging. Thus they can identify many of the changes produced by aging and assimilate these concepts and the wide range of disciplines of aging education.

# Finding Positive Books about Aging for Young Readers



Sandra McGuire is the director of Kids Are Tomorrow's Seniors (KATS) Program and Chair, MSN Program, College of Nursing at the University of Tennessee

*Sandra L. McGuire*

Children's literature can be used to offer positive portrayals of older people, help educate children about aging, and promote positive attitudes about aging. Teachers need to include books with older characters in their children's reading activities and even use them to focus discussions on aging. Book collections in schools, libraries, bookstores, and homes need to have books that promote positive attitudes about aging and that integrate intergenerational activities. We need to help children see the potential that exists for growth and development throughout life, and share with children the joys of aging.

Developing children's knowledge about and positive attitudes toward aging (their own and others) will help them live each day more fully and give them the ability, understanding, and self-confidence to adapt to aging. They will be able to understand that old age does not have to be a time of personal and societal devaluation, but rather can be a time of continued growth, development, and fulfillment.

Finding early children's literature that has positive portrayals of older adults is a challenge. Older characters are underrepresented and stereotyped, and often do not have a major role. Early research

by Dr. Edward Anselmo showed that the cumulative effect of the portrayals of older adults in early children's literature showed them as unimportant, unexciting, inarticulate, flat, unidimensional, unimaginative, noncreative, and boring. Subsequent reviews of the literature largely concur with these earlier findings.

Today's children will likely live into their 80s, 90s or beyond. What they find about aging in much of early children's literature often perpetuates negative attitudes. Children need to be exposed to early children's literature that shows positive models of old age. Excerpts from *Childhood Education*, Spring 2003.

The *Growing Up and Growing Older* booklist started over 20 years ago as a way to use early children's literature to teach children about aging and to promote positive attitudes about aging. The books on the list have a positive portrayal of older adults. <http://www.lib.utk.edu/refs/ccyal/research.html>. Earlier versions of the booklist are available through ERIC (ERIC: ED347515, ED445344).

If you have books you would like to have considered for the booklist please contact Dr. Sandra McGuire [smcguire@utk.edu](mailto:smcguire@utk.edu).

## Key Concepts for Aging Education

Concept I: Aging is a natural and lifelong process of growing and developing.

Concept II: Older people and younger people are similar in many ways.

Concept III: Older people are valuable and contributing members of society.

Concept IV: Old and young can enjoy each other and learn from each other.

Concept V: People need to plan for becoming older.

Concept VI: People have much control over the older person they become.

Sandra McGuire, Ph.D.

# A Word about the Future

*Fran Pratt and Donna Couper*

When today's elementary school students reach their seventies, they may well be regarded as the "young-old" in a country that has about a million living centenarians. If such a vision of the future seems unsettling, it may be because we are projecting into the future our concept of what it means to be very old based on the centenarians we see today. Perhaps the worst kind of education we could provide children would be to teach them that their own future can be seen in the conditions of older people today. No one can say what it will be like to grow old in the middle or late twenty-first century, or under what kinds of conditions older people will live. We do know that old age today means something vastly different from what old age meant 50 or 100 years ago. We do not know whether the life of older people in the future will be better or worse, but we can be certain that it will be different. We can also be certain that,

for better or worse, those who are now growing up and growing older will largely determine what it means to grow old in years to come.

In the world of every-accelerating change, technological advances alone will not assure a better future for an aging society. Building a better future will require an educated public. Through education, those who have yet to grow old can prepare to create a better social climate in which to live a long life. People who are free of age-biases, knowledgeable about aging, and think positively about growing older will be in a far better position to create a brighter future for themselves and for others growing older. People educated about aging may be more likely to adopt healthy life styles and maximize their own chances for living long and living well. They may be better able to care for aging relatives, neighbors, and friends. They may be less likely to practice age discrimination, and as voters will make informed decisions on issues affecting all generations. It will be these human factors, not just



Children need models of healthy and productive aging.

technology, that will decide what the future holds.

As the graying of American continues, quality education about aging will be a key ingredient in creating a better social environment in which to grow and grow old. Quality education about aging will, in turn, depend largely on high quality curriculum and instructional materials that make this kind of education possible. Educators, authors, editors, and publishers have important roles. In the words of Charles Kettering, "We should all be concerned about the future, because we will spend the rest of our lives there."

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# RESOURCES

## Aging Education Resources

*Aging in the United States: An Education Module.* Population Reference Bureau. Washington, D.C., 1999.

"Aging Content in Elementary and Secondary School Curriculum." *Gerontology and Geriatrics Education*, Lucchino R, Lane W, Ferguson KD 18(2):37-49, 199

*Schools in an Aging Society*, a series of six books from Connecticut's Department of Education and Department on Aging and the Center for Understanding Aging. Titles include, Health/Home Economics Classroom Activities, Language Arts Classroom Activities, Social Studies Classroom Activities, Strengthening the School-Community Connection, Elders as Resources and Guide for Pupil Personnel Specialists. Available <http://www.cps.unt.edu/natla/>

*Connecting Generations: Integrating Aging Education and Intergenerational Programs with Elementary and Middle Grades Curricula* by Barbara M. Friedman.

"Retired Educators as Advocates: Promoting K-12 Education about Aging." *Educational Gerontology*, Couper DP, Norsman AS, Sulick BR. 25:1-12, 1999.

*Walk in My Shoes: A 4-H Aging Awareness Project* by Molly McErlean. Youth & leaders guides available from University of Illinois Extension or <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/wims/wimsproject.html>

### Other Resources

Although not teaching resources, these books make a significant, implicit argument for the need for aging education and intergenerational interaction to combat ageism and provide for the growing population of older adults.

*AgePower. How the 21st Century Will be Ruled by the New Old.* Ken Dychtwald. Penguin Putnam, Inc, New York (1999).

*Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America.* Marc Freedman. Public Affairs, New York. (1999).

*What are Old People For? How Elders Will Save the World?* William H. Thomas, M.D. VanderWyk & Burnham, Acton, MA. (2004).

### Web sites

Aging Education in the K-12 Health Curriculum  
[http://www.pbs.org/teachersource/whats\\_new/health/april00.shtm](http://www.pbs.org/teachersource/whats_new/health/april00.shtm)

Intergenerational Initiative: Comprehensive intergenerational website  
[www.siu.edu/offices/iii](http://www.siu.edu/offices/iii)

Music and Intergenerational Activities  
<http://www.umaine.edu/mainecenteronaging/muse-youth.htm>

National Academy for Teaching and Learning About Aging  
<http://www.cps.unt.edu/natla/>

Reinventing Aging: Baby boomers and civic engagement [www.reinventingaging.org](http://www.reinventingaging.org)

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