Children's perceptions of older adults: past and present

Mary Kathryn Hatcher Jones

University of Northern Iowa

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Children's perceptions of older adults: past and present

Abstract
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Children's Perceptions of Older Adults: Past and Present

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Mary Kathryn Hatcher Jones
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Charles R. May
April 19, 1994
Date Approved
Director of Research Paper

Judith M. Finkelstein
April 27, 1994
Date Approved
Graduate Faculty Reader

William P. Callahan
5-5-99
Date Approved
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION
- Background .......................................................... 1
- Purpose of the Study .................................................. 1
- Need for the Study .................................................... 2
- Limitations ............................................................ 3
- Definitions ............................................................ 4

## CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: PAST AND PRESENT
- Quantity of Research on Children’s Perceptions of Older Adults .......... 5
- Children’s Perceptions of Older Adults ................................ 5
- Children’s Perceptions of Themselves As Older Adults .................... 6

## CHAPTER III FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CHILDREN’S PERCEPTIONS OF OLDER ADULTS
- Positive Influences on Children’s Perceptions of Older Adults .......... 8
  - *Children’s Positive Personal Experiences with Older Adults* ......... 8
  - Curriculum on Aging ................................................. 8
- Negative Influences on Children’s Perceptions of Older Adults .......... 9
  - *Children’s Negative Personal Experiences with Older Adults* ........ 9
  - Hidden Curriculum on Aging ....................................... 9
  - Adult Behaviors .................................................... 10
  - Mass Media: Electronic and Print .................................... 10

## CHAPTER IV GUIDELINES
- Need for Guidelines ................................................... 11
- Suggested Guidelines .................................................. 11

## CHAPTER V SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
- Conclusions .......................................................... 15
- Recommendations .................................................... 16

REFERENCES ............................................................ 17
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background

Research regarding perceptions of older adults began in the early 1950s. However, it was not until the 1968 classic study of Hickey, Hickey and Kalish that children were included in the research of perceptions of older adults. While the late 1960s marked the initial research of children’s perceptions of older adults, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that the topic became a serious concern. Another, more recent, renewal of interest in researching children’s perceptions of older adults occurred in the mid-1990s, and it continues to the present.

The late 1970s to early 1980s body of research, exploring children’s perceptions of older adults, predicted a significant rise in the elderly segment of the population, due to the aging baby boom generation and longer life expectancy. Results, from research studies of the 1970s and 1980s, were consistent with the results of Hickey, Hickey and Kalish (1968) indicating that children continued to negatively discriminate against and stereotype older adults.

The present statistical realization of earlier predictions, regarding a significant increase in the elderly population, coupled with the 1970s and 1980s research findings that little had changed from the results of Hickey, Hickey and Kalish (1968), account for the more recent renewal of interest in children’s perceptions of older adults. Over three decades have lapsed since the initial study of children’s perceptions of older adults. The subjects of those initial studies now have children of their own and parents who are approaching retirement. Today’s statistical realization of the elderly population, will become tomorrow’s actual reality. Now is the time to revisit the study of children’s perceptions of older adults.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether children's perceptions of older adults have changed between the late 1970s and the present, late 1990s. The following questions will be addressed in order to achieve this purpose:

1. Does a comparison of more recent research findings, 1990s to present, with the results of earlier research studies, 1970s and 1980s, indicate changes in children's perceptions of older adults?

2. If change is indicated, what factors contributed to bringing about the change in children's perceptions of older adults?

3. What factors are prohibiting positive changes in children's perceptions of older adults?

4. What are some guidelines for facilitating children's positive perceptions of older adults?

Need for the Study

Major demographic changes are on the horizon. Census population projections indicate that in the next 30 years the population of those 65 and over will grow to 69 million plus, an increase of 75%. Older adults will comprise approximately one fifth of the overall population by the year 2030 (Administration on Aging, 1999). In light of these facts, it is important to determine how children perceive older adults in order to maintain and enhance the quality of life for this rapidly growing segment of the population, and for the children who will be interacting with them.

In terms of enhanced quality of life for children, the hope is that children will come to accept their own aging process absent of fear. Additionally, children improve their quality of life when they can positively interact with those who are different in some way, as in the case of age.
In terms of improved quality of life for older adults, the hope is that more accurate information will cause a shift in the thinking of younger people. If attempts to socialize children in this regard are successful, then older adults will be esteemed and valued by those who possess an understanding that time is the great equalizer and who act in accordance with such an understanding, rather than perpetuating the negative stereotypes that older adults are "...rigid, unable to cope, irrelevant and worthless" (Aday, Sims, McDuffie & Evans, 1996, p. 143). The belief is that positive perceptions of older adults can lead to older adults experiencing a quality life that is characterized by acceptance, empathy, connection, and validation.

Rosow (in Burke, 1982) summarized the purpose for studying children's perceptions of older adults when he stated:

By now it should be clear that the crucial people in the aging problem are not the old, but the younger age groups, for it is the rest of us who determine the status and position of the older person in the social order. (p. 206)

If Rosow's statement is true, it is imperative to determine whether children's perceptions of older adults have changed and to identify the factors that have contributed to or prohibited positive change. Thus, there is a need for further study.

Limitations

The primary limitation regarding this study was the lack of research. Particularly, a lack of empirical research and "...a dearth of longitudinal research" (Aday et al., 1996, p. 144). Recent research studies can precede publication by one to three years, or more. That being so, there may be numerous studies which could contribute to this paper.
Definitions

For the purposes of clarity and consistent thought throughout this study, terms are defined as follows:

**Ageism**: The outward manifestation of beliefs characterized by age biases and prejudices.

**Children**: People ages 3 to 20 years.

**Curriculum on Aging**: Subject matter that is taught on the topic of aging.

**Earlier research**: Studies conducted between the late 1970s and the middle 1980s.

**Hidden curriculum**: Subject matter that is presented intentionally, or unintentionally, but is not consciously received.

**Intergenerational Education**: Systematic programs designed to get older adults and children in direct contact with each other to facilitate the formation of mutually beneficial relationships.

**Older Adults**: People aged 65 years and older. This term will be used interchangeably with the term elderly.

**Recent research**: Studies conducted between 1990 and the present.
CHAPTER II
THE RESEARCH: PAST AND PRESENT

Quantity of Research on Children's Perception of Older Adults: Past and Present

As previously mentioned, studying children's perceptions of older adults was a concentrated focus in the late 1970s and early 1980s and has been revisited in more recent years. This is evidenced by the cluster of research studies on this topic dated 1977 to 1983, and a scant amount of studies until 1996 to the present where there has been renewed interest in the topic of children's perceptions of older adults. Although a generation has passed between the initial studies of children's perceptions of older adults and now, few longitudinal studies were conducted over this thirty year span of time. In spite of this lack, there are some indicators of positive changes in children's perceptions of older adults.

Children's Perceptions of Older Adults: Past and Present

In earlier studies (Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper, & Serock, 1977; Rich, Myrick, & Campbell, 1983), children used negative stereotypes to describe how elderly people looked and acted. However, recent research findings by Blunk and Williams (1997) indicated, "...that young children were significantly less likely to view older adults negatively on personality or social traits than on those characteristics relating to abilities" (p. 239).

In their study, Blunk and Williams (1997) assessed children's prejudicial attitudes toward the elderly. They also studied the effectiveness of a developmentally appropriate curriculum in positively influencing children's perceptions, in addition to studying the effects of grandparent visitation on children's attitudes of the elderly; their research revealed a surprise finding, indicative of a developing trend, that children formed separate perceptions of how older adults are, what they look like and what they can do.
Blunk and Williams (1997) validated the earlier qualitative studies of Donorfio (1991) and Weber, Cooper, and Hesser (1996) in which drawings were used to explore children's attitudes toward the elderly. Donorfio's (1991) subjects drew pictures of both a young and an old person. She found that 67% of drawings of an old person depicted a happy expression. She also found that 20% of both the drawings of a young person and the drawings of an old person displayed action. A cane appeared in 70% of the drawings of an old person, while wheelchairs or walkers appeared in 10% of the drawings.

The research of Weber et al. (1996) revealed similar results for a study in which children were asked to draw an old person. Sixty-two percent of the drawings had smiling, happy expressions. Approximately 28% of the pictures displayed a cane, and 18% contained wheelchairs and walkers. Of the drawings, 58.6% of them portrayed old people as healthy and active.

These research findings indicated that children perceived older adults' personalities more positively and separately from their abilities. Weber et al. (1996) summarized their research:

The children revealed that they do not hold typical negative beliefs of old people...their drawings were very positive, presenting an energetic look at the elderly. Even when depicting elders with mobility aids, the children used bright colors and full face views, possibly indicating optimism in spite of a minor dependency. This counteracts the typical view that children negatively stereotype old age and infirmity. (p. 116)

Children's Perceptions of Themselves As Older Adults: Past and Present

Over a decade has passed from Burke's (1982) report that "...children demurred at the prospect of their own aging" (p. 217), when 68 children of the 102 sampled "...expressed dislike for their own prospects of growing old" (p. 218). Similarly, Rich, Myrick and Campbell (1983) reported that children as young as three were so fearful of old age that they were determined to avoid it. According to the research findings of Donorfio (1991),
not much had changed. Donorllo reported that 70% of her sample responded negatively when asked how they felt about getting old. This was the same percentage of children who drew the opposite gender when asked to draw a picture of an old person. The results of Weber et al. (1996) concur.
CHAPTER III

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF OLDER ADULTS

Positive Influences on Children's Perceptions of Older Adults

The research reviewed establishes that children's perceptions of older adults can be influenced. Two factors clearly emerged as positively influencing children's perceptions of older adults. They were the following: (1) positive personal experiences with older adults, and (2) curriculum on aging. Research revealed that positive manipulation of these factors was able to bring about positive change in children's perceptions of older adults.

Children's Positive Personal Experiences with Older Adults

Dellmann-Jenkins, Lambert, Fruit, and Dinero (1986) designed an intergenerational program that included three experiences:

1) contact on a daily basis with volunteer teaching assistants aged 55 years and older; 2) classroom activities providing positive and realistic information about older people and the aging process; and 3) interaction with senior citizens participating in a local day care center for older adults. (p. 208)

In addition, the research of Dellmann-Jenkins et al indicated that children's "...perceptions about the way elderly persons look and behave appeared to be altered in a positive direction as a result of their participation in the intervention program. (p. 211)

Aday, Sims, McDuffie and Evans (1996) designed a longitudinal study to investigate the effects of a multifaceted intergenerational program on children's perceptions of older adults. The design was as follows: (1) seniors visit children's school, (2) children visit senior center, (3) Christmas party and gift exchange, (4) partnered (senior and child) painting to music featuring tunes from the 1930s to present, (5) reminiscing groups involving the sharing of values, childhood activities and games, (6) performance by the Ripe and Ready Players, a senior song and dance group, (7) informal sharing time, and
(8) a farewell picnic. After each of these activities, the children and seniors exchanged letters and poems. Coupled with this program, was a unit on aging that was designed to present positive, accurate and realistic information about age and the aging process.

Findings from the Aday et al. (1996) study were as follows: (1) Participants in the intergenerational program considered old age six years beyond that of non-participants; (2) Positive perceptions of the elderly were indicated immediately following the completion of the program; and (3) Positive perceptions have been maintained for five years. Noticeably absent, from this study, were results regarding the participants perceptions of themselves as older adults.

Curriculum on Aging

The Blunk and Williams (1997) study included the use of a developmentally appropriate curriculum to influence positively children's perceptions of older adults. This curriculum consisted of numerous art activities, discussions about family and extended family, dramatic play props associated with aging, the use of elderly puppets, as well as fingerplays, flannel board stories, and books containing elderly characters portrayed positively. Their research revealed that the curriculum on aging had influenced children to regard older adults more positively.

Negative Influences on Children's Perceptions of Older Adults

Children's perceptions of older adults can be negatively influence, as well. Two factors that negatively influence children's perception of older adults are: (1) negative personal experiences with older adults, and (2) the hidden curriculum on aging.
Children's Negative Personal Experiences with Older Adults

An earlier research study by Seefeldt (1987), explored the effects of children's visits to a nursing home. The residents of the nursing home were infirm, and most were immobilized. They needed total, continual care. Upon conclusion of the study, it was found that the visits had actually worsened the children's perceptions of the elderly.

Hidden Curriculum on Aging

The hidden curriculum on aging refers to information about aging that children receive unaware. Two sources of this hidden curriculum include: (1) adult behaviors, and (2) the mass media. Research revealed that these sources are vehicles of negative, stereotypic, information about older adults.

Adult Behaviors

Adult language conveys explicit as well as hidden messages. The research of Davidson, Cameron and Jergovic (1995) indicated that children were sensitive to the language adults used to describe and discuss older adults. The Davidson et al. (1995) study revealed that when children heard the term elderly used in descriptions read to them about specific older adults, they retained and recalled more negative information about the individual. Children who heard the same descriptions without the term elderly, and other age related information, retained and recalled positive information, if the description was positive, and negative information, if the description was negative.

Mass Media: Electronic and Print

Vasil and Wass (1993) conducted a summary review of 28 empirical studies regarding the portrayal of older adults in the mass media. They grouped the studies into the two broad categories of electronic and print media. Their research indicated that there was an underrepresentation of older adults in both media types, and thus, was not reflective of the true size of this segment of the population. In addition, they found that both media
types relegated older adult characters to background scenes and their roles were left undeveloped.

Dellmann-Jenkins and Yang (1997) studied the portrayal of older adults in children's literature. Ninety-five Caldecott award-winning picture books were divided into two groups: early award-winners, dated 1972-1983, and more recent award-winners, dated 1984-1995. Their study revealed similar results to those of Vasil and Wass (1993) for the earlier dated books; however, their results revealed a greater positive portrayal of older adults in Caldecott award-winning books between 1984 and 1995.
CHAPTER IV

GUIDELINES

Need for Guidelines

Numerous factors influence *children's* perceptions of older adults. These factors can either contribute to, or detract from, positively shaping children's perceptions of older adults. Therefore, guidelines are needed to positively impact children's perceptions of older adults.

Suggested Guidelines

The following guidelines are suggested to facilitate children's positive perceptions of older adults:

1. Older adults must be viewed as individuals.

   Viewing older adults collectively can perpetuate negative stereotypes and provide misinformation. The elderly segment of the population is characterized by as much diversity in appearance, personality, and abilities, as any other segment of the population. Focusing on the diversity of older adults can help to dispel children's stereotypic perceptions of the elderly.

2. People must *examine* their own beliefs about older adults.

   Burke's (1982) study revealed that children's perceptions of older adults reflected the perceptions held by adult society. *This* explains why people must examine their own beliefs regarding older adults. This examination occurs when one takes an inside look. Through introspection one can identify ageistic prejudices. When one considers aging a negative factor, it "...constitutes another antihuman value, another bias, another very destructive practice which touches us all" (Kupetz, 1993, p.12).
3. Adults must be appropriate role models for children.

Kupetz (1993) stated that, "as positive models influencing children, adults can have a direct effect on the enduring consequences of children's behavior toward the elderly and their own aging" (p. 13). Children need appropriate models from which they can pattern their lives. A good role model must be engaged in using appropriate language, making appropriate choices and responses, and living in congruence with espoused beliefs. The good role model considers the impact of his or her words and deeds upon others. They must often sacrifice their own desires in order to positively influence the other person.

4. Children must have positive firsthand opportunities to interact with older adults.

Parental facilitation of the child's development of a close, positive relationship with grandparents can be a good first exposure to older adults. Within this natural family context, there can be freedom of inquiry which can translate into open communications between young and old. The family context can then be broadened to interactions that include older neighbors, church members, nursing home residents, classroom volunteers, and the like. Perceptions are formed by organizing information gathered through the senses. Firsthand interactions provide much more powerful sensory information than do vicarious experiences.

5. Curriculum on aging must be designed and implemented to present accurate information on aging.

According to Dellmann-Jenkins et al. (1986), "even though the older population has increased significantly many early childhood educators still consider aging... as an 'unmentionable' classroom topic" (p. 206). Dellmann-Jenkins et al. (1986) further concluded that "it is not surprising... to find a limited amount of information on how to help young children understand what is good about growing older" (p. 206).

Teachers, in particular, can design, or incorporate, curriculum on aging to be presented in the course of their instruction. The curriculum should emphasize "...characteristics and positive attributes of the elderly, the important role they play in our
lives, and that aging is a natural part of life" (Blunk & Williams, 1997, p.237). Ideally, the curriculum should include activities shared between the young and old; however, it is not an absolute necessity to positively affect children's perceptions of older adults. The goal of all curricula on aging is to present accurate information, reverse negative stereotypes and dispel myths that cause division and misunderstandings between children and older adults.

6. Portrayals of older adults in the mass media must be monitored.

Children can watch multiple hours of television per day. Parents, in particular, must watch television with their children and instruct them as to the accuracy of the images portrayed. In addition to television, picture books are another large form of mass media that children encounter. As parents and teachers choose books they must not only be aware of the knowledge which is conveyed through the text, but through the illustrations as well. By scrutinizing and eliminating all forms of mass media that contain age-related biases and negative attitudes toward older adults, parents and teachers can positively shape children's attitudes. These attitudes will then translate into actions that demonstrate respect for and valuation of elders, as well as acceptance of their own aging process.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine whether children's perceptions of older adults have changed between the late 1970s and the present, late 1990s. The following questions were addressed:

1. Does a comparison of more recent research findings, 1990s to present, with the results of earlier research studies, 1970s and 1980s, indicate changes in children's perceptions of older adults?

This study revealed that a comparison between the more recent, 1990s, body of research findings and earlier, 1970s to 1980s, research results does indicate a change in children's perceptions of older adults. Research based on drawings, surveys and interviews indicate that children are perceiving older adults more positively today, than in the past. While the change is not sweeping, some desirable trends are developing.

2. If change is indicated, what factors contributed to bringing about the change in children's perceptions of older adults?

The research revealed that children do respond positively when intentional efforts are made to alter their existing perceptions. This study found that intergenerational programs and curriculum on aging were two factors that positively influence children's perceptions of older adults. While children view older adults more positively as a result of intergenerational programs and curriculum on aging, this has not translated into a greater acceptance of themselves as older adults.

3. What factors are prohibiting positive changes in children's perceptions of older adults?

Children's negative personal experiences with older adults and the hidden curriculum on aging emerged as two factors that prohibit children's positive perceptions of older
adults. Particularly prohibitive, with regard to the hidden curriculum on aging, was the use of the term elderly and the portrayals of older adults in the mass media.

4. What are some guidelines for facilitating children's positive perceptions of older adults?

The following guidelines were suggested to facilitate the formation of children's positive perceptions of older adults:

1. Older adults must be viewed as individuals.
2. People must examine their own beliefs about older adults.
3. Adults must be appropriate role models for children.
4. Children must have firsthand opportunities to interact with older adults.
5. Curriculum on aging must be developed and implemented to present accurate information on aging.
6. Portrayals of older adults in the mass media must be monitored.

Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:

1. There is a lack of research on the topic of children's perceptions of older adults.
2. Positive trends are developing with regard to children's perceptions of older adults.
3. Children are beginning to view older adults as individuals with varying social traits and abilities, rather than the negatively stereotyped collective of the past.
4. More positive perceptions of older adults are not producing a positive correlation in children's acceptance of themselves as older adults.
5. Intergenerational programs are beneficial in developing mutual relationships between the young and old.
6. Curriculum on aging has proven to be an effective way to positively shape children's perceptions of older adults; however, curriculum guidelines are sorely lacking.
7. Children are sensitive to language that is used to talk about older adults, particularly the term elderly.

8. Mass media underrepresents and misrepresents the older adult population relative to its true size.

9. There is a developing trend to portray older adults more realistically in recent children's literature.

Recommendations

Further study is recommended. Some areas of recommended study include the following:

1. The further exploration of children's perceptual differences between older adults' personalities and abilities.

2. The explanation as to why children's improved perceptions of older adults are not translating into a greater acceptance of themselves in old age.

3. The development of guidelines for curriculum on aging.

4. An examination of the portrayal of older adults in all forms of mass media.

5. The identification of other sources of hidden curriculum on aging.
References


