K-State child development expert encourages youth to visit older adults

Children, as ‘social beings,’ benefit from interactions with previous generations

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – It may seem that encouraging younger children to visit older folks is primarily for the benefit of the adults.

Bradford Wiles says research does show that intergenerational connections reduces loneliness and boosts happiness for older adults. But, he adds, the same studies indicate that spending time with older adults helps younger children develop life skills and a sense of who they are.

“Children learn through interactions with other people. We’re social beings,” said Wiles, a child development specialist with K-State Research and Extension. “The variety of contacts children can have can teach them about themselves – what they like, what they don’t like, what other people have experienced.

“That’s all part of growing up, particularly in early childhood. They’re really starting to develop their understanding of other people’s beliefs, thoughts and desires. As they’re working with a variety of people – in particular, older adults – it helps them have an understanding of the passage of time, different experiences, and provides them with another adult with whom they can connect, learn and teach.”

Wiles said younger children develop life skills by better understanding other people’s talents and perspectives. While they get some of that from interactions with parents, teachers and perhaps coaches, many of those relationships are with people of similar ages and experiences.

“When you add an older adult, you get a radically different perspective,” Wiles said. “Younger children are generally demonstrating different talents and different ways of engaging than they do in the more structured environments of family and school.”

Older adults also can often offer their undivided attention that, Wiles says, reaffirms the value of the older adult to the community, as well as providing the attention that children crave more than anything.”
“So often we know that the solution to some of the issues in early childhood is attention. We can’t always provide that. If we’re in the middle of fixing our plumbing, we can’t stop and play ball with our kid. It’s important to recognize that as parents we can’t give our undivided attention all the time.”

Wiles said intergenerational relationships benefits older adults by providing cognitive practice and engagement.

“We know that social engagement, more than anything, is the most protective factor against age-related declines in cognition, thinking and mobility,” Wiles said. “So the more opportunities we can provide for children to engage with older adults, the better off the older adults will be, and the children benefit as well.”

Wiles encourages older adults to connect with a local preschool or K-12 school system to ask about opportunities to visit classrooms and share experiences. A national program – Generations United – is an example of opportunities available to help bring older adults and children together with structured activities.

More information on child development is available online from K-State Research and Extension, and at local extension offices in Kansas.

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K-State Research and Extension statewide offices, https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html

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