Older adults, teens could be an ideal match for support during pandemic

K-State specialists say isolation affects young and old similarly

MANHATTAN, Kan. – They may be on opposite sides of the life spectrum, but older adults and teens have a lot in common during the COVID-19 pandemic.

And some of it is not good.

“We know that older adults in particular are one of the groups that are at most risk for the negative (health) effects of COVID-19, so they have really been encouraged from the beginning to be isolating themselves,” said Erin Yelland, an adult development and aging specialist at Kansas State University.

“This has been going on for so many months now that this is really beginning to take a toll on older adults, especially in regard to their longer term health outcomes.”

One of Yelland’s colleagues – Elaine Johannes, a youth development specialist – said teens and other school-age children are isolated, too, and they are experiencing their own limitations during the pandemic.

“An important goal of the teen years is to develop who they are, and the way to do that is to test identity, test friendships, test abilities and interests – either as an athlete, an artist or a caring volunteer,” Johannes said. “It’s really hard to test your identities on an iPad.”

Yelland said there are unique issues among middle-aged and older adults as a result of social isolation, such as reduced physical activity. That could lead to other physical problems, such as high blood pressure or elevated cholesterol.

“We also know that social isolation is a huge concern for the development of dementia,” she said. “We have known about that for years, but we may begin to see the effects of that now more than ever before.”

Johannes said social isolation may affect teen’s brain development, especially their ability to set goals, follow through and solve complex problems.
“Those are things that are learned through experience and time,” she said. “As the research continues to come out as to what the coronavirus is doing to younger people, it may be limiting or slowing down their ability to solve problems. They need to have experience doing that, and they need to be able to have trial and error and success.”

The two K-State specialists point out the risks involved for both age groups largely because it’s a problem that can be addressed. The most sensible response, they say, is to connect the two groups.

“The older adult, just by the fact that they have lived life, has had those trial and error and success moments,” Johannes said. “They know how to manage their stress even though they are now having stress in different ways. Younger people have not had that experience so their depression and anxieties may really be related to brain development and not having been through these tough times before.”

Yelland added: “Older adults bring wisdom, experience and life history to young adults’ perspectives on their future. Purposeful sharing and connections can be incredibly valuable to both of the individuals involved.”

Some ways that youth can support older adults is by calling them regularly or stopping by in person, with appropriate social distancing. Older adults, perhaps now retired, may be able to share their knowledge in school-related topics, such as math, science or health, to help kids with homework.

“They can also connect in different ways, maybe by talking about social things they are interested in or hobbies they like,” Yelland said.

“Younger people have gifts and talents and energy and see things a little bit differently than older people,” Johannes said. “But the older adults have history and stamina and stories.”

Johannes added that the state’s extension service, K-State Research and Extension, has a long history in helping volunteers of all ages work together collectively for the common good. She encourages people of all ages to contact their local extension agent to see what programs are available to help make those connections.

“We all know this coronavirus issue and all of the health effects and economic toll is not going to be over real soon,” Johannes said. “I recommend that communities start to be creative and create these pods of support where they can, and not wait for a large-scale initiative to occur.”

More information on issues related to aging is available online from K-State Research and Extension.
Sidebar

What about the parents?

While older adults and teens are important age groups needing support during the COVID-19 pandemic, parents of younger children need some attention, too, said K-State Research and Extension youth development specialist Elaine Johannes.

“We’re aware that there is ‘cheese between the buns,’” Johannes said. “What I mean by that is the parent who is having to take care of homeschooling their kids, keeping the family going, working their own jobs, and then maybe also taking care of their older parent.

“Honestly, this cheese between the buns is what I’m really worried about, too.”

Erin Yelland, an adult development and aging specialist, serves as an example. In addition to her job with K-State, she is raising children and taking care of an aging father with dementia and other health issues.

“I can personally speak to the intense pressure that is being put on many individuals across the world at this time,” she said. “It can be very challenging and is certainly affecting individuals’ physical and mental health.”

“I think it’s important to think about the pre-existing network of support,” she added. “Think about the people we are connected to and how we can check in on those individuals, make social connections happen as safely as possible in person again. That would be really helpful for many people.”

-30-

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story

K-State Research and Extension local offices, www.ksre.ks-state.edu/about/stateandareamaps.html

Adult Development and Aging, www.aging.k-state.edu/programs/index.html

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