



Connecting Generations During the Holidays

The holiday season brings families together and is the perfect time to catch up with each other. Our holiday conversations can reinforce our stereotypes of different generations and make communication more difficult. So, this holiday season become aware of your stereotypes and see beyond them, says Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension program specialist in aging.

Seeing beyond stereotypes can help people of different generations find common ground and enjoy one another during the holidays. The best way to overcome stereotypes is to examine how you see people of different generations.

How do you view older adults? Answer true or false to these questions from a quiz developed by Penn State Cooperative Extension:

1. Most older people (over 65 years old) have a bad memory. *False: Research shows little or no decline in short-term memory with age. Fewer than 10 percent have trouble with long-term memory.*
2. The reaction time of a younger person is faster than that of an older person. *True: Older adults have a slower reaction time when doing some types of activities.*
3. In general, most old people are pretty much alike. *False: Just like all kids are not the same, there are many differences among older people. There are rich and poor, healthy and sick, happy and sad, and those of high and low intelligence. Some evidence suggests that people become less alike as they age.*
4. The majority of old people are seldom irritated or angry. *True: In one study, over one-half said they are never or hardly ever irritated.*

Now, how do you view young people? Answer true or false for these questions:

1. Teenagers are uniquely violent and crime-prone. *False: In terms of crime volume, youths and adults contribute roughly equal rates for their respective populations.*
2. Teenagers are at high risk for suicide. *False: Teens are at very low risk for suicide. Suicide rates for high school-age youths are half those of adults.*
3. Teenagers are the most at-risk group of drug abusers. *False: Teenagers are one of the groups least likely to abuse drugs, though in recent years we see a slight increase in self-reported, occasional marijuana use by adolescents. Very few teens use harder drugs or indulge frequently.*
4. Teenagers smoke because of immaturity, peer pressure and tobacco ads. *False: Other factors besides young age contribute to the decision to smoke. For example, youth with parents who smoke are three times as likely to smoke than others.*

Now that you've tested your knowledge about people of different generations, how did you do? "It is healthy to constantly check, challenge and reassess our beliefs about people in other generations," says Brintnall-Peterson. "Family conversations during the holidays are a great opportunity to do this."

"Holidays are also a time of gift-giving, and when it comes to gift-giving the best gift for children and grandchildren is not a toy or a book," Brintnall-Peterson says. "It is an appreciation of the tradition of the holiday itself. Gifts can bring people together around common interests (such as eating, talking, singing and making things) and they can strengthen relationships within the family and reaffirm family and cultural values."

It can be a challenge to buy "family-strengthening" gifts. There is a lot of pressure to buy new and expensive gifts. Research shows that children and youth are increasingly materialistic, especially when they have materialistic parents. Children (especially the 27 million 9 to 14-year-olds) are a force that has drawn the attention of marketers.

Gifts that bring people together around common interests include handing down a hobby, a puzzle to do together, seeds for a garden, or a fishing rod. Activities might include: a hat show or fashion show, a sing-along, a "dance down" competition, sharing a favorite hobby, playing old vs. new games, or writing poetry together.

Gift-giving can be an opportunity to pass on and reaffirm family values. Consider giving:

- a family recipe (bring the ingredients with you so you can cook together);
- an heirloom (as a reflection of shared family heritage);
- a quilt made with material or a design that has family significance;
- an oral history or biographical booklet about an older adult family member; or
- supplies for a family album or a family history book (with newspaper clippings, photos and stories).

Gifts can convey the importance of volunteerism and civic engagement. As a family:

- conduct a presentation, sing a song, or play instruments at a nursing home, a children's ward at a hospital, or as part of a community event;
- cook and deliver a meal to a soup kitchen or homeless shelter; or
- join a community service project. You might help rebuild a park, deliver meals to the homebound, or paint over graffiti.

Gifts can help to build community and cultural pride. Gifts such as a set of binoculars for bird watching or a butterfly catching net can enhance appreciation of the local environment. Gifts such as a flag or a poster or banner can highlight cultural or national identity.

Brintnall-Peterson advises older adults to keep at it. Young people might not fully appreciate your efforts to heighten holiday spirit, strengthen family relations, or build respect for community and cultural traditions. Nevertheless, as they mature and start their own families, the true significance of your efforts is likely to hit home. And that is how the heritage chain in your family will remain unbroken.

Provided by Mary Brintnall-Peterson, Ph.D., Program Specialist in Aging at the University of Wisconsin-Extension. For more information or questions, contact Mary by phone (608) 262-8083 or by email at Mary.brintnall-Peterson@ces.uwex.edu.

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