

TAKING TIME

by Rebecca Wolf
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A Gift to the Next Generation

Several weeks ago I congratulated my great-grandmother on having lived in every decade of the twentieth century. (She was born in 1894.) I reflected on the changes that she and others had seen throughout their lives.

In the past fifty, even twenty years, the world has changed dramatically. Children today are facing many challenges -- challenges that older adults can help them meet.

In 1987, one out of five American children lived in poverty (rural poverty is growing twice as quickly as urban poverty). That same year, more than one-third of high school students reported having been threatened with violence during the past year. School-age children are facing rising teen suicide rates and increased availability of drugs. More than half of all children today will spend some of their growing-up years in a single-parent family. Many of these children are also "latchkey children"-- children who take care of themselves after school.

One psychologist stated that many youth show increased levels of boredom, low self-esteem, and low motivation. This may be a result of parents insulating them from natural challenges, risks, and consequences.

At the same time, our population is aging -- 30-35% of us are "grandparent-aged." Thinking about my friendships with my grandparents, I am convinced that older family members can positively influence today's children, and, in the process, make their own lives more fulfilling.

One researcher wrote, "By having an effect on the lives of children, grandparents can bring a sense of completion or fulfillment to their own lives. In many ways good deeds and effective teaching will ensure that grandparents will

live on in their children and in generations to come." Friendships with older people provide youth with:

- a realistic view of life. Research has shown that children who spend time with older people develop positive attitudes toward aging. Other children often don't.

- an exciting perspective on history. Have you ever plugged a watermelon? Do you know what a running board is? How many of you lived when FDR or Jack Kennedy was president? Until you share your stories with children, these dynamic figures are only textbook names.

- encouragement to excel and a listening ear -- rare commodities that parents are sometimes too busy to offer. Older people are usually, but not always, retired. This gives them more freedom to take time to comfort a child. It's a matter of "tapping strength from the past in order to restore hope and expectations for the future."

If you are a grandparent, I encourage you to nurture the relationships you have with your grandchildren. Spend time with them. Ask them to help you with a project. Share your interests with them. If your grandchildren live far away, "adopt" a young child in your community. (Frequently you don't have a choice; they adopt you!) Volunteer at a nearby school.

If you're a parent, encourage your child to spend time with older relatives and friends. Begin this at an early age, and it will seem natural for a child to maintain these kinds of relationships throughout a lifetime. You will also be building your child's support system. At times when a parent "just doesn't understand," your child will have another adult to go to for advice and comfort.

Friendships that bridge generations make our lives richer. It's a matter of each of us taking time to reach out.

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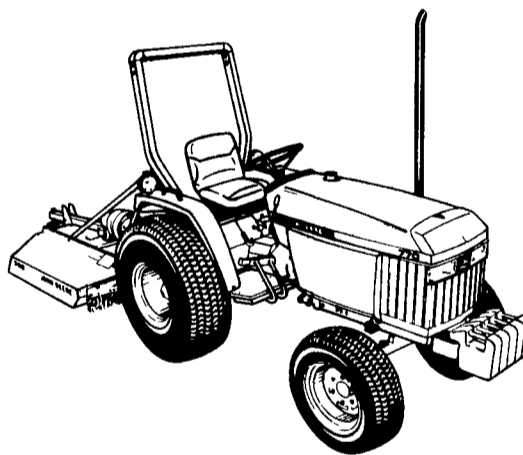
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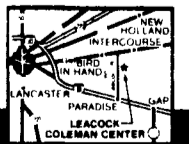
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