

Caregiver's Corner Column (September 2012)

Talking to Kids about Grandparents & Older Relatives

By Suzanne Lockwood Hayes

Seniors Helping Seniors

“You’ve got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative. Latch on to the affirmative. Don’t mess with Mr. In-Between.”

I can hear Billie Holliday singing that Johnny Mercer/Harold Arlen standard, and remember to apply it to daily living. The key to talking with kids about us older folks is to keep it positive.

My mother-in-law came to live in our town, just down the street, in her late 70’s. She smoked, drank, dressed well, dined out, flirted shamelessly, and was tons of fun. However, I did not want to bring her into our lives without preparing the kids, then ages two and four. After all, we talked about everything.

So, I announced, “Grandma Jeanne is going to be our neighbor now. We’ll be seeing a LOT more of her. She’s got pretty white hair and a really cool chair with wheels on it. She’ll be doing stuff with us. She’s Daddy’s mom. We love her.”

I’m not sure the kids ever got used to the amount of time I spent with my mother-in-law, but at least they knew about her positive traits and that it was a pleasant experience for me, most of the time.

Of course there was the spilled coffee, messy apartment and other things that puzzled my kids. After all, Grandma was a “grown up.” They got in trouble for the same behaviors. They could see the negatives. I could not eliminate them, but I did put them in terms of normal living. “Grandma’s hands don’t work as well as they used to, but she can still hug you...just not while she’s drinking coffee.” Looking back on it, I would have to say that we made accommodations, but always put them in a positive light.

Our family was blessed with several older relatives. Aunt Mary suffered a stroke, couldn’t talk real fast anymore, and tended to fall over. However, she had a smile and a hug that warmed my kids better than any I could give them. Acceptance was part of the family culture. Remember: accentuate the positive.

It is good to tip your kids off to behaviors that might cause embarrassment or concern. No one likes to be “blind sided,” including kids. If you think someone might fall over, it’s better to warn the kids with something like: “Let’s keep Aunt Mary’s walker next to her. She really likes it because it helps her with standing up and walking. That’s a good thing.” Talking frankly with the kids, on a positive note, is much better than setting up an opportunity for rude surprises.

“This is pretty cool. Grandma gets her food early, just like you kids, so she can sit down and eat and not be bothered with having to get it herself. We treat her special, because she is very dear to us.”

Talking to your kids about older relatives is a great opportunity to broach a subject there seems to be little time for in living our daily lives - manners. It makes sense to talk to your children about grandparents and older relatives in terms of how we should treat them; we accept them for who they are, and we love them.

Treating your elders like you want to be treated when attaining their station in life is something we all want. It's never too soon to start that with your kids. Just remember to "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, and don't mess with Mr. In-Between."

Note: the author has raised two children to adulthood, and hopes to be described positively to her grandchildren someday.

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