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Quality of Contact with Grandparents Is Key To Youths' Views of Ageism

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Impact of Contact With Grandparents on Children's and Adolescents' Views on the Elderly

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Ageism—stereotypes that lead to prejudice and discrimination against older people— occurs frequently in young adults and can be seen in children as young as 3. A new study from Belgium sought to identify the factors underlying this form of discrimination. It found that ageist stereotypes in children and adolescents generally decrease around ages 10 to 12, and that young people who say they have very good contact with their grandparents have the lowest levels of ageism.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Liège in Belgium, appears in the journal *Child Development*.

“The most important factor associated with ageist stereotypes was poor quality of contact with grandparents,” explains Allison Flamion, a PhD student in psychology at the University of Liège, who led the research team. “We asked children to describe how they felt about seeing their grandparents. Those who felt unhappy were designated as having poor quality of contact. When it came to ageist views, we found that quality of contact mattered much more than frequency.”

To assess aspects of ageism, the researchers studied 1,151 children and adolescents ages 7 to 16 in the French-speaking part of Belgium; the youths were primarily White, from urban and rural areas, and from a range of socioeconomic statuses. In questionnaires, the researchers asked the youths their thoughts on getting old and about the elderly. They also collected information about the health of the youths’ grandparents, how often the two generations met, and how the young people felt about their relationships with their grandparents.

In general, views on the elderly expressed by the children and adolescents were neutral or positive. Girls had slightly more positive views than boys; girls also tended to view their own aging more favorably, the researchers note.

Ageist stereotypes fluctuated with the ages of the youths studied, with 7- to 9-year-olds expressing the most prejudice and 10- to 12-year-olds expressing the least, the study found. This finding mirrors other forms of discrimination (e.g., those related to ethnicity or gender) and is in line with cognitive-developmental theories: For example, acquiring perspective-taking skills around age 10 reduces previous stereotypes. With ageism, prejudice seemed to reappear when the participants in this study reached their teen years: 13- to 16-year-olds also had high levels of ageism.

Grandparents' health was also a factor in youths' views on ageism: Young people with grandparents in poor health were more likely to hold ageist views than youths with grandparents in better health.

The most important factor influencing youths' views of the elderly was the quality of their contact with their grandparents. The study characterized youths' contact as good or very good when they said they felt happy or very happy (respectively) when they saw and shared with their grandparents. Those who described their contact with grandparents as good or very good had more favorable feelings toward the elderly than those who described the contact less positively. Furthermore, the benefit of meaningful contact occurred in both children with the lowest level of ageism and those with the highest level, and boys seemed to benefit more than girls from high-quality contact.

Frequency of contact, while mattering considerably less, also played a role: 10- to 12- year-olds who saw their grandparents at least once a week had the most favorable views toward the elderly, likely because of the multiplying effect of frequency with quality, the researchers suggest.

"For many children, grandparents are their first and most frequent contact with older adults," notes Stéphane Adam, professor of psychology at the University of Liège, who coauthored the study. "Our findings point to the potential of grandparents to be part of intergenerational programs designed to prevent ageism. Next, we hope to explore what makes contacts with grandparents more rewarding for their grandchildren as well as the effects on children of living with or caring for their grandparents."

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Impact of Contact with Grandparents on Children's and Adolescents' Views on the Elderly by Flamion, A, Missotten, P, Marquet, M, and Adam, S (University of Liège). Copyright 2017 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.