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4-H 151 Project Concern I: What it is Like to be Old

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Project Concern I: What It Is Like To Be Old

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Leo E. Lucas, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

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Project Concern I: What It Is Like To Be Old?

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Who is Old?

When does old age begin? If you ask adults if they are old they will usually answer, “compared to whom?” All people are older in age compared to those who were born later. Aging begins when you are born and continues until death.

People who have retired from working at a job a number of years are older than those who are younger, but they still may not think they are old. Two people who are both 75 may think of themselves differently. One may be active, working at a part-time job and busy with community activities while the other may be in a wheelchair and unable to leave home.

Today the United States government gives full Social Security benefits to people who are 65 years of age or older. By the year 2027, people must be 67 before they get the same full benefits. The meaning of “old” is changing. Most people may continue working today until they are 70 before they have to retire. If they own their own farms or businesses they can work for as long as they like.

Most people say that older age begins at 65, since most want to retire at this age. However, there are more differences among people 65 and over than in any younger age group. If you were to meet 10 children who were four years of age, they would be much alike in their physical and mental abilities. However, if you asked ten 70-year-olds to meet in one room, you would see big differences in the way they look, talk and walk. The older you grow the more different you become from everyone else your age.

One of America's greatest problems is a bad feeling toward people because of their age. Treating all people 65 and older as if they were sick or crazy is just as bad as calling all teenagers “bad” because a few get into trouble with police.

Today many people do not become frail until they are 85 or older. While physical abilities, energy, speed, and strength slowly decline as people age, mental abilities decline very little, if at all, unless there is brain damage. Many people do not reach their peak until after 65.
President Ronald Reagan will have served as president of the U.S. until he was nearly 78 years of age. Claude Pepper of Florida served past the age of 85 in Congress.

We must not confuse getting old with illness. Although most people over 70 suffer some things like arthritis or high blood pressure, these can be controlled to permit most activities. Older people, like all of us, get sick, but generally they recover with treatment.

Today, Americans are living longer than ever before. In 1986, nearly one in eight persons was 65 years of age or older compared with less than one in twenty in 1900. In many small towns in the midwest over one-fourth of the people are over 65. The biggest increase in our population is persons over 85. There were over 32,000 Americans over age 100 in 1984. The biggest reason for longer life is better health care at all ages. Children and adults who take good care of themselves in younger years are generally in good health in later years and tend to live longer.

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Find out what percentage of persons in your town or county are 65 years of age or older. Also discover what percentage is over 85.
2. Ask five older people at what age they think old age begins.
3. Ask five older people how they feel about their present age.
4. Sit in one place for an hour and watch people go by. Try to pick out those who are retired. What are their characteristics?
Getting to Know Your Grandparents

One way to learn about yourself is to understand more about your parents and grandparents. Part of our abilities come from our mothers and fathers. The way we look, how well we perform in sports and music, and mental abilities are passed on to us in part from our ancestors. Another part of our abilities comes from what we learn in school, church, at home, and in the community.

Have you ever wondered what makes your parents the way they are? The parents of your mother and father have shaped them just like you have been raised by your parents. Wouldn't it be interesting to learn more about your parents when they were your age? Your grandparents can tell you this because they can give you a story of your past that explains how you came to be the way you are.

You make your grandparents proud. They see you as their tie to the future. They want to keep in touch with you and know what you are doing. What you do also interests them since they raised your parents who created you. Grandparents want to help you if you give them a chance.

Grandparents can help you in many ways. First they want to be your friend. They may want to take you places, cook you a good meal, give you presents, but most of all they like to talk to you or hear from you in person or by letter or card. Everyone needs a friend and grandparents can be your most loyal friends standing by you in times of trouble.

A second way grandparents are important is to help you better know "who you are." They can tell you about the history of your family. They can tell you about cousins and aunts and uncles you don't know very well. They can tell you about their parents, your great grandparents. Most of all they will help you understand your parents by better sharing what your parents did when they were young.

Grandparents can also give you a good idea of how it feels to grow older. They are living models of older people and are an example of what it is like to grow old. You may be like them some day. You can profit from the mistakes they made as well as from their wise decisions.

Grandparents can help you know about the past which is not written in history books. They
can tell you first hand how it was in earlier days. History is a good guide to the present and a way to predict the future. Most of your grandparents lived during the Great Depression of the 1930's. They can tell you how they lived when there wasn't much money and people didn't have TV or computers.

Few children live with their grandparents in the same home. Some grandparents live near, while others live so far away you only get to see them once a year or less. Many times we hear about our grandparents through our own parents. We may get cards or letters from our grandparents and sometimes they talk to us on the phone.

You can still be close friends with your grandparents even though you don't see them very often. The best way to enjoy friendship from far away is by writing letters. Writing is better than talking on the phone for many reasons. Most of all it gives us a chance to send and receive messages that can be kept. In a phone call you often forget what you said and heard. You have to share with other family members who also want to talk. A letter gives us a chance to put down our own ideas and also it's a time to ask personal questions.

Another good thing about letters is that you can put in things you have made or pictures of things you did. A basic rule of long distance friendship is that to receive you must also write letters. Few grandparents will refuse to answer a grandchild's letter.

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Pick one of your grandparents and ask the following questions from your Activity Form. Keep the form to share with your group.
2. Do the “Explore Your Heritage” Project.
3. Write your family tree with the help of your parents.
4. Select an older person with whom to talk. Pick a subject like traveling and ask them how they got around in their early life. Ask them how they travel today.

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Grandparent Activity Form

Select one of your grandparents for an interview in person, by phone, or by letter. Ask these questions and write their answers:

1. Month, Day, and Year of Birth

2. Place of Birth

3. Full names of their father and mother

4. Full names and birth dates of each of their brothers & sisters

(If any are now dead, put year of death after each)

5. Month, Day & year of their Wedding

   Place of Wedding

6. Names & birth dates of each of their children.

(If any are now dead, put year of death after each)

7. What was the hardest part of being a parent when their children were in elementary school?

8. What were the greatest joys of being a parent?

9. What was it like when they were in elementary school?

10. Describe their first job for pay.
11. What was the biggest argument they ever had with your parents?

12. What do they most enjoy doing with grandchildren?

13. What do they most hope for their grandchildren?

14. What one thing do they wish their grandchildren would do for them?

15. What do they presently enjoy doing the most?

16. What is their most important goal in life?
Retirement is a word used to describe the time in life when people stop working for pay. The usual retirement age in America is about 65 but some people choose to retire earlier and others prefer to keep working longer.

When people stop working for pay, there are many things they may choose to do. About the only thing a retired person does not do is to work full time for pay. Many continue working in a part-time job either for pay or for fun. Those who work do so because it is their choice.

Other retired people choose not to work at all and prefer doing something totally different. They may have a hobby which they now have time to enjoy. Some men learn to cook or garden. Many women who have not worked for pay want to learn new hobbies that take them out of the home. These women now have more freedom to enjoy many activities that were not enjoyed before because of many tasks in the home.

Freedom to enjoy oneself is the greatest satisfaction of the retirement years. There are really only two major limits for retired people. First, they need enough money to enjoy a comfortable life. Second, their health should be good enough so they are not prevented from doing what they want. If these problems do not exist, how then can this freedom be enjoyed?

One of the most enjoyable ways to spend leisure time is to participate in certain activities such as swimming, tennis, golf, softball, horseshoes, bowling, hiking, pool, dancing, hunting and fishing. About the only activities they cannot do too well are contact sports such as football, basketball, and hockey. Some communities sponsor Senior Olympics for older persons. Skills learned in younger years can still be practiced quite late in life.

Another enjoyable activity for older people is travel. There are many tours planned especially for older Americans. Plane, bus and boat trips are enjoyed because far away places may be reached in the company of friends. Some retired people prefer to travel to out-of-the-way places in their own recreational vehicles or campers. They can travel south in the winter to avoid extreme cold weather and they can travel north in the summer to take advantage of a cooler climate. One favorite place to stop on a trip is for a visit with friends and relatives. A relaxed visit provides time to talk with people too far away to see very often.
Older people spend a lot of time with their friends. They can enjoy activities with friends, but conversations are the best part of their social life. Many older people belong to clubs that meet every week or so. There are centers for older people to meet, eat and enjoy activities. They enjoy participating in church services and civic groups. A higher percentage of older people vote in elections than younger persons. Many continue to learn by going to classes.

Older people who either prefer spending time at home or have to stay home because of poor health find a number of things to do. They enjoy watching TV, listening to the radio or stereo, reading books, papers and magazines, playing cards and doing handiwork such as quilting or woodworking. Many older people enjoy working in their yards and gardens. They also enjoy talking to their friends who visit or telephone.

Most retired older people still live in their own homes and stay in the towns where they worked. They know their towns very well and can still do the things they have always enjoyed. A few older people move to retirement communities where they can enjoy special services. Some, called "snowbirds" have two homes, one in the south for winter, and then their own home for the rest of the year. The freedom to move about is very rewarding to them.

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Talk with one or more retired persons about their favorite hobbies. Find out their favorite TV programs, a game or sport they enjoy, and their special interest in life. Perhaps you enjoy these same interests, too.
2. Join an older person for an activity you both like and report the results at your next meeting.
3. Ask five retired persons what they most and least enjoy about retirement.
4. Find out from your parents what they plan to do in retirement.

**NOTES:**
Managing Money in Retirement

How would you like your allowance cut by 1/4 to 1/2? This is exactly what happens when most people retire. On the good side it takes less money to live and there are certain economic benefits for retirement living.

The amount of money available for older Americans depends on how much money they saved when they were working. The sooner they start saving, the more money there is available to be used when needed. Interest is earned on the money for as long as it remains in a savings account.

Another type of payment most Americans receive when they retire is Social Security. This is based on how much money people earned during their working years, but older Americans today receive a basic payment no matter what they earned. Most of today's older people have received far more in Social Security than they paid out while working.

In the future, when you retire, payments may not be as high as today. Congress may change Social Security by the time you retire so taxes on what your children and grandchildren earn will not be too high. This is called a transfer program since today's working people are paying for the Social Security of those who are now retired.

Since most retired people receive less money than when they were working, they must learn to reduce expenses. In general, costs for food, clothing, and housing get smaller. Many older Americans move to houses which cost less or stay in older homes which may be mostly paid for. They often do not feel the need to drive a new, expensive car or wear as many new clothes as they did before retirement. They have learned to enjoy less expensive tastes such as watching TV instead of going to a movie or concert.

There is one place, however, where costs go up. Because of greater health risks, older people pay much more for medicine, hospitals and doctor bills than younger people. Even though Medicare, a health insurance part of Social Security, pays some of the costs, older people pay much more of their income for health care than others.

Even with these increased medical costs and
decreased income, older Americans today are better off than ever before. Our government has been generous in providing Social Security payments and in giving other benefits. Many free or low cost services are used by retired persons. They can get good meals at senior citizen centers. There are vans available for transportation at low cost. Many merchants give them discounts for goods and services. There are many low-cost services that are open only to those older than 60 or 65.

Hardly anyone of any age has all the money they want. Older people wish they had more money for gifts and the extras in life. However, society places fewer demands on older Americans and they generally adjust well to having less money. The last thing they want is to depend on others for money.

**ACTIVITIES**

1. One way older people can be helped is if you ask them to let you buy needed foods or other basics at the lowest possible price. Why don't you offer your closest older friends some help with shopping? Ask to buy an item for them that is hard to find or seems costly at their regular store.
2. Take a survey of stores in your community to find out which ones sell high quality products at the lowest prices. What discounts do they offer? Share your findings with your friends.
3. Find out how much income is received and how much expense one of your older friends has during a month. Is there any money left over at the end of the month?

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Health is a concern of people at all ages but aging adults tend to have more chronic (long lasting) illnesses which may have started long before age 65. Older Americans also have body changes that make it easier to pick up infections and have accidents.

It is not easy to list all physical changes that occur with age. These do not occur at the same speed in all people but they tend to become more common at ages over 85.

### Physical Changes with Aging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heart Condition</td>
<td>higher blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, and poorer circulation lowering body temperature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigestion</td>
<td>food remains in stomach longer causing gas and heartburn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constipation</td>
<td>lack of ability to move bowels regularly due to inactivity, lack of fiber foods and not enough liquids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidney Problems</td>
<td>need to go to the bathroom more often.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lung Problems</td>
<td>less oxygen is kept causing loss of energy and shortness of breath.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing Loss</td>
<td>harder to hear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyesight Decline</td>
<td>lack of ability to see clearly and the need for more lighting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nervous System Decline</td>
<td>nerve signals move more slowly causing slower reaction time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone Weakness</td>
<td>bones become more brittle due to loss of minerals and bone mass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat Cell Increase</td>
<td>overweight problems increase.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These normal physical declines in the body increase slowly with age after about 40. For most people it is not noticed. Such declines in eyesight and hearing loss can be corrected by glasses and hearing aids. Other declines can be controlled by healthy living. Four out of five health problems can be either prevented or delayed. There are living habits which can be started in the younger years to slow down this physical decline in the later years. These four habits all begin with the letter E.

**Eating properly** requires a healthy diet while avoiding dangerous drugs like alcohol and nicotine. Everyone must learn to eat balanced meals every day with nutrients from the basic four food groups: (1) Milk and dairy products; (2) meat, eggs and other proteins; (3) bread and other cereals; and (4) fruits and vegetables. Older people need to cut down on fats, salt and sugar but increase use of foods containing high fiber, protein and carbohydrates.

**Exercising regularly** is another habit to slow down physical aging. The best exercises for older Americans are walking, swimming, and daily stretching. There are even exercises for people who can’t get out of bed or are in wheelchairs. Exercise has more benefits than preventing disease. It is fun and lets you be with friends.

The third habit is **enough rest and relaxation**. Just as the body needs exercise, it also requires enough rest to recover from body strains and sore muscles. People of all ages need seven to eight hours of sleep per night. Older people must learn their body signals which tell them, "Slow down; you are going too fast; it is time for a break." A good laugh is the best way for the body and mind to relax.

The final "E" is to have an **examination regularly**. Just as your teachers give tests to see what you know, your doctor needs to examine your body. If an older person is feeling well and is in good health, physical exams are needed every two or three years. If an older person is frail, an exam should be given every six months or a year. There are two reasons why exams should be given regularly. First, people should see if the medicines they are taking are still needed. Second, tests should be given to look for any new diseases. If most problems can be discovered early, serious illness and even death can be stopped. Your doctor can prescribe diets, drugs, or exercises that can prevent serious problems later on that are just beginning to show up. One of the most important persons in the life of older Americans is their doctor.

Since the average person over 65 has one or more chronic illnesses, it is important to know some of the most important ones. Here are a few:

Most of these diseases can be controlled by proper diet, healthy habits, and medicine. However, some may lead to death. The three leading causes of death for persons over 65 are heart disease, cancer, and strokes. The risks of cancer increase with age, but with early dis-

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**Chronic Ills of Elderly**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arthritis</td>
<td>Disease of the joints which slows movements and causes pain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoporosis</td>
<td>Loss of bone mass, difficulty to maintain normal posture and easy for bones to break.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atherosclerosis</td>
<td>Arteries harden which narrows path of blood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>Lack of ability of body to use excess sugar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periodontal Disease</td>
<td>Disease of gums leading to loss of teeth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulmonary Disease</td>
<td>Disease caused by breakdown in lung tissue.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
covery, people can be treated to postpone death for five or more years. Strokes may not be fatal and the paralysis may be treated. With proper treatment, people may recover from most of their serious illnesses. With new forms of treatment like heart bypass surgery, a heart attack may even be successfully treated.

Most older Americans do not lose brain power. Less than one person in ten suffers from mental diseases. However, there are diseases of the brain which are inherited or caused by accidents. Over one-half of older people who suffer from mental illness have a condition called Alzheimers disease which has no cure. People who suffer from brain diseases usually live in nursing homes where they receive 24 hour-a-day care. However, only one person in twenty over 65 lives in a nursing home.

ACTIVITIES

1. Your assignment is to pick one of the chronic ills most commonly found among elderly people you know. Go to a library or encyclopedia, and prepare a report on this disease. Describe the symptoms, find out the causes, describe the treatment, and finally discover how it can be prevented. Bring your report to your next meeting.

2. Ask a doctor who has many older patients to explain the most common ailments of the old in your community.

3. Ask two older persons to describe their ailments and how they are being treated. What precautions must they take?

4. Visit a hospital or nursing home and ask a nurse to describe the treatment given to older persons.

NOTES: ________________________________________________
This world is the only place for sure where you will never get out alive. Every person, animal and plant will die someday. The only question left is, "when will a person die?" Death can occur at any age by accident or disease but most people today live well past the age of 65.

Death occurs when the heart stops beating and a person can no longer breathe. This can be caused by any number of things. Many people believe that when a person or animal dies the spirit still lives. The memory of those persons continues long after their death. Loved ones feel sad for a long time because once dead, there is no way life can be restored.

The average man in the U.S. who is 65 years of age can be expected to live until he is 79. The average woman of this age usually lives to about 83. Since women outlive men, they most often experience widowhood, a term given to a person whose husband or wife has died.

What can you do when your grandfather or grandmother dies? The most important thing is to accept this death and to give your relatives all the love and support you can find. The survivors will be sad for a long time and they need your love and understanding. You and your parents will also be sad. This is normal because you have had an important loss in your life. It is okay to feel sad and even cry when you want to. Other people will understand. If you feel strong enough, you should try to go to the funeral. You will get to see other relatives and listen to the life achievements of your dead grandparent.

There are some things that can make you feel good when a grandparent dies. First of all they will no longer have to suffer pain that they endured during the last part of life. They are at peace with the world. Next, death brings relief to those giving care to the dying. If your grandfather died, your grandmother no longer must provide care and she is relieved of the strain of constant worry and caregiving. Finally since everyone must die sometime, you must understand that death is natural. Nothing that anyone can do will prolong physical life forever.

What if your grandparents have't died but one of them is very ill and close to death? Older persons near death most often already know that they will soon die. If you are visiting a relative near death here are a few simple rules to follow:
1. Let them take the lead in asking you questions they have. Speak clearly to them in a courteous way. Stay only as long as they want your company.

2. Let them know you care about them. Hug and kiss them gently if they want to.

3. If conversation begins to lag, tell them about some earlier experiences you enjoyed with them. You do not have to talk every minute; just being there is important.

4. If they talk about dying, show that you understand. Don't make it hard by refusing to accept that they are going to die.

5. This will be a sad time for you. A dying person may look very different from the person you once knew. If you feel like crying, you have permission to do that. They will understand.

Most older people die either in hospitals or nursing homes. It is hard to visit them there. You may want to send them a card, letter or something else they can remember from you. Some older people must stay in bed for a long time before they die. They do, however, want to see their relatives and you should grant this wish if they want to see you.

One important service for dying patients is called “Hospice”. This is a program where doctors, nurses, social workers, church people, and volunteers provide a dying person with special treatment to permit death with dignity. Pain is usually cut down with medicine and everything is provided to make dying as comfortable as possible. Some dying people prefer to be moved into their own homes. This way is more natural and they can see their favorite pets, flowers, and relatives.

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Visit a very sick person in a hospital or nursing home. Follow rules listed above.
2. Find out from an older widow or widower how they have adjusted to death.
3. Attend a funeral and write what happened.

**NOTES:**

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Having a Life Celebration Party

Now that you have learned some things about growing older, wouldn't it be fun to do something nice for a group of older persons. Everybody likes a party. Why not plan a party for your older friends or grandparents?

As an end to your project, plan a party to celebrate life with your leaders and parents. You feel special about your birthday because other people remember you with presents and cards. Your life has been remembered on each birthday. Your group can give a life celebration party for your older friends. Bring them with you to your party to celebrate living a long time.

Here are some ideas about planning a party:
1. Pick a time when older people can come. Ask your older guests when they would like to have a party.
2. Pick a place that is easy to get to that has a kitchen and dining room.
3. Plan to have food and drinks that all ages will enjoy. An easy way is for each family to bring a favorite dish.
4. Entertainment can be provided by songs or skits performed by 4-H members. Adults love to be entertained.
5. Plan a few games that everyone can do. Older adults enjoy all kinds of games except those that require fast physical movement.
6. Plan a short program where one or more 4-H members talk about the contributions of older Americans to all of us. After the program, ask all 4-H members to introduce their guests and give each guest a chance to say a few words.
7. Organize the party so that each person is on one of these committees:
   a. Arrangements - Get a place and send out invitations.
   b. Food - Set up tables, arrange foods, pro-
vide plates, cups, napkins, silverware and provide drinks.

c. Program - Arrange for entertainment, games and a short program.

d. Cleanup - Clean things up after the party.

Make your party fun for young and old alike. Each member has the duty to invite and bring at least one older guest to the party. Call them at least a week ahead of time. Plan with your parents to pick them up, take them to the party, and then take them home.

Celebration of life should not only take place on birthdays. Living a long time is joyful. Learn to show your love for your older friends while they are still enjoying life.