

By Natalie Tucker Miller, IAC-CC

Respecting Our Elders

Building a platform for stronger, gentler and easier relationships

As the population shifts to accommodate the rapidly growing 65+ demographic, we'll begin to see many of our clients' needs shift. Whether we're coaching people who are part of this developmental stage or clients who take on the responsibility of senior and elder care, there are specifics to consider that might not be as necessary with other clientele.

Several years ago my mother asserted, "You've never been 80, so please don't assume to know what's best for me." One of the primary truths of life is that, at least in our current physical iteration, we have not experienced the age of the elders in our care. This is a major consideration that is often overlooked by the weary and worrisome children of elder parents and the executives, administrators and caregivers who are spread thin by the demands of a largely understaffed profession.

We often hear adult children of aging parents express sentiments such as, "I am parenting my par-

ents" and in the care-giving field, "It's like working with children." Although the above C.S. Lewis quote appears to indicate a reversion to a former time – and it *can* feel as though our elders have regressed – there are clear distinctions to the contrary. If we are to connect meaningfully and purposefully with our elders, it will serve us to acknowledge and understand those distinctions. We can then alter the language to better reflect our roles and relationships.

Ultimately, this has the power to lessen the negative emotions that often drive us when we spend time with our elders, and to create a lasting legacy of love.

So if we're not "parenting our parents," what exactly are we doing?

As parents, we notice our children approaching the world from curiosity, whereas elders are at a stage of reflection. Similar behaviors may emerge from these points of reference; however, when we respond in

*"Someday you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again."
— C.S. Lewis*

accordance with these different stages, we begin to build a bridge of connection. Imagine the possibility of more and more people honoring the later stages of life by responding with this in mind, increasing the likelihood of addressing the unique needs of individuals as well as providing the platform for stronger yet gentler and yes, easier, relationships.

Consider the examples in the box at lower left of what certain behaviors might indicate when conveyed by a young person vs. an elder. Remembering these distinctions can help us guide our clients to more rewarding and fulfilling lives.

My mother, now past the age of 88 and living in the mysterious world of dementia, continues to appreciate being treated with the dignity she is rightfully due. There are more and more modifications that need to be addressed as her abilities change. However, I choose to remain fully aware that my role is not that of parent, but of a child who is curious about what discoveries will come with each new interaction. •

Natalie Tucker Miller is a coaching instructor and founder of Ageless-Sages, publisher of picture books for elders and adults.

BEHAVIOR	POSSIBLE MEANING FOR CHILD	POSSIBLE MEANING FOR ELDER
Attention seeking:	Not getting the recognition they feel they deserve.	Desiring a connection with and understanding from the people with whom they are in direct contact.
Resistance to suggestions:	Feeling the need to have limits lifted commensurate with their expanding abilities.	Wanting freedom of choice within the imposed boundaries created by a diminished capacity of function.
Argumentative in conversation:	Needing to be acknowledged for their growth and knowledge.	Needing to be honored for their accumulated wisdom.

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