

# Early Children's Literature and Aging

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## Abstract

Increased longevity is a worldwide phenomenon placing emphasis on the need for preparation for life's later years and for maximizing the potentials of these years. Today's children will be the older adults of tomorrow. A resource that can help to educate them about aging and prepare them for the long life ahead is early children's literature (Preschool-Primary). This literature can provide children with a holistic view of aging, teach them about aging and the aging process, promote positive attitudes about aging, and promote positive aging. Selecting early children's literature for aging content, resources for finding early children's literature to promote positive aging, and examples of early children's literature to promote positive aging are presented.

## Keywords

Aging, Aging Education, Ageism, Positive Aging, Early Children's Literature, Book Award for Best Children's Literature on Aging

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## 1. Introduction

There is a universality to aging; we are all doing it! Today's children will be the older adults of tomorrow. In the U.S. a child can expect to live to be 80, 90, or even 100 years old (Administration on Aging, 2016). Worldwide, children will spend an increasingly large part of their lives as older adults. They need to be prepared for living a long life in an aging world (Couper & Pratt, 1999; Crawford, 2015).

It is common for a significant lag to exist between the emergence of a situation and general recognition of its relevance, especially when the situation develops gradually over time (Couper & Pratt, 1999). This appears to be what has happened with the longevity revolution. In spite of the fact that growing longevity and issues of population aging are constantly in the public eye, the process of preparing people for this long life has received little attention.

Unfortunately, people are often not educationally, socially, or emotionally prepared for old age and often reach old age with little or no formal education on aging or anticipatory guidance about aging. Frequently what people are exposed to in relation to aging are the “problems” of old age and the pathology of aging. Older adults are often thought of in terms of the devastating d’s of: death, dying, dependence, disability, disease, and dementia. What results is often a “nursing home” mentality of aging, ageist attitudes, and gerontophobia.

Aging is an important issue on individual, societal, and global levels (Crawford, 2015). It is past time to make significant efforts to promote positive aging. Positive aging is a contemporary term and represents attitudes, lifestyles, and activities that maximize the potentials and quality of life of life’s later years. The foundation for positive aging should begin during youth. Children need to understand that there is great potential for good health, activity, happiness, and creativity at all stages of life.

Possibly, the most important factor influencing how people age, is their attitude about aging (Dychtwald & Fowler, 1990). Research has consistently shown that people who have positive attitudes and self-perceptions about aging are living longer, healthier lives than their counterparts who do not (Levy et al., 2016; Levy, Pilver, & Pietryzak, 2014; Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002; Levy, Slade, Murphy, & Gill, 2012; Levy, Slade, Zonderman, & Ferrucci, 2011; Levy, Zonderman, Slade, & Ferrucci, 2009). These attitudes and self-perceptions are important since those who expect a downward course at a certain age tend to live life accordingly (McGuire, Klein, & Couper, 2005). Ageist attitudes tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. Unfortunately, “research has consistently shown that children as young as three evidence ageist attitudes and that as the child grows up these attitudes become more negative” (Couper & Pratt, 1999: p. 7). It is important to prevent and combat these attitudes and assist children in planning for the long life ahead of them.

Children with positive attitudes about their own aging and the aging of others will live more fulfilling lives. They will have the understanding, and self-confidence to adapt to aging, and the ability to promote societal valuing of this later stage of life. They will be able to realize that old age does not have to be a time of personal and societal devaluation, but a time of continued growth, development, and fulfillment. The images of older adults in children’s literature play an important role in attitude formation.

This article addresses the importance of teaching about aging, early children’s literature in relation to attitudes about aging, and the potential of this literature to lay a foundation for positive aging. It incorporates information on selecting early children’s literature for aging content, resources for finding early children’s literature to promote positive aging, and examples of early children’s literature with positive portrayals of aging.

## 2. Teaching about Aging: A Literature Approach

Literature educates children and exposes them to social values, attitudes, and beliefs. The images of older people in children’s literature play an important role in attitude

formation. Concepts and information that could otherwise be difficult for young children to understand can be shared through literature. The following is an excerpt from a classic document on why children need to learn about aging by Mr. Fran Pratt, the founder and past director of both the *Teaching and Learning about Aging Project* and the *Center for Understanding Aging*. Although this education involves cognitive knowledge it should also emphasize the affective domain of learning. Through literature children learn about growing up and growing older at a developmental level they are able to comprehend, begin thinking about the long life ahead of them, and start the journey to positive aging. The following illustrates the importance of aging education and teaching children about aging.

Children learn about aging whether we teach them or not. The issue is not whether they learn, but rather what they learn about the lifelong process of growing up and growing older. If left to happenstance, children learn about aging in the same ways they learn about so many other things—simply by absorbing what they see, often without being able to distinguish between fact and fiction... All too often, what children learn about aging is based on myths about the aging process and on stereotypes of older people that are deeply entrenched in our culture. These myths and stereotypes are transmitted from one generation to another in our language, humor and literature, and through all the media by which we perpetuate the knowledge, values and attitudes of our society... For all these reasons, children need to learn about aging. It is better to prevent than to cure, easier to learn than to unlearn. Children should begin at the earliest possible age to develop a healthy and realistic view of aging, to understand that they can maximize their own opportunities for quality of life, and to develop understanding of the complex issues of living in an aging world (Pratt, 1992: pp. 101-102).

When Ansello (1977) published his seminal work on aging in children's literature he found that illustrations of older characters were rare and that older people were underrepresented and stereotyped. Subsequent reviews of the literature largely concur with these earlier findings (Ansello, 1988; Hollis-Sawyer, Cuevas, English, & Wheeler, 2007; James & Kormanski, 1999; McGuire, 2003; McGuire, 2016; McGuire, Senter, & Stevens, 2013). Early children's literature (Preschool-Primary) remains almost void of older people and frequently fails to fully develop older characters or give them meaningful roles. The underrepresentation of older adults in this literature is a form of "ageism by invisibility" and mirrors situations in society that are often void of older adults. Books are an important tool to learn about aging and begin preparing for the long life ahead.

### **3. Selecting Early Children's Literature for Aging Content**

Unfortunately, ageism has crept into children's literature (Crawford, 2000; Crawford, 2015; Dodson & Hause, 1981; Hollis-Sawyer & Cuevas, 2013; Hollis-Sawyer et al., 2007; McGuire, 2005; McGuire et al., 2013). Although ageism is not likely the intentional message of the author or illustrator, the message is there. If not carefully selected, the images

of aging in this literature may lead to a biased understanding of aging (Hollis-Sawyer et al., 2007). Aging stereotypes are frequently transmitted through children's literature (Hollis-Sawyer & Cuevas, 2013). This makes it increasingly important to incorporate early children's literature that has meaningful, positive portrayals of older adults, helps children see the potentials of aging, and promotes positive aging. Stories that have positive, meaningful images of older people are excellent choices for children and avoid supporting or reinforcing age-related myths, stereotypes and bias (Crawford, 2000; Crawford, 2015; Dodson & Hause, 1981; McGuire, 2003; Simeon, 2016). When selecting children's literature for aging content it is important to consider things such as:

- is the older character portrayed in a non stereotypic manner;
- are older adults portrayed as valuable and contributing members of society;
- does the older character play a vital role in the story;
- is the older person portrayed as independent and active.

Literature selected for this age group should not focus on the devastating d's previously mentioned. These events are not synonymous with aging and focusing on them in this literature can inhibit positive attitude formation about aging, promote negative self-perceptions of aging, and support aging stereotypes. When addressed, they can be done within a lifespan context since people can become ill, disabled, dependent, and die at all ages (McGuire et al., 2005). Books on these topics can be helpful for situational use with children (Crawford, 2015).

Books that help children to see they are growing up and growing older are excellent choices. Picture book biographies illustrate growing up and growing older (Bader, 2013) and promote positive aging. The *Rookie Biography Series* presents interesting picture biographies for young readers. Books in the series generally end with inspirational suggestions for children about things such as being willing to work for change, working hard for something you believe is right, helping others, and working to make things better for people.

Encourage the use of books that illustrate lifespan activities, and help children to see their "elder within". Dychtwald & Fowler (1990) used the term "elder within" to describe the older person within us, what we would like to be and do as an older person, and our older potentials. Visualizing their elder within helps children to realize that they are growing up and growing older, that someday they will be older adults, and what old age can be for them.

When sharing the books with children it is important to evaluate one's own attitudes about aging. Ageist attitudes are contagious and children will assimilate the attitudes of those around them. Promote attitudes that illustrate the potentials of aging and what life's later years can be. Review books before using to assure appropriateness for content, reading level, and reading audience.

#### 4. Filling the Gaps in This Literature

Many gaps remain in children's literature in relation to aging. When depicted, most books for early readers depict the older character(s) as a grandparent. Look for books

that have roles other than grandparent for children to aspire to. Children need to see the heterogeneity of aging and that there are a many roles for them in old age. Multiple roles and experiences for older adults need to be addressed if children are to see the kaleidoscope of life that is aging.

It is well known that older adults hold leadership positions, work as volunteers, take part in community life and activities, date and marry, travel, engage in lifelong learning and educational activities, participate in exercise and athletic activities, use technology, and are scientists, artists, musicians, and authors; yet these roles and activities are not well represented in early children's literature. Topics such as going to college, Road Scholar (formerly Elderhostel), and Senior Olympics are missing. However, there is an excellent movie, *Age of Champions* that shows real life Senior Olympic athletes competing in Senior Games. Topics such as the Older Americans Act, Older Americans Month, the National Institute on Aging, the Administration on Aging, Social Security, and Senior Centers are relatively missing from this literature.

There is much work to be done to encourage authors and publishers to be aware of how aging is presented in their publications and take a more active role in promoting positive aging. Some authors such as Eve Bunting, Barbara Cooney, Amy Hest, Patricia Polacco, Cynthia Rylant, Harriet Ziefert, and Charlotte Zolotow have consistently written books that support positive aging. Some resources for locating early children's literature that educates about aging and promotes positive aging follow.

## **5. Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) Children's Book Award**

In 2009, the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) started the AGHE *Book Award for Best Children's Literature on Aging* (Preschool-Primary). The award strives to heighten awareness of authors and publishers on how older adults are portrayed in this literature, highlight books that have positive, meaningful portrayals of older adults, and recognize books that promote positive aging. The award is given bi-annually at the AGHE conference. Books that have won award are: *Papa Chagall, Tell Us a Story* (Anholt, 2014), *Rock, Brock and the Savings Shock* (Bair, 2006), *Sometimes It's Grandmas and Grandpas, Not Mommies and Daddies* (Byrne, 2009), *The Golden Rule* (Cooper, 2007), *Ain't Nobody a Stranger to Me* (Grifalconi, 2007), & *Marching With Aunt Susan: Susan B. Anthony and the Fight for Women's Suffrage* (Murphy, 2011), *Niwechihaw/I Help* (Nicholson, 2008), and *The Turtle of Oman* (Nye, 2014). Anyone can nominate books for the award by contacting AGHE. Additionally, an extensive listing of selected children's books on aging is available at the AGHE site under "Publications".

A description of the award, the award selection process, and a listing of the award winners is available at the AGHE website <http://www.aghe.org> (click on Membership and then "Awards"). This award is an important resource for combating ageism and promoting positive portrayals of older adults, but unfortunately is not well known (Simeon, 2016). The award recognizes and champions the need to lay a foundation for

positive aging with young children. Award books are excellent choices for young readers.

## 6. A Is for Aging, B Is for Books

The A is for Aging, B is for Books website (<http://www.lindseymcdivitt.com>) is an excellent resource for locating early children's literature with positive aging content and is updated regularly. Books are selected with respect and love for older adults, avoid negative stereotypes in text and illustrations, and highlight the gifts and strengths of older adults as role models. Books on the website "stay away from narrow portrayals of older adults and acknowledge the variety of interests, abilities, and talents that do not melt away with old age, but grow with experience" (McDivitt, 2015). The website provides informative links, presents reasons why it is important to seek out positive aging picture books, and notes that children's literature can be used to combat ageism.

## 7. Growing up and Growing Older: Books for Young Readers Annotated Bibliography

This annotated booklist began as an attempt to locate early children's literature (Pre-school-Primary) that would educate about aging and help promote positive aging (McGuire, 2016). This age range was selected in an attempt to help prevent and combat early ageist attitude formation and build a foundation for positive aging. The booklist is regularly updated is available free, online at <http://library.lmunet.edu/booklist> and at [http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_nurspubs/26](http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_nurspubs/26). Early versions of the booklist were catalogued in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) (McGuire, 1987, 1992, 2000) and were AgeShare publications for the Center for Understanding Aging. In addition to the AGHE *Book Award for Best Children's Literature on Aging* winners, classics such as *Miss Rumphius* (Cooney, 1982), *Mr. George Baker* (Hest, 2007), *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991), *Miss Tizzy* (Gray, 1998), *Emma* (Kesselman, 1993), *Sea Swan* (Lasky, 1998), *The Keeping Quilt* (Polacco, 1988), *Lunchtime for a Purple Snake* (Ziefert, 2003), and *I Know a Lady* (Zolotow, 1992) are included.

The bibliography includes *books-in-print* and *out-of-print books*, includes tables of: *Favorite Books-in-Print*, 2) *Favorite Out-of-Print Stories* (OOPS), and 3) *Books With Multicultural Content*. Future editions of the booklist are planned to include topical book listings such as: intergenerational learning, intergenerational friendship, community service, work, retirement, and financial planning. Diversity in children's books is important. The multicultural section of the booklist highlights books with cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. There is a need to recognize and highlight such diversity in children's literature.

## 8. Conclusion

It is past time to recognize that today's children need to be prepared for the long life ahead of them, be educated about aging, and have positive self-perceptions of aging. Early children's literature is a valuable tool to educate about aging, promote positive at-

titudes about aging, and promote positive aging. Books are commonly purchased for home, school, and community use. They are an accessible and excellent resource that can readily be incorporated in everyday life, promote intergenerational learning, and lead into discussions about growing up and growing older.

By promoting positive aging, the quality of life can be improved for today's and tomorrow's elderly—of which today's children will be a part. “Only as children view their own aging and the elderly positively will they be able to achieve the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness that are considered rights of each in our society” (Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper, & Serock, 1976: p. 3). These are goals worth achieving and we can all be part of it.

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