



There's an extensive amount of literature on developing healthy, happy, and independent children. One area we all could use a little boost on is helping kids and young adults to value what it means and what it takes to be a family caregiver.

Developing this life skill can be easily overlooked. With a little intention, we all can make an impact in establishing healthy families and communities. A recent encounter helped me give closer thought to this subject.

I was having coffee with a woman who raised seven kids. She was a widow, lived on her own, and was 78 years old. All of her kids were married and had solid jobs. Half of them lived in nearby towns and the other half were scattered across a few states. All of her kids owned their own homes and raised their own families with little to no help from mom and dad. None of the seven were ever arrested, had problems with substance abuse, or had domestic concerns. When her kids would gather for family events, they would all share hearty laughs, they never swore or used foul language in front of their parents, and showed great respect for each other. They were all loving, good, and caring people.

Anyone hearing this knows this is quite a feat. All seven of her adult children were now married, financially independent, relatively healthy, and had no problems with drugs or alcohol. Plus, they all enjoyed each other's company.

My goodness, as I write this it's hard for me to believe it's even possible to raise a family like this, especially in today's world. Clearly, when her kids were young, parenting styles were different. Even so, with that many kids she had to be an impeccable role model. She walked the talk on every level of family values and it showed. I recall an unexpected comment from her one day and was shocked when she told me that she missed the mark in being a good mother.

"Are you kidding?!" I replied. I reminded her of her stellar family and that their success was grounded on her consistent loving upbringing. Her style was always to give her kids free rein, let them learn how to struggle, and make decisions on their own. She did not impose herself upon any of them. This parenting style fostered their creativity and independence.

After my attempt to console her she politely reflected, "I know that's what I did, but I missed an important lesson. When my mother needed help, I felt that it was "my responsibility." I did not want to bother my children by involving them in any of those details. My kids would often ask about Grandma, but I never went out of my way to invite them to be involved in her caregiving process. It wasn't my style. Looking back, it didn't help them know or

understand how they all could be part of family caregiving. Now I need help and they just don't understand."

At first I found myself thinking, "How can this be? Wouldn't it be obvious to adults when someone such as their mother needed help? Especially when this person lived alone, was frail, and elderly?" The truth is, no, it's not necessarily obvious at all. Unless there is a dramatic change that clearly exemplifies the need for help, many people don't naturally offer or even understand how to care for a loved one . . . especially if it hadn't been part of their upbringing.

When kids are young, you have an incredible opportunity to teach them about family caregiving. If this is not done carefully, however, you run the risk of being ineffective. For teens, requests for help can fall on deaf ears followed with a response of, "Why, mom? Can't so and so do it?" When the battles become more than you want to deal with, you may avoid putting off any effort whatsoever in providing a caregiving life experience. Oftentimes I hear from parents, "It's just too much work. I've already got enough on my plate." I completely understand, though I encourage you to forge ahead in helping your children acquire important life lessons through light-heartedly inclusion with people who need help.

It's true that times have changed. We live in a fast-paced world. Instant gratification and conveniences have made younger generations accustomed to getting things fairly easily. There's also a lot of distractions and conflicting priorities in life. Extracurricular activities and extensive job demands have taken us away from understanding the importance of showing care and concern to others. This is why being creative and vigilant in exposing kids and young adults to caregiving experiences is so important. When we fail to provide these experiences we fall short in teaching a vital life skill - caregiving.

You may ask yourself, "What can I do to change this?" Here are a few things to consider.

### Be Positive

If you are providing care to a parent, family member, or friend, be mindful of your own behavior and attitude regarding caregiving. Remember that kids and young adults pay close attention to our words, mannerisms, and body language. They're always looking to us as the example. Take heart of the old saying, "What goes around, comes around." Talk matter-of-factly and positivity about caregiving so they can be more open and receptive to this subject. During challenging times, find a way to keep yourself in check, like taking a few deep breaths or stepping out for fresh air. Be careful to not create or include them in the drama. Be aware of your own persona so you can be a positive role model.

### Reach Out

Taking initiative to help kids and young adults experience components of caregiving can be done in simple ways. Running an errand or delivering a treat can give a teenager some extra driver's education time. Arts and crafts projects that include "Thinking of You" cards or other trinkets can show ways to bring a smile to an ailing aunt, uncle, neighbor, or friend. I knew one family that established "Grandma Tuesdays" when the kids were in high school. This involved having the teenagers pick up Grandma from her house so they would

learn how to help her in and out of a car. At first the parents modeled the behavior. As time went on everyone knew how to jump in and help. Instinctively they offered an arm, patiently listened, and became more accepting of things taking a little more time. The weekly gathering also helped improve comfort levels and skills in communicating with Grandma as her health continued to decline. When Grandma moved to an assistive living facility everyone understood why it was important to stay involved and visit. It was just another stage of life and their involvement remained important.

### Stick With It

We all have good intentions and want to help others, but life gets in the way. Taking time to plan ahead and schedule caregiving experiences can help you be consistent. Partnering with other friends and their kids, relatives or cousins, or other respected adults in the community can make it easier to motivate kids and young adults in participating in caregiving activities. This can be especially helpful at the latter part of life when it may feel awkward or uncomfortable to interact with someone. It's also important to reinforce caregiving experiences throughout life. I know of two adult siblings who give each other gentle reminders to stay in touch with family outside of standard holidays. They interject positive outreach with their adult children and grandkids to help extended family and neighbors. Now that their own parents have passed away, they realize it's up to them to keep "care and concern" alive in their families.

Growing old and/or living with changes in health is a natural part of life. We all know that trauma, chronic illness, and disability can occur at any time and to people of all types of health and fitness levels. Teaching our kids that life transitions can occur at any time and that it's commonplace to step up to help in unconditional ways can show them how to be more accepting of change, become better problem solvers, and ultimately empower them to overcome their own life challenges. The power to teach starts with being positive, mindful, and consistent in your practices. Remember, you're not alone and can work with others to create a positive community of care in your family and neighborhood. It's never too late to lead by example.

*In her former role as Founding Director of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago LIFE Center, Kristine Cichowski developed an award-winning education center for families and people faced with physical disabilities and chronic illness. Kristine currently provides education and training to businesses, schools, and community groups on family caregiving, disability inclusion, self-advocacy, and leadership through her company Power To Be. To learn more, visit [www.powertobe.net](http://www.powertobe.net).*

