

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Preparing Your Children to Visit Your Parent

Visiting an elderly grandparent who is frail and ill can be tough for your children whether they're youngsters or teens. There are things you can do before that meeting to make the time together less stressful and more rewarding for both generations.

- First, always remember to treat each child in a way that is appropriate for his or her age. Give your kids the basic information about their grandparent's condition in words they can understand. For example, "emphysema" probably means nothing to them. Tell them Grandma may have trouble breathing and some difficulty talking. She may need some oxygen. Describe an oxygen tube what it does and how it helps her to breathe.

Tell them you hope years from now they will remember this day, this visit—this person who has meant so much to you.

- Talk about what equipment is being used. For instance, if your parent is on an I.V. or has a catheter bag hanging beside the bed. Kids are amazingly curious and "just looking around" may be the way for them to pass the time. Let them know you'll answer question after the visit with Grandpa.

- Go over appropriate and inappropriate behavior, whether the visit is taking place in a bedroom, a nursing home or the hospital. There's no running around. And like a library or a church, it's a quiet place. And we use our "quiet voices."

- Warn them that all visitors may need to step out of the room if Grandpa has to take care of some personal business with a nurse or attendant.

- If Grandma has dementia, talk about what symptoms the children might see. Explain how she might not recognize them—or you—and might speak as if a long-dead relative is still living.

- Remind your children that when they aren't feeling well they tend to be cranky. The same is true with grown-ups. Grandpa may seem angry or get upset easily but it's not because he's mad at them.

- Offer some suggestions for what they might talk about with their grandparent. They can tell what they're doing in school. They can talk about their sports team or about their pets.

- Suggest that younger children might want to prepare some homemade gift, maybe a drawing to hang on the wall. Explain to older ones that their visit is a gift, one that can mean a great deal to their grandparent.

- Remember that your children may have very few, or no, memories of this person, especially if you live a distance from your parent and, over the years, visiting has been limited. Your father may seem to be only a little old man lying in bed. Tell your kids stories about him. About the Dad you knew. This will help your children understand why it's so important to you that they see him. So important they get to spend time together. Then, too, you're proud of your children and you want your parent to see them.

- It might help to dig out the old family photo albums. Let your kids see pictures of Mom when she was young. Celebrating birthdays. Opening Christmas presents. Enjoying a vacation. Help your children understand she has a history. She has lived a long life.

- Prepare yourself to talk about death with your children. Don't just wing it on the spot. This may be especially difficult, but just as you talk about how life begins when there's a newborn around, talk about how life ends. How Grandpa is near the end of life on earth and what that means. Why it's important that, just as life is respected when it comes into the world, so it needs to be as it leaves.

- Talk about how precious life is. And how, just because someone is bedridden, just because someone isn't making money, it doesn't mean that person's life has no value. Maybe this is a time for Grandma to pray. Maybe it is a time to reminisce with family and friends and say good-bye. Maybe it is all of those, a time to prepare for the life that comes after this life.

- Remind your children they will be in the presence of history. In the presence of wisdom. Tell them you hope years from now they will remember this day, this visit—this person who has meant so much to you. □

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