

## **Let's call it Kid Therapy**

By Debbie Selsavage CDP

I recently observed a situation I found very troubling. I was not asked to consult, so I kept my opinion to myself, but I can certainly write about it to possibly benefit others facing a similar situation.

A three-generational family had made the decision to place a member with Alzheimer's disease into professional memory care. The three generations consisted of a married couple, the mother's mother, now with dementia; and their nine-year-old son. The grandmother doted on the boy and was directly and beneficially involved in his up-bringing. He loved his grandmother, and spent many hours playing cards or making puzzles with her. They clearly had a very special bond.

As grandmother began to decline, the couple made the decision that they had to place her in professional care. This was an especially difficult decision for her daughter, who struggled with it daily, even when her mother seemed content with her new situation. The daughter was so upset that the day her mother was placed in memory care, she decreed that her son would never be allowed to visit her. She did not want the young boy to see the "horrors" of his grandmother's cognitive decline, nor the surroundings in which she lived among others with varying degrees of dementia.

Because this is a difficult situation for any family, I understood the mother's point of view, but I could not sympathize or agree with her decision. I felt she was so wrapped up in her own grief that she had not given enough consideration to the bond between her mother and her son, nor enough thought to *their* needs. I felt it was a decision from which no one in the family would benefit.

I guess some of my reaction to this situation came from the many hours I have observed seniors with dementia interacting with children. It is downright magical! Children can be so accepting, patient, and non-judgmental, and our seniors with dementia appear to love the guileless and simple interactions that children provide. It is so wonderful; I believe a practice of therapy can be built around it . . . let's call it "Kid Therapy!"

In fact, it is nothing new. Decades ago, a large assisted living and memory care facility was built in Largo, Florida. It had such a large staff of young women that they included child day-care in its planning, which proved to greatly improve the morale and stability of its staff.

In fact, it worked so well that it was opened to the public and became a professional service within the community. But the best part was yet to come.

I don't know how it all happened, but someone decided it would be a good idea to bring the young children into assisted living and memory care units to meet and interact with the residents. This was not just a good idea; it was brilliant, and became a regular weekly, structured program from which everyone received benefit. The kids looked forward to it, and the residents were ecstatic each time their young friends came to visit.

We in our middle years probably give ourselves way too much credit. We think we are no longer vulnerable to the innocence and naivete of youth, but we are not yet subject to the ills and possible cognitive decline of old age. Thus, we know what's best for everyone. Not always!

I hope the young woman who wanted to separate her son from his grandmother eventually overcame her own grief to rethink the situation. She might have realized that continuing interaction would have helped her son develop empathy that would have eventually made him a better and more functional adult. And his grandmother's declining years would certainly have been more joyful. Together, they both could have experienced a better quality of life. And the whole family might have learned we cannot hide from dementia, and that we cannot protect others from it.

I know Kid Therapy works because I have seen it work. It is also recognized as Intergenerational and that simply means: existing or occurring between generations. Children are so much stronger than we think they are, and they too need to learn that "We all deserve the best."

*Debbie Selsavage is a Certified Trainer and Consultant in the Positive Approach to Care®, and a Certified Dementia Practitioner. Her company, Coping with Dementia LLC, is dedicated to making life better for individuals living with dementia. Contact Debbie at [deb@coping.today](mailto:deb@coping.today) to learn about free support groups on line.*