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Preschool Children'S Perceptions Of And Attitudes Toward Elderly People

Susan Lynn Reuter
Eastern Illinois University

This research is a product of the graduate program in Home Economics at Eastern Illinois University. Find out more about the program.

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PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF AND ATTITUDES TOWARD ELDERLY PEOPLE

SUSAN LYNN REUTER

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Preschool Children's Perceptions of

and Attitudes Toward Elderly People

(TITLE)

BY

Susan Lynn Reuter

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1984

YEAR

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11-2-84	*A. Jayne Ozier*
DATE	ADVISER
11-5-84	*Virginia L. Vogel*
DATE	COMMITTEE MEMBER
11/5/84	*Carolyn D. Harmon*
DATE	COMMITTEE MEMBER
11/5/84	*Joyce Crouse*
DATE	DEPARTMENT CHAIRPERSON

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of preschool children's perceptions of elderly people and their attitudes toward elderly people. The two objectives established for the study were 1) to explore preschool children's perceptions about what elderly people look like, think about, do for fun, and are able to do, and 2) to determine if preschool children's attitudes about elderly persons are positive, negative, or neutral. A descriptive, exploratory research design was followed for this study. The convenience sample included the 44 children enrolled in one child development laboratory in east central Illinois. Data collection techniques included an interview schedule, projective test with the preschool children, and a parent questionnaire. Background information from the parent questionnaire were presented in percentages in pie charts. Frequency counts and percentages were used to describe the children's perceptions. Verbal responses by the children were categorized to indicate positive, negative, and neutral. Frequencies were reported.

The findings of this study indicated that preschool children's perceptions of elderly people tended to relate directly to activities that occur daily in the children's lives. Children described the looks of older persons in terms of emotional and physical characteristics. They described them as looking sad, mad, having white hair, wrinkles, and old hair. Thoughts of other people and different places dominated the perceptions of the preschoolers. The children reported playing was the most common activity for having fun. Many varying activities ranging from being a professional like a doctor or teacher to riding a bicycle were identified as abilities of older people.

The study also found that preschool children's attitudes toward elderly persons tended to neutral rather than positive or negative. This finding is substantiated by information gathered from the parent questionnaire. As reported by their parents, the children included in this study had frequent contacts with elderly persons, the majority of contacts occurring weekly. Parents also stated in the questionnaire that the elderly with whom children had contacts with were grandparents, great-grandparents, and other elderly relatives and that the majority of contacts were either pleasant or neutral experiences. The positive and neutral attitudes may have been a reflection of or influenced by recent contacts with elderly persons, the majority of which were positive or neutral.

In conclusion, due to the findings of the study pertaining to preschool children's perceptions of and attitudes toward elderly persons, the researcher concluded that the children included in the study appeared to have perceptions of elderly persons that related to events occurring in the children's lives and that the children's attitudes toward elderly tended to be neutral rather than positive or negative.

Acknowledgements

This project could not have been completed without the help and support of several people. Dr. Virginia Vogel, whose knowledge of child development provided a strong foundation throughout the writing of this paper. Dr. Carolyn Jarmon, whose critical thinking ability and knowledge and experience about writing a research paper helped me to foresee and overcome problem area during the research and writing of my paper.

My parents, Jack and Carol Reuter, who have stood behind me from start to finish on this project, and in all of the choices in my life.

And finally Dr. Jayne Ozier, my advisor, whose friendship, love, and constant belief in me gave me the courage and ability to complete this project.

Preschool Children's Perceptions of and
Attitudes Toward Elderly People

by

Susan Lynn Reuter

THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Science

in the Graduate School, Eastern Illinois University

Charleston, Illinois

1984

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables

List of Figures

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Current reviews of literature (Chitwood & Bigner, 1980; Downs & Walz, 1981; John, 1977) suggested a need for bringing children and elderly in closer contact with each other exists. Contact between children and elderly persons were infrequent and, when they did occur, they seemed to be under unusual circumstances which were not part of day-to-day living (John, 1977).

> The day when grandparents shared in the childrearing process
> has passed. The day when elderly individuals will number in
> substantial proportions of the general population is at hand.
> It is crucial that this segment join with the youngest segment
> to ensure the early development of accurate attitudes and
> perceptions toward the aging process. (Chitwood & Bigner, 1980)

According to Click and Powell (1976) when children learned to relate to elderly people early in life, young and old tended to have better relationships. A study by Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper, and Serlock (1977) reported that preschool children have limited knowledge of older people. Due to the absence of contact between generations and insufficient knowledge, John (1977) concluded that children may develop feelings of prejudice toward older people and discrimination against them.

Research (Lane, 1964; Chitwood & Bigner, 1980) further suggested that through increased contact between young children and elderly people, the children may develop positive attitudes. The potential prejudice toward the elderly and discrimination against them may be eliminated or decreased. Since the

literature revealed very little about preschool children's perceptions of and
attitudes toward the elderly, further research is needed (Downs & Walz, 1981;
Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper, & Serlock, 1977; Lane, 1964).

The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore the nature of pre-
school children's perceptions of elderly people and their attitudes toward
elderly people. In order to investigate this phenomenon, two objectives were
established to guide the study.

Objectives of the Study

The two objectives for the study were:

1. To explore preschool children's perceptions about what elderly look
   like, think about, do for fun, and are able to do.

2. To determine if preschool children's attitudes about elderly persons
   are positive, negative, or neutral.

Definition of Terms

1. Preschool children - children with chronological ages between two and
   five years (Smart & Smart, 1982).

2. Elderly people - individuals with a chronological age of 65 or older
   (Atchley, 1977).

3. Perception - involves the process of analyzing stimuli in terms of
   physical or sensory features and the subsequent matching of these
   features with stored memories to extract meaing (Smart & Smart, 1982).

4. Attitude - a belief, opinion, or conviction that is revealed when people
   express what they are for and what they are against (Raths, Harmin, &
   Simon, 1966, p. 66).

Theoretical Framework

According to Piaget, the child goes through four stages of intellectual development: the second of which is the preoperational stage. This stage begins around age two with the acquisition of symbolic thought -- the use of mental images and words to represent actions and entire events that are not present (Forman & Kurschner, 1977). The child's new ability to represent the nonpresent event in gestures and in words helps him/her to establish a relation between the two events.

In the preoperational stage the child's thinking is internalized. Internal representations provide mobility for the child's expanding intelligence (Flavell, 1963). Forms of internal representation that emerge simultaneously at the beginning of this stage are imitation, symbolic play, mental imagery and language. This period is also dominated by representational activity and a rapid development of spoken language.

The child develops mental competence to organize events into a functional relation. The child understands that a change in one factor causes a change in the other factor. The concept of function involves the coordination of two changes -- the inverse function and the direct function (Forman & Kuschner, 1977).

The perceptual processes of the preoperational child include selecting, sorting, processing, organizing, and storing the products of his/her senses (Smart & Smart, 1982). Children at this stage are deceived by appearance. In Piaget's terms, the quantity of substance is conserved despite changes in spatial distribution (Forman & Kuschner, 1977).

Prior to the preoperational stage, the child's intellectual tools consist of the ability to use his/her senses and to interact with the world through movement. With language development comes a new form of self-centeredness or egocentricity (Flavell, 1963). Although using language at this stage children

lack the ability to engage in a discussion. Instead they partake in collective monologues.

Preschool children believe that everyone thinks as they do. But preschoolers' thinking uses a different logic which is transductive. They think from particular to particular rather than from general to particular to particular to general (Forman & Kuschner; 1977).

In summary the preschool child's thinking is dominated by his/her perceptions and is from particular to particular. The preschool child's thinking has also been shown to be self-centered and internalized. Consequently, this stage builds a strong foundation for the third stage of intellectual development -- the concrete operational stage.

Since this study focused on the perceptions of preschool children, it was appropriate to include the Piagetian theory emphasizing the preoperational stage. The characteristics of the intellectual developmental processes provide explanations presented in the results and discussion chapter.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Observers of American culture and society have noted that the social climate is generally unfavorable toward the elderly. Little is known at which developmental stage negative ideas about the elderly are established (Hickey, Hickey, & Kalish, 1968; Lane, 1964) or even at what developmental stage individuals were able to discriminate between ages (Britton & Britton, 1969). In reviewing the literature on the topic of preschool children and elderly, a paucity of literature was found. This review focused on research concerning children's perceptions, attitudes, and intergenerational experiences with elderly. However, because of the difficulty in distinguishing research on knowledge from that on perceptions, it is necessary to include a section on knowledge.

Perceptions

Children from an early age appeared to understand the concept of being old (Seefeldt et al., 1977), but the extent of their knowledge of that concept seemed limited (Jantz et al., 1977). According to Looft (1971) and Seefeldt et al. (1977) preschool children's cognizance of "old" was dominated by their preceptions. Preschool children tended to judge age by the single, physical attribute of size.

Of the 63 children included in Looft's (1971) study, eighteen were preschoolers. Even though data were not reported on preschoolers specifically, Looft (1971) concluded the children's ideas tended to be dominated by their perceptions and focused on the single attribute of size in Looft's drawings, thus rendering all other visual cues insignificant.

Through a stratified random sampling technique, 180 subjects were chosen for the Seefeldt et al. (1977) study. Forty of these were ages three and four. Like Looft (1971), the Seefeldt et al. (1977) results indicated that the ability to assign accurate indices increases with age. The three and four year olds in their study exhibited a limited scope of possible age estimates; none of these forty children could assign an age greater than ten.

As preschool children mature intellectually, their perceptions of the concept of old change; they were able to judge age by physical attributes other than size (Britton & Britton, 1969; Looft, 1971). The subjects for the Britton and Britton (1969) study consisted of fifty white, middle-class preschool children with a mean age of 4-3, who were asked to arrange a set of five pictures of male figures in sequential order from youngest to oldest. Data indicated that the younger preschool children were able to place the pictures in the correct order some of the time, while the older children were more successful, thus confirming that their perceptions of the concept of old had changed as they grew older.

Children also have both positive and negative perceptions of the elderly, with most children perceiving old and the aging process as negative (Jantz et al., 1977). From their study, Jantz et al. (1977) reported that children think positively about elderly in affective terms and negatively when referring to elderly physical and behavioral characteristics. The population for the study (Jantz et al., 1977) was 180 children: forty of whom were of preschool age. Age and grade level of the children was associated with their feelings of getting old. The negative characteristics of sick, ugly, and sad and the postive characteristics of rich were assigned by the preschoolers in the study. As the older children's responses were compared to those of preschoolers, the only difference was that more positive characteristics were reported by the older children.

In conclusion, the following three points summarize preschool children's perceptions of elderly people. Firstly, the children have limited understanding

about elderly and this knowledge was dominated by their perceptions such as physical size. Secondly, as the children mature intellectually their perceptions change, and they were able to judge age by physical attributes other than size. And finally, that children have both positive and negative perceptions of elderly and of the aging process.

Knowledge

In reviewing the literature on preschool children, it was difficult to distinguish between research done on their perceptions and that focusing on their knowledge. Due to this problem, the following section was included concerning preschool children's knowledge of elderly people.

John (1977) discussed how the composition of the American family was changing and how that change affected preschool children. The children tended to have infrequent contact with older family members. Because of this infrequent contact with older persons, John (1977) listed the following reasons why children should learn about elderly (p. 24-25):

1. It seems important for children to learn that warm, sensitive relationships can span generations.

2. Children need to see old age as a part of the total life cycle.

3. Learning about aging can help children face this phenomenon more realistically.

4. It seems important for children to learn about the contribbutions the older group makes to society.

5. Studying about the elderly can give the child a more positive picture of the total span that will hopefully be available to him or her.

6. The elderly frequently demonstrate values and ideals that have survived over the years.

In addition, research by Chitwood and Bigner (1980) revealed that preschool children had the knowledge to discriminate between pictures when they were asked to order them from the youngest to the oldest. The problem the 35 preschool

children had was understanding the word "oldest" and then discriminating among

the cues in order to correctly place each figure in the array. Contrary to the

problem with the word oldest, the subjects had no difficulty understanding the

word "youngest". In addition, Chitwood and Bigner's (1969) data showed that

children have learned to evaluate their observations and feelings about the

aging process with the resulting impressions being largely negative about old

people and what it was like to be old. Consistent results were reported by

other researchers (Britton & Britton, 1969; Looft, 1971; Downs & Walz, 1981;

Seefeldt et al., 1977). Jantz et al. (1977) also found that children's positive

and negative perceptions of elderly people were influenced by their previous

knowledge of older persons.

Of the 180 children Jantz et al., (1977) included in their study, 40 were

ages three and four. Jantz et al. (1977) revealed that as children grew older

their perceptions change. This resulted in part from children maturing cogni-

tively. Jantz et al. (1977) stated that children have negative attitudes about

physical aspects associated with elderly and with growing older. As children

began to view their own aging process positively, they started transmitting

those feelings to the next younger generation, thus changing the stereotype of

getting old.

In summary, the children studied appeared to be able to discriminate between

young and old from pictures they were shown. It was also discovered that the

children's perceptions were influenced by their knowledge and previous experiences

of elderly persons.

Attitudes

Children's attitudes about the aged are both positive and negative. Positive

attitudes observed in two studies (Hickey et al., 1971; Jantz et al., 1977) were

that children saw elderly as happy and friendly people. Negative attitudes

related by the children concerned the physical characteristics of the elderly such as ambulatory difficulties, wrinkles, and gray hair (Downs & Walz, 1981; Hickey et al., 1971; Jantz et al., 1977). According to Chitwood and Bigner (1980) the majority of children's impressions about the elderly and what it was like to be old are negative. For example the elderly were viewed as ugly, sick, poor, not friendly, and dirty.

Downs & Walz (1981) used 40 preschool boys and girls as subjects for their study. The children were asked to correctly order photographs of younger, middle-aged, and elderly female and male adults by age. Their results indicated that girls were more positive toward elderly than were boys. They also found that negative attitudes concerning the elderly evident in preschool children. Pre-school boys used physical attractiveness as a judgment for positive and negative attitudes in older persons.

Hickey et al. (1968) had earlier discovered that by age eight children have already developed concepts and attitudes about elderly people and old age. By age six, children indicated a bias against old people (Hickey et al., 1968; Ianni, 1973; Downs & Walz, 1981).

In conclusion, children's attitudes, like children's perceptions about elderly people, are reported in the literature to be both positive and negative. Attitudes about the elderly were also shown to be evident in preschool children.

Intergenerational Experiences

In order for children to extend their knowledge and to alter some of these negative attitudes toward elderly, increased contact between children and old people were suggested by Chitwood & Bigner (1980). John (1977) and Parnell (1980) agreed that because the American family is becoming smaller and more mobile, children have infrequent contacts with their elderly family members. More older family members have maintained their own residences, giving young

children only limited experiences with their grandparents (John, 1977). John (1977) speculated that children need to see the elderly in situations other than those in their own homes. Sites such as senior citizen's centers, could provide the more frequent contacts to help alter negative attitudes toward older people. According to Chitwood and Bigner (1980), day care centers and pre-schools have offered the most effective mode of intervention to provide exper- iences with the elderly for young children.

Through increased interaction with the elderly who viewed their own aging positively, children increased their knowledge about old people and, consequently, were more likely to change their negative attitudes about elderly (Lane, 1964). As children gained additional understanding, they were more likely to change their attitudes and to expand their contacts with older people. A cyclical growth occurs. These additional intergenerational experiences strengthened the positive attitude changes thereby benefiting both parties.

In summary, since contacts between children and older family members tended to be infrequent, children seemed to need to see the elderly in situations other than their homes. Day care centers and preschools were suggested as effective ways to bring these two segments of society closer together. Speculation sug- gested that through the increase of contacts between children and elderly, the children would increase their knowledge about elderly people, modify some of their attitudes and perceptions about them, to the benefit of both parties.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive, exploratory research design was followed in this study to
explore the two objectives defined. The two objectives for the study were
(1) to explore preschool children's perceptions about what elderly people looked
like, thought about, did for fun and were able to do; and (2) to determine if
preschool children's attitudes about elderly persons were positive, negative,
or neutral. The convenience population was composed of preschool children en-
rolled in a child development laboratory. A multi-method of data collection was
used including a questionnaire, interview, and projective test. The data were
then analyzed using frequency and percentage tables.

Selection and Description of Subjects

The sample consisted of 44 children enrolled in two sessions of a university
child development laboratory in a rural area of east cental Illinois. The
researcher served as a graduate assistant in this setting. Permission to include
the children as subjects was given by all parents in a letter of consent. Consent
was obtained prior to data collection (see Appendix A). Twenty-two of the child-
ren were enrolled in the morning session (a two-hour period from 9:00 a.m. until
11:00 a.m. five days a week, Monday through Friday). The other half of the sample
was enrolled in the afternoon session (a two-hour period from 1:00 p.m. until 3:00
p.m. five days a week, Monday through Friday). Both sessions met for a fifteen
week period in the fall and spring concurrent with the university's academic
semesters.

In the morning session, 12 children were female and ten were male. At the time of data collection the age range of the children in the morning session was three years, one month to five years, five months, the mean age was four years, one month. In the afternoon session there were ten female and 12 male children. The age range was three years, five months to five years, five months at the time of data collection, with a mean age of four years, four months. Combining figures from both the morning and afternoon showed that there were equal numbers of children of each sex with an average age range of three years, one month to five years, five months and a mean age of four years, two months.

All but three of the children participating in the study came from two parent families. Two of these three children were siblings (brother and sister), but all three were from homes where the mother was the only parent.

Of the 43 subjects, three were non-white, and two of these three were brother and sister. There were four sets of siblings in the study. In the morning sessions there were two sets of siblings -- identical twin boys and a brother and sister; in the afternoon session there were two sets of brothers and sisters. In all cases where a brother and sister were enrolled, the sister was the older sibling.

Development and Description of Instruments

The three instruments used in the study were a questionnaire (see Appendix B) consisting of seven questions; an interview of eight questions (see Appendix D); and a projective test (see Appendix E) consisting of six black and white photographs of older people, three male and three female. The questionnaire was designed to provide background information about each child's previous experiences with elderly persons. The interview and projective test were designed to identify preschool children's perceptions and attitudes about the elderly.

The questionnaire (Appendix A) for the study was developed using ideas from an instrument used in a previous study (Click & Powell, 1976). Choices were provided for each of the seven questions so the parents could complete the questionnaire quickly and easily to encourage a higher rate of return.

A panel composed of two child development and family life professors and one child development and family life graduate student was given the questionnaire to establish content validity. Subsequently, it was duplicated and prepared for distribution accompanying the letter of consent to the parents of children enrolled in the preschool included in the study.

The second and third instruments for the study were the projective test and interview schedule. The researcher pilot tested the projective instrument at a local day care center to seek indication of the instrument's reliability.

The first stage in developing the projective test consisted of showing 16 black and white photographs of elderly people to four children at a local day care center to identify the six pictures to be used in the study. Each child was interviewed individually using a predetermined set of questions, and each interview took approximately 30 minutes to complete. All of the interviews with the children were tape recorded to allow the researcher accuracy in transcribing the children's responses.

From this first pilot test visit to the day care center, the researcher was able to identify several weaknesses with the research instrument. First, the children needed to be given the tests in an environment with a limited amount of stimuli. The room where the researcher pilot tested the instrument had too many distractions, diverting the children's attention.

The second weakness identified was that the researcher needed to further develop effective communication styles in a testing environment. The questions appeared to illicit a majority of "I don't know" answers from the children which led the researcher to believe the children did not understand the questions.

The projective test was piloted at the same day care center approximately five days after the researcher first visited the center. Four different children, each four years old, were chosen as subjects. These children were administered a revised set of questions.

The environment in which the test was administered had minimal stimuli, and the length of time used to administer the test was limited to 15 minutes. After completing the projective test with the children, the researcher determined that the questions were still not illiciting the desired results.

In order to bring the projective test questions to a level that preschool children could understand, the researcher spent two weeks carefully listening to the vocabulary of the children in the child development laboratory. The researcher then rewrote the questions for the projective test.

Six children, varying in age from three to five, were chosen as subjects for the final pilot test at the day care center. The children were administered the projective test individually in a room with limited stimuli, and the interviews were tape recorded to increase the researcher's reliability in transcribing the children's responses. This version of the projective test appeared to give the researcher the desired results. The children seemed to more clearly comprehend the interview questions the researcher was asking. The version was used in the actual research study.

Content validity for the projective test and interview was established in two ways. Firstly, the instruments were given to two child development and family life professors. They established that content validity did exist. Secondly, content validity for several items in the interview had been previously established from their use in a former study (Click & Powell, 1976).

Date Collection Procedures

A request for a letter of consent (see Appendix A) was sent home to the

parents of all children enrolled in both sessions of the child development laboratory three weeks prior to data collection. Attached to the letter was the questionnaire (see Appendix B) about the children's contacts with elderly persons. The parents were asked to complete the questionnaire and return it with the signed consent form within a week. A verbal follow-up was made with all parents who had not returned the consent forms and questionnaires by the end of the week to insure 100% return of consent forms and questionnaires.

The testing environment was prepared in the hallway outside of the child development laboratory during the week the consent forms were sent home to the parents. Since the hallway was in a university building and had a high traffic pattern, maintaining control in the testing environment at first appeared to be difficult. Therefore, testing was done concurrently with university classes to minimize the number of students in the hallway and to maximize the attention of the children during testing.

The equipment used by the researcher while testing the children included a square child-sized table, two child-sized chairs, and a tape recorder. The equipment was moved into the hallway from the child development laboratory each day prior to testing. The table was placed against the wall. The chairs were placed so that the child faced the wall. The researcher was seated adjacent to the child to avoid possible cues through eye contact between the researcher and the child during the testing situation.

The children were selected randomly each day during the first hour of the session, which was their free play time to minimize disruption of the children's daily schedule. When a child was selected, he/she was told the researcher needed his/her help with a game out in the hallway. The testing time was limited to ten minutes for each child. This time period was adequate to complete the projective test and seemed appropriate for the expected attention span of preschoolers.

The child selected was taken to the testing area. The tape recorder was turned on and placed close enough to the child to pick up his/her responses but out of his/her reach. As the child gave his/her responses to the questions while examining six photographs they were recorded by the researcher on a data collection form (see Appendix C). The child was first asked his/her name. Then the three male pictures were laid out on the table for the child to see. The child was asked which person was oldest, and the answer was recorded. The child was then asked how he/she knew the person selected was the oldest. After recording this response the researcher removed the two pictures the child did not select as being oldest. The researcher then proceeded to continue with the interview (see Appendix D) for the remaining male picture recording the child's responses in the same manner.

An identical procedure was followed with the child using the set of female pictures. After showing the child both sets of pictures, the child was thanked for his/her help and allowed to return to the classroom activities. The researcher then took a few minutes to go over her notes from the previous interview and re-organize the materials for the next interview. Another child was selected randomly from the class and the procedure was repeated. The researcher completed approximately four interviews during the morning session and another four during the afternoon session.

Data Analysis

Data were collected via parental questionnaires and a combined projective test and interview schedule. Data from the parental questionnaires were analyzed and presented in pie charts. Projective test and interview data were analyzed and presented in frequencies and percentages according to categories outlined in the objectives.

As a staff member of the child development laboratory, further supplementary data about the subjects were available to the researcher prior to interviewing the children. This enabled the researcher to gain a greater insight into the subjects' backgrounds before administering the projective test to them. Also, the experience of working with the children helped the investigator establish trust and rapport while minimizing test anxiety and the Hawthorne effect (House, 1978).

The data were first analyzed to describe the preschooler's perceptions of elderly persons in this study using frequency counts and percentages. Categories used were based on the study objectives.

The data were analyzed to determine whether the preschool children's attitudes were positive, negative or neutral as outlined in the second objective. Due to the exploratory nature of this study and the absence of definitions in the review of literature, the researcher developed categories of positive, negative and neutral after the data were collected. Attitudes judged by the researcher to be positive included the words happy, funny, nice, friendly, handsome, good, tallest, caring (nurturing), taking them places, family member, love and hugs, and professional work-related activities. To identify a negative attitude, the researcher included words such as sad, mad, mean, sick, ugly, dirty, poor, angry, silly, wrinkled, old hair and face, no hair, white hair, and any words with disciplinary actions. Any other responses were categorized as neutral.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data for this descriptive, exploratory study were collected through a multi-method approach including a parent questionnaire, a projective test, and an interview. The objectives for this study were (1) to explore preschool children's perceptions about what elderly people looked like, thought about, did for fun, and were able to do, and (2) to determine if preschool children's attitudes about elderly persons were positive, negative or neutral.

Background of Subjects

The sample consisted of 44 preschool children with a mean age of four years, two months. There were equal numbers of males and females in the sample. The children were equally divided between the morning and afternoon sessions of the child development laboratory.

The following discussion presents background information in addition to that reported in Chapter III (refer to page 11). According to results from the questionnaire (see Appendix B), children's contacts with elderly persons occurred from as frequently as every day to never (Figure 1). The elderly that the children had contact with most frequently were their grandparents and elderly neigh= bors (Figure 2).

The frequency of contact with grandparents appeared to be high even though many grandparents lived out-of-state (21 or 41%) or in the same state (20 or 39%), but not in the same town (Figure 3). This led the researcher to assume that the grandparents either visited the children or the children's families visited the grandparents on a regular basis.
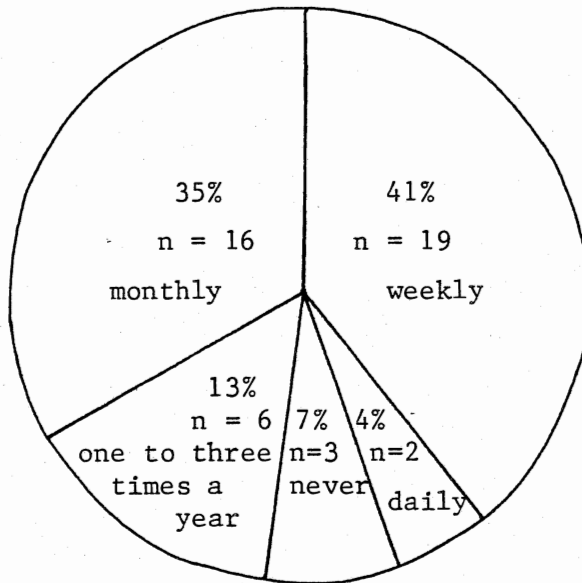
Figure 1

Frequency of Contact with Elderly
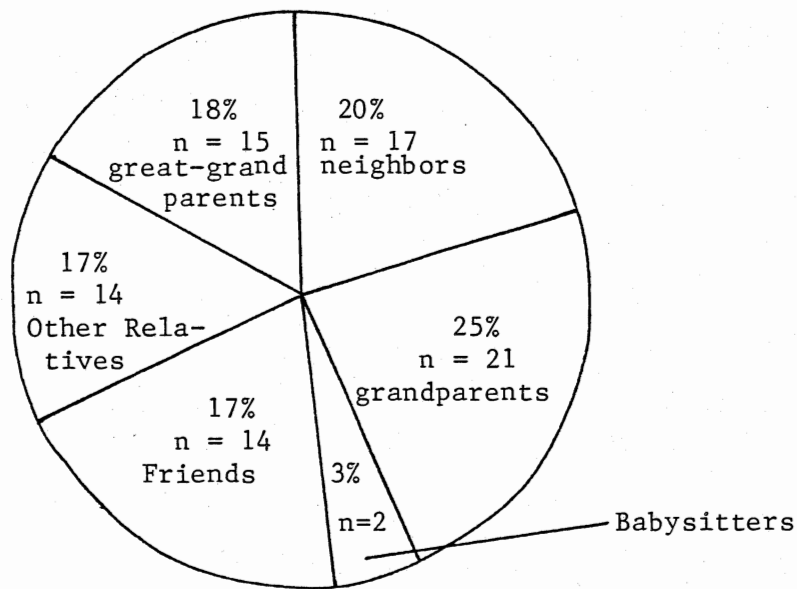
Figure 2

Elderly with whom Children had Contact
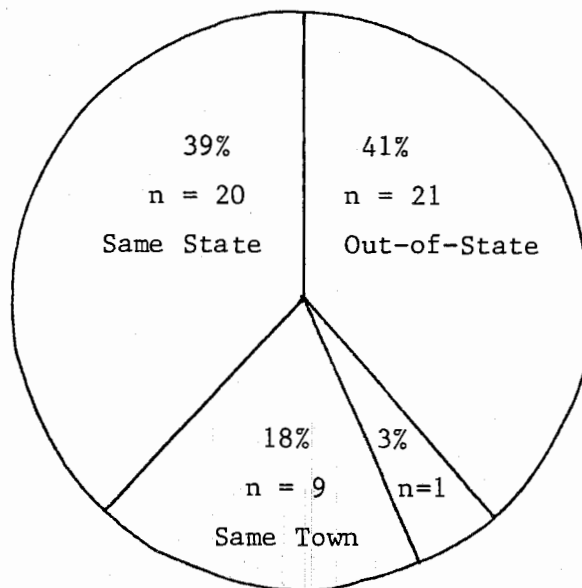
Figure 3

Location of Grandparents

The questionnaire as answered by parents also revealed that the majority of
the preschooler's contacts with elderly had been a pleasant (36 or 82%) or a
neutral (8 or 18%) experience for them. This finding suggested to the researcher
that the preschooler's responses to questions pertaining to elderly persons
would be positive.

Projective Test

Data are presented according to each objective. The results for the first
objective are presented in Tables I through IV.

In administering the projective test to the preschool children there was
no limit put on the length of responses to each question. Consequently, many of
the children gave several responses to each question while some children were
relatively non-verbal giving no response or only a one-word response.

Objective One

To explore preschool childern's perceptions about what elderly
people look like, think about, do for fun, and are able to do.

The 44 preschool children in this study were found to list emotional charac-
teristics most frequently in describing what elderly people look like (Table 1).
Answers given by the children ranged from happy, funny, sad, and fine when
describing elderly men to sad, mad, angry, silly, and happy when describing
elderly women.

The categories of old and physical characteristics were very close in
number. Many children used the word old in their responses as to what elderly
people look like and then went on to clarify it with a description of a physical
characteristic which is why the number of responses are similar. Several child-
ren also listed more than one physical characteristic. Physical characteristics
of elderly men listed were wears glasses, has white hair, old hands, no hair,
and wrinkles. The descriptions of elderly women were looks big, has old hair,
walks slow, wrinkles, old face, and wears glasses.

The frequencies of the "Don't Know" and no response categories were high
in this section. It seems that children either have definite ideas as to what
elderly people look like or do not know at all.

The results in this study pertaining to the physical characteristics of
elderly seemed to relate directly to those reported in a study by Jantz et al.
(1977). Jantz et al. (1977) found that children report positively about elderly
in affective terms and negatively when referring to elderly physical and beha-
vioral characteristics. Looft (1971) and Seefeldt et al. (1977) felt that
children's cognizance of "old" was dominated by their perceptions and that
children tended to judge age by the single attribute of size.

From the results of this study, it appeared that these preschool children
did use the size of the person in the photograph to determine his/her age.

Table 1

Preschoolers' Perceptions of How Elderly People Look (N = 44)[1]

Categories of Perceptions	Elderly Men		Elderly Women		Total[2]	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Physical[a]	13	8	12	7	25	15
Old	12	7	20	12	32	20
Emotional[b]	19	12	21	13	40	24
Family Member[c]	6	4	3	2	9	6
Miscellaneous[d]	10	6	12	4	22	13
Don't Know	14	8	9	5	23	14
No Response	9	5	5	3	14	8

a. wears glasses, white hair, old hands, no hair, wrinkles, tallest, very ugly, big, old hair, face, walks slow, scarf on head

b. happy, funny, mad, sad, fine, silly, sleepy, poor, angry

c. dad, grandfather, like grandma

d. high up, riding a bike, different, cowboy, dressed up, going to the store, a man, saw before, guessed, told me, just is, a girl, good, like nothing

[1]N represents the total population in the study

[2]Represents total number and percentage of responses to each perception category

* NOTE: Total percentages will not equal 100% due to rounding of figures

Piagetian theory (Foreman & Kushner, 1977) that the preschool child's thinking was dominated by his/her perceptions and is from particular to particular supports this concept.

The preschool children's responses to what elderly people thought about (Table 2) seemed to follow the same reasoning pattern as previously discussed. The children listed a variety of places as things elderly thought about. The large number and limited scope of places could be a result of the photographs used in the projective test.

Sick people, grandmas, girls, and God were the people that the preschooler's felt elderly people thought about. Animals, such as cows, rabbits, a dog, and animals in general, were another area of interest.

People, places, and animals that were important in the children's lives at the time the projective test was administered were the items listed most frequently by the children. These responses are expected for children at this age who cannot comprehend anything beyond what is happening at the present time in their lives.

Piagetian theory (Foreman & Kushman, 1977) stated that a child's thinking at the preoperational stage is internalized. As forms of internal representation emerge the child can see beyond his/her own perceptions and begin to develop such forms as imitation, symbolic play, mental imagery and language (Foreman & Kushman, 1977).

Children's concept of age increases as the children themselves increase in age (Jantz et al., 1977). With the growth of the child's own thought processes he/she begins to realize how others, including elderly people may think and perceive things in the world around them.

Further analysis of the data showed play as the activity that the children felt elderly people did most often for fun (Table 3). Forty-two times the

Table 2

Preschoolers' Perceptions of What Elderly People Think About (N = 44)[1]

Categories of Perceptions	Elderly Men		Elderly Women		Total[2]	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
People[a]	2	3	6	8	8	10
Places[b]	9	11	10	13	19	24
Animals[c]	3	4	1	1	4	5
Miscellaneous[d]	4	5	10	13	14	17
Something	2	3	1	1	3	4
Nothing	1	1	2	3	3	4
Don't Know	13	16	8	10	21	26
No Response	6	8	2	3	8	10

a. sick people, grandma, God, her girls, her husband, someone

b. going somewhere, to a store, across the street, jungle, home, work

c. rabbit, a dog, animals (general), cows

d. plants, breakfast, studying, words, food, her car, numbers, things to buy, her picture being taken

[1]N represents the total population in the study

[2]Represents total number and percentage of response to each perception category

* NOTE: Total percentages will not equal 100% due to rounding of figures

Table 3

Preschoolers' Perceptions of What Elderly People Do for Fun (N = 44)[1]

Categories of Perceptions	Elderly Men		Elderly Women		Total[2]	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Play	24	14	18	11	42	25
Nurture Children[a]	6	4	7	4	13	8
Food[b]	12	7	10	5	22	11
Outside[c]	7	4	4	2	11	6
Love & Hug	7	4	6	4	13	8
Disciplinary[d]	8	5	5	3	13	8
Miscellaneous[e]	12	7	12	7	24	14
Nothing	0	0	2	1	2	1
Don't Know	7	4	10	6	17	10
No Response	4	2	11	6	15	9

a. care when sick, laundry, help, keep at home, be nice to them, stay with them

b. eat, drink, preparation, out to eat, cook

c. go outside, plants, garden, boat, park, go in car, plant flowers

d. put to bed, tell them to be good, spank them, get mad

e. school, talk, sit, straighten up, go out, go to store, work, write, wash clothes

[1] N represents the total population in the study

[2] Represents total number and percentage of responses to each perception category

* NOTE: Total percentages will not equal 100% due to rounding of figures

children said old people liked to play for fun. The second most frequently reported category of fun was related to food, such as eating, drinking, preparing food, and going out to eat. The children identified the food category 22 times. This finding could reflect the fact that play is all consuming in the children's lives and is their work and their fun.

Other activities listed by the children as done by elderly people for fun fell into the categories of nurturing, outside activities, disciplinary, and love activities. The children's ideas of what people older than themselves did for fun, other than play, fell into areas of how elderly people nuture and care for children, not actually what elderly people really do for fun. With increased contacts between preschool children and older persons, the children's knowledge would be extended and so would their ideas about the elderly (Chitwood & Bigner, 1980).

According to Piaget, children at the preoperational stage lack the ability to engage in a discussion. With language development comes a new form of egocentricity (Flavell, 1963).

These children believe that everyone thinks as they do. Their thinking uses a different logic, transductive, which was from particular to particular rather than from general to particular or particular to general (Foreman & Kuschner, 1977).

The children in this study felt elderly people were able to do a wide variety of activities varying from miscellaneous activities such as riding a horse, writing, and going to bed to professional activities, household activities, and play (Table 4).

Children's perceptions of what elderly were able to do tended to be more accurate and realistic than the other areas researched. The children's responses appeared to be less child-like when asked about the abilities of older persons

Table 4

Preschoolers' Perceptions of What Elderly People are Able to Do (N = 44)[1]

Categories of Perceptions	Elderly Men		Elderly Women		Totals[2]	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Professional[a]	6	7	6	7	12	14
Household[b]	4	5	3	4	7	8
Physical[c]	5	6	2	2	7	8
Play[d]	4	5	5	6	9	11
Meal Preparation	4	5	2	2	6	7
Miscellaneous[e]	7	8	12	14	19	22
Don't Know	7	8	10	11	17	20
No Response	5	6	3	4	8	10

a. doctor, teacher, drive fire engines, make houses, be a nurse, work

b. gardening, fire wood, plants, TV, wash dishes, mow lawn, clean

c. walk, stand, talk

d. ride, bike, blocks, piano, pitch a ball

e. ride a horse, play with sister/brother, time, nothing, draw pictures, drive, help people, write, read, go upstairs, go to bed

[1] N represents the total population in the study

[2] Represents total number and percentage of responses to each perception category

* NOTE: Total percentages will not equal 100% due to rounding of figures.

than when asked about the physical appearances, thoughts, and fun-time activities

of the aged. For example, one child's response that seemed to represent this

area was that elderly people were able to work as doctors and nurses. In con-

trast to the more child-centered response of he looks like a cowboy and he lives

in the jungle. Although the preschool children seemed to be perceptive as to

elderly people's abilities, it was evident that their perceptions were still

dominated by activities that occur in children's daily lives.

Britton and Britton (1966) stated that little was known at what develop-

mental stage individuals were able to discriminate between ages. With mature

cognitive development and the ability to organize events into functional relations

comes discrimination between ages and age abilities (Foreman & Kuschner, 1977).

Summary of Objective One

In summary, the findings indicated that children's perceptions of elderly

people tended to relate directly to activities that occurred in the children's

daily lives. Emotional and physical characteristics of old were what the child-

ren seemed to cite frequently as perceptions of what elderly people look like.

The places category of perceptions of what elderly thought about was reported by

the children. The places the children stated elderly thought about were stores,

across the street, the jungle, home and work. Play and food were the two cate-

gories children cited most frequently as what elderly did for fun. Play is what

children do for their work and fun, thus they seemed to perceive that elderly

did the same. The children's perceptions of what elderly were able to do varied

greatly and tended to be more accurate than the other areas researched.

From the background information about the children collected using parental

questionnaires, it may be that since the children in the study had frequent con-

tacts with older persons, the children's responses were influenced by those

intergenerational experiences. Therefore, these preschooler's perceptions and knowledge of elderly persons may have been more accurate with greater levels of understanding than children who had not had the exposure to older people. Finally, the children's perceptions of the elderly tended to support the findings of earlier research.

Objective Two

To determine if preschool children's attitudes
are positive, negative, or neutral.

The data from the projective test were further analyzed to determine the quality of children's attitudes toward older persons. The results are presented in the same four categories (look like, think about, do for fun, able to do) as used in the previous objective. Rather than discussing each category independently, an integrative discussion follows the fourth category.

Due to the absence of definitions for positive, negative, and neutral in the review of literature, the researcher developed the following criteria for the categories of positive, negative, and neutral using responses given by the children. Attitudes judged by the researcher to be positive were described by the words happy, funny, nice, friendly, handsome, good, tallest, caring (nurturing), taking them places, family member, love and hugs, and professional work-related activities. To identify a negative attitude, the researcher included words such as mean, sick, ugly, dirty, poor, angry, silly, wrinkled, old hair and face, no hair, white hair, and any words about disciplinary actions. Any other responses were categorized as indicating a neutral attitude.

Preschooler's Attitudes of What Elderly People Look Like

Of the 165 total responses given by the children in this category, only 17 of those responses met the criteria for a positive attitude, and 39 responses were classified as neutral such as "I don't know", "play", and "animals". Some

of the children's comments that reflected a positive attitude of what elderly looked like included "he's happy," "he's funny," "she's happy," "she looks pretty," and "she looks like a pretty lady." Comments by the children seemed to reveal a negative attitude were "she's not happy--maybe she's mad," "he's mad," "he has white hair," "he has no hair," and "he has wrinkles."

Preschooler's Attitudes of What Elderly People Think About

The children gave 80 responses pertaining to what elderly people thought about. Of those 80 responses only three of these were categorized as indicating a positive attitude. The remaining 77 were classified by the researcher as neutral. The positive responses given by the children included "she thinks about her girls" (children), "she's thinking about her husband," and "she's thinking about someone who is sick." All of the positive attitudinal responses were in reference to the female photographs.

Preschooler's Attitudes of What Elderly People Do for Fun

"He pushes me on swings," "he takes care of me," "she takes me for ice cream," "she cooks supper," and "he loves me" are some of the children's comments that reflected a positive attitude toward what elderly persons do for fun. Of the 170 responses by children in this category, 32 could be listed as indicating positive attitudes and only seven could be classified as suspected negative attitudes. Comments listed as negative were "he puts me to bed," "he spanks me," and "she gets mad."

Preschooler's Attitudes about What Elderly People are Able to Do

The abilities of elderly persons evoked only eight responses that could be considered meeting the criteria as positive. Of the 85 responses given by the children, there were none that fit the category of indicating negative attitudes. Some of the children's positive comments were "she could help some people," "be a doctor," "a teacher," "drive fire engines," and "work" in general.

Summary of Objective Two

Preschool children's attitudes about elderly people varied from positive
to neutral to negative with the majority of responses being within the neutral
category. Of the 500 total responses given by the children, 60 were seen as
indicating positive attitudes and 46 as negative attitudes. This finding seems
to contradict previous research that reported children's attitudes were generally
negative. The discrepancy could be due in part to the fact that children in
this study had frequent contacts with elderly persons, and these contacts were
either positive or negative as reported by the parents.

Discussion of Objective Two

According to the literature, children's attitudes about elderly were found
to be both positive and negative (Hickey et al., 1977). However, the literature
did not address the neutral attitudes of children about elderly persons which
the researcher found to be prevalent in this study. This finding failed to sup-
port the results of the study by Chitwood and Bigner (1980) which stated that
the majority of children's impressions about the elderly and what it is like to
be old are negative.

Chitwood and Bigner's (1980) research also supported increased contact
between children and elderly. Their research stated that with increased contact,
children's negative attitudes of elderly could be altered. By fostering inter-
actions between children and elderly who have viewed aging as a positive exper-
ience, children have increased their knowledge and modified some of their negative
attitudes about elderly people (Lane, 1964).

Consequently, in order for children to learn more about elderly people and
their abilities, children have seemed to need the opportunity to see elderly
people in situations outside their homes (John, 1977). It is through these

contacts that preschool children will learn the most about elderly persons thus decreasing the negative perceptions and attitudes they may currently hold about the elderly.

The findings for the two objectives indicated that the children included in this study appeared to judge their perceptions of elderly persons by events occurring currently in the children's lives and that the children's attitudes were neutral rather than being strongly positive or negative. This could have been due to past experiences with elderly people and strong impressions made by those experiences.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of preschool children's
perceptions of elderly people and their attitudes toward elderly people. Two
objectives were established to investigate this phenomenon. The objectives
for the study were: 1) to explore preschool children's perceptions about what
elderly people look like, think about, do for fun, and are able to do, and
2) to determine if preschool children's attitudes about elderly persons are
positive, negative, or neutral. A descriptive, exploratory research design
was followed for this study. The convenience sample included the 44 children
enrolled in one child development laboratory in east central Illinois. Data
collection techniques included an interview schedule, projective test with the
preschool children, and a parent questionnaire. Background information from
the parent questionnaire were presented in percentages in pie charts. Frequency
counts and percentages were used to describe the children's perceptions. Verbal
responses by the children were categorized to indicate positive, negative, and
neutral. Frequencies were reported.

The findings of this study indicated that preschool children's perceptions
of elderly people tended to relate directly to activities that occur daily in
the children's lives. Children described the looks of older persons in terms
of emotional and physical characteristics. They described them as looking sad,
mad, having white hair, wrinkles and old hair. Thoughts of other people and

different places dominated the perceptions of the preschoolers. The children

reported playing was the most common activity for having fun. Many varying

activities, ranging from being a professional like a doctor ro teacher to riding

a bicycle were identified as abilities of old people.

The study also found that preschool children's attitudes toward elderly

persons tended to be neutral rather than positive or negative. This finding

is substantiated by information gathered from the parent questionnaire. As

reported by their parents, the children included in this study had frequent

contacts with elderly persons, the majority of contacts occurring weekly.

Parents also stated in the questionnaire that the elderly with whom children had

contacts with were grandparents, great-grandparents, and other elderly relatives

and that the majority of contacts were either pleasant or neutral experiences.

The positive and neutral attitudes may have been a reflection of or influenced

by recent contacts with elderly persons, the majority of which were positive

or neutral.

Conclusions

The findings of this exploratory, descriptive study tended to indicate

that preschool children's perceptions of elderly people related directly to

events that occurred in the children's daily lives. Based on the comments

from parents, the children in the study seemed to have had some contact with

elderly persons before this study.

Indications of the children's attitudes about the elderly varied from

positive to negative to neutral, with the majority of the verbal responses

being categorized as neutral. The attitudes assessment was made based on the

500 verbal responses of the children to the projective test. Of these responses

only 106 were positive or negative which led the researcher to speculate that

the children were likely aware of elderly and had spent time with them.

In conclusion, due to the findings of the study pertaining to preschool children's perceptions and attitudes of elderly the researcher concluded that the children included in the study appeared to have perceptions of elderly persons that related to events occurring in the children's lives and that the children's attitudes toward elderly tended to be neutral rather than positive or negative.

Limitations

A limitation of this exploratory, descriptive study was the sample. The sample consisted of all 44 children enrolled in one child development laboratory using a convenience group rather than a random sample. This limited the generalizations that could be made from the study.

Inter-rater reliability for data analysis was omitted. Thus, bias may have occurred.

A final source of possible bias is the indirect measure of attitude used. Children were not asked if they liked or disliked older people. Their attitude assessment was based on their verbal responses. Such an indirect measure permits possible interpretation error. However, with young children such indirect measures may actually have greater accuracy than a direct quotation.

Implications for Further Study

In the area of preschool children's perceptions and attitudes of elderly people further research might pose the following questions:

- How do the perceptions and attitudes of elderly people by preschool children who live in a rural setting differ from those preschool children who live in an urban setting?

- What difference exists in the perceptions and attitudes of elderly between preschool boys and preschool girls?

- Do any differences exist about perceptions and attitudes of elderly persons by preschool children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds?

- What would the perceptions and attitudes about elderly people be from preschool children who have never met or had any exposure to an elderly person?

- What are the differences of male and female preschool children as to their perceptions and attitudes of elderly people?

- Would there be any difference in the preschool children's perceptions and attitudes if they were exposed to a pre-test and post-test study, with contact with elderly persons occurring in the time between the two tests?

- Would preschool children's attitudes and perceptions change as they got older? (a longitudinal study)

These implications would serve as good guides for future research with larger, random samples, selected from different socio-economic groups and geographical locations.

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of preschool children's perceptions of and attitudes toward elderly people. The two objectives investigated 1) to explore preschool children's perceptions about what elderly people look like, think about, do for fun, and are able to do, and 2) to determine if preschool children's attitudes about elderly persons are positive, negative or neutral were identified through the use of an interview schedule and projective test. From the research conducted in this study, the researcher was able to identify other areas of possible research on this topic for home economists and others in the social science field.

37

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APPENDIX A

Request for Consent

EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS 61920

School of Home Economics   217-581-3325

April 19, 1983

Dear Parents:

Many of you already know me, but let me introduce myself again. I am a Home Economics graduate assistant, and I work with the children in the morning session of the Child Development Laboratory. I am currently working on my master's thesis in the area of Child Development and Family Life. The topic of my thesis is preschool children's perceptions of elderly people.

As part of my research I will need to interview each child individually about his/her perceptions of older persons. The children's identity will be kept anonymous along with maintaining confidentiality of their responses.

I will also need your help. Please complete the attached questionnaire, which I am using to collect demographic data to describe my study population. It will only take you five minutes to complete, and it will be a great help to me as I do my research.

Although you have already given permission for your child to be included in student research, I am requesting that you sign the permission form below and return it and the completed questionnaire to me by <u>Monday, April 25, 1983</u>. If you have any questions about my research, please feel free to call me at the laboratory from 9:00 to 11:00 any morning (581-3417) or Dr. Jayne Ozier, director of thesis (581-2124).

Thank you for your time and cooperation.

                                        Sincerely,

                                        Susan Reuter

My child _____ has permission to be included in Susan Reuter's graduate thesis.

_____   _____
   Parent's signature   Date

APPENDIX B

Parental Questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE

Child's sex _____ male _____ female   Session your child is in _____ a.m. _____ p.m.

Child's age _____ 2½-3   _____ 3½-4   _____ 4½-5

_____ 3-3½   _____ 4-4½   _____ 5+

1. How frequently does your child have contact with an elderly person (age 65 or older)?

   _____ daily   _____ once a month   _____ never

   _____ weekly   _____ 1-3 times a year

2. Who are the elderly your child has contact with?   (Check all that apply)

   _____ grandparents   _____ friends

   _____ great-grandparents   _____ neighbors

   _____ other relatives _____

3. How many elderly is your child well acquainted?   (Knows their name, talks to and visits with frequently)

   _____ 4 or more   _____ one

   _____ two to four   _____ none

4. If your child has grandparents, where do they live?

   _____ same house   _____ same state

   _____ same neighborhood   _____ out-of-state

   _____ same town

5. In your judgement, your child's contacts with elderly people have been:

   _____ pleasant

   _____ neutral

   _____ unpleasant

6. Has your child recently spent more time than usual with an elderly person?

   _____ yes (explain _____)

   _____ no

7. Any other comments about your child's contacts with elderly persons that you feel are important:

APPENDIX C

Data Collection Form

Child's Name _____

Interview Checklist

<u>MALE</u>

	Positive Responses	Neutral Responses	Negative Responses	Physical or Facial Movements of Child
Question: 1A # ____ B				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6A				
B				
7				
8				
A				
B				

<u>FEMALE</u>

	Positive Responses	Neutral Responses	Negative Responses	Physical or Facial Movements of Child
Question: 1A # ____ B				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6A				
B				
7				
8				
A				
B				

APPENDIX D

Projective Test Interview Questions

PROJECTIVE TEST QUESTIONS

1. a) Which person is oldest?
   b) How do you know?

2. What is the person in the picture doing?

3. What is the person thinking about?

4. How does the person in the picture look?

5. What would you do with this person if he/she came to visit you?

6. a) Do you like this person?
   b) Why or why not?

7. Tell me about jobs old people can do.

8. What other kinds of things can this person or old people do?
   a) with his/her family?
   b) with his/her children?

APPENDIX E

Projective Test Photographs