

Helping Kids Understand Dementia

The statistics are well-known: Over five million Americans currently live with dementia and the number is expected to rise with baby-boomers entering their senior years. While the disease's impact on families has been widely discussed, one area that has received less attention is how it affects young children. Experts say educating kids on dementia is crucial for helping them continue to connect with a relative with the disease. It will also lay the groundwork for society to better understand and handle dementia in the future.

"The changes in cognition that come with dementia can be difficult for adults to deal with and they can be even more confusing for kids if they are not prepared," said Juliet Holt Klinger, Brookdale's senior director of dementia care. "When Grandma doesn't know who you are or starts crying or becomes angry, it can be scary. I think that sometimes for adults, this is so unsettling that we don't take into account how much more distressing it could be for a child."

Something that's important for children to realize is that these changes are part of a disease. "Kids need to know the problem isn't that Grandma doesn't love them anymore or that they have done something to upset her," Holt Klinger said. "It's happening because a disease process is affecting her brain."

A good way to initiate a discussion about dementia with younger children is by reading books together. Holt Klinger recommends Maria Shriver's *What's Happening to Grandpa?* for youngsters from kindergarten to fourth grade, as well as *Faraway Grandpa* by Roberta Karim.

"For older kids and teens, the [Alzheimer's Association's](#) website is a great place to start," Holt Klinger said. The site features videos explaining how the brain works as well as ones showing kids can help in the fight for a cure. The site also provides an interactive tour through the brain of a person affected by Alzheimer's.

The goal of these resources, as well as Brookdale's intergenerational programs, is to help children become more comfortable around dementia, she noted. "It's also to assist them in understanding the changes in family members, neighbors, or family and friends living with the disease," Holt Klinger said. "I believe that talking about dementia with kids will go a long way to paving the road for greater understanding in the future, because they will grow into adults who have a grasp and sensitivity on this issue."