

Please Recognize Sandwiched Parents

By Sarah Lieber, Senior Sidekicks

Every morning parents take their children to school and daycare. How many of them will also take care of an elderly person that day? There are more than you think. Adult children as early as age 35 can start elder caregiving. That's also the prime time for parenting, and establishing a career and a home. Child care institutions must recognize that adult children have a lot on their plates.

Helping this sandwich generation keep its "peanut butter and jelly" together requires a refocus by those who care for their young children. We must include the elder care factor into our child care inquiries, offer support and help parents to prepare to "parent their parents." Does your school ask about elder care? Does your school provide classes which address intergenerational issues? How many schools or daycare settings take the demands of elder care into account? We might sympathize when parents say they were up all night with a new baby; do we also recognize staying up all night with an elder? Sibling rivalry can manifest at school; what about the rivalry a child feels when they see the elder receiving care? Do teachers and child care workers ask about these situations? When children act out, do teachers and child care givers ask parents if they are dealing with elder care issues? If these kinds of questions are not part of the screening instruments, why not?

Support groups abound: divorcing parents, adoptive parents or special-needs parents. Where is the support group for "sandwiched parents?" Where is the class on helping the children adapt when the grandparent must move into the child's home or into a "home?" When does classroom discussion turn to a child's relationship with an aging relative? We have "Curious George" books on other topics; why not this one?

During my decades of working with seniors, I have met many caregiving adult children. They often believe their situations are unique. They express feelings of guilt and see their responses to stress as

"wrong." To help sandwiched parents negotiate this period (and teach the next generation how to negotiate this period), we need to recognize how this elder care impact seeps into other generations.

Everybody knows about Lamaze classes. Parents also get lots of "free advice" when expecting. We have books to help older children prepare for the new arrival, as long as that means a new sibling. What if the "new arrival" means an elder? Elder care begins much earlier than most sandwiched parents realize—doing elder's yard work, taxes, errands or accompanying them to the doctor. These early forms of care only lead to more care, which is exactly the opposite direction of growing children's independence. The time has come to raise awareness of the impact of elder care demands on sandwiched parents and their children.

SUGGESTED READING LIST FOR CHILDREN IN ELDER-CAREGIVING FAMILIES

- ▶ **Great Aunt Martha** by Rebecca C. Jones (misconceptions of aging)
- ▶ **Nana Upstairs Nana Downstairs** by Tomie de Paola (caregiving at home)
- ▶ **My Grandpa** by Marta Altes (aspects of aging)
- ▶ **A Young Man's Dance** by Laura Lazzaro Knowlton (memory loss)
- ▶ **My Little Grandmother Often Forgets** by Reeve Lindbergh (memory loss)
- ▶ **How to Babysit a Grandpa [Grandma]** by Jean Reagan (relationship with grandparents)
- ▶ **The Retired Kid** by Jon Agee (relationship with grandparents)

Senior Sidekicks services promote senior independence while supporting family caregivers. Its Parenting Your Parent Course prepares adult children like "senior Lamaze." For information go to SeniorSidekicks.com or call 787-5866.