



# Top 10 ideas for visits with seniors

By Christine Crosbie

**I**t's Sunday morning. You and perhaps your family members are preparing to visit parents, grandparents or an elderly relative. Depending on your schedule, these visits are something you look forward to or something you manage to squeeze in between your children's sports events, shopping, home repairs and everything else on your to-do list (or both). Whether these visits are long, short, frequent or rare, they're important for both of you, visitor and "visitee." They give

you the opportunity to reconnect and spend some meaningful time together.

### *Connecting to happiness*

Feeling a connection to family or community is one of the strongest factors in making us happy. Psychologists who study the science of happiness say that such connections have a greater and more lasting impact on our self-esteem and well-being than receiving a raise or financial windfall. Both you and your parent will feel this

benefit if you're mindful of the reasons for the visit—being close to someone you love and spending precious time together.

Widowhood, mobility issues or lack of transportation can lead to seniors spending a lot of time alone. Being alone isn't necessarily a bad thing, but *loneliness*—the feeling of a lack of relationships and social connections—can have a negative effect on mental and physical health. Luckily, it's a condition that's easily cured.

Dropping in on your parent in their own home may lead you to spend your time helping out with housework or going through bills and medication, rather than focusing on your parent. Visiting a retirement residence or long-term care facility may limit the kinds of activities you can do when you're there. But with a little creativity you can add some variety and make the visit more interesting, memorable and worthwhile.

Take the time to prepare something special, or different, for your next visit. Arrive with a small gift or some flowers, and choose an activity you may not have done together for a while. Use these activities as a way to talk about each other and the world around you.

Here are 10 ways to make visits to seniors more interesting and engaging for both of you.

## 1 Get cooking

Many of us have fond memories of the smell of fresh-baked goodies during visits to our grandparents' homes. Certain foods seem to always hit the spot, whether homemade or store bought. Turn the tables by finding out what your senior friend or relative really likes and taking a batch on your next visit. Butter tarts, rice pudding and oatmeal chocolate-chip cookies are classic carbohydrate-rich comfort foods (you may want to look into recipes with reduced fat and sugar if diet is an issue).

Some older people insist on cooking and baking when company comes over because it makes them feel useful and hospitable. Asking if you can learn how to make their "secret recipes" and participating in the preparation may also be great activities.

## 2 Break out the cards and board games

People with age-related memory loss can sometimes recall things from their youth (such as the rules of games...and grammar!) more accurately than recent events. Playing old favourites such as backgammon, for instance, can be fun and stimulating.

It's nice to play familiar games where the rules are straightforward, but that still challenge your brain: chess requires strategy and looking ahead at the consequences of each move, Scrabble exercises word memory and puzzles require concentration and visual alertness.

## 3 Picture this

Pull out some family photo albums for your next visit. You can then talk about the context of the pictures and what memories you both have of that time. Photofinishing shops can scan long-forgotten slides onto a disc, perfect for a digital slide show. You can even add a soundtrack of favourite songs if you like. If you have a laptop computer, upload more recent photos or burn them onto a DVD that can be played in large format on a television. This makes it easier for those diminished vision to appreciate the images.

Today, you can combine photos and have them printed in a hard- or soft-cover book via the internet or at your local photo shop. A coffee-table book of family photos makes a wonderful gift.

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“The most important trip you may take in life is meeting people halfway.”

*Henry Boye*

## Quick tips

- Time your visits for when you both have energy and no pressing appointments to make.
- Celebrate special events such as birthdays. Decorations and themed treats can be fun to share.
- Combine the visit with an activity such as a haircut or pedicure. (As we get older, foot care becomes more important and harder to do for ourselves.)
- Visits with young children are hugely entertaining but can become exhausting for everyone involved. Keep visits short and sweet, particularly with active kids.
- Avoid giving advice unless you're asked for it. And this goes both ways! Seniors should rely on their doctor for medical information.



“Those who bring sunshine to the lives of others cannot keep it from themselves.”

*James Mathew Barrie*

#### 4 **Catch some flicks**

A trip to the movies is a nice way to get out of the house and keep up with popular culture. Read reviews and find out what you can about the film before you go. Very loud movies may be overwhelming (especially for people who use hearing aids), while watching a slow movie can be nap inducing. Check for accessibility if there are mobility concerns and find an aisle seat in case a trip to the bathroom is required.

Renting, borrowing or buying DVDs may be a better option for those who need frequent bathroom breaks or who are uncomfortable travelling to the cinema. Take some time afterwards to discuss the film and compare your reviews to those of the critics in the papers and online.

#### 5 **Turn some pages**

While passive activities such as watching television don't do much to enhance brain function, reading, especially more thought-provoking texts, does stimulate the brain. Take some newspaper clippings on subjects your parent or grandparent enjoys and discuss and debate the topics. If they're up to it, have them read out loud. If he or she knows or is learning a second language, find materials in that language too. Several studies have proven that learning new things, even at an advanced age, keeps our brains sharp.

#### 6 **Take up gaming**

A recent survey of over 2,000 adults found that 23 per cent of people aged over 65 years played video games, either on the internet or on gaming consoles such as Nintendo's GameCube and Microsoft's Xbox. Over a third of those people said they play every day!

If the person you are visiting doesn't have access to a computer at home, take along a laptop if you have one. Some games are just fun to play, while others will help to exercise the brain and improve memory through fairly simple but challenging tasks. Watch out! These games can be addictive—in a positive way.

#### 7 **Get out of the house**

In the winter months, outdoor walks can be treacherous; snowy and icy sidewalks are a common cause of falls in seniors. Get out of the house and into your local mall for some walking, socializing or maybe a little shopping. Many bookstores and coffee shops have comfy seating

and encourage browsing. Make appointments to meet friends and family members on their lunch breaks or after work for a change of scenery.

#### 8 **Take a pet**

Countless studies have shown the benefits of seniors owning pets. Pet owners tend to be more active and have overall better health, including lower blood pressure and stress levels. Not all apartments and retirement homes permit tenants to own pets, but they may be welcomed as temporary visitors. Some nursing homes even have resident companion animals or therapy dog programs where animals are brought in to interact with residents.

If it's appropriate, take your own pet for a visit. You can use it as an opportunity to go for a walk or just enjoy time playing with the animal. If you don't have a dog yourself then a trip to the local dog park can give you a variety of furry friends to interact with. Make sure to ask owners if their pups are comfortable with strangers.

#### 9 **Check it out at the library**

Put holds on the latest bestsellers at your local library, so when you drop by you don't have to scan the stacks. Many books are available in large-print editions or recorded on CD.

If you are well versed in the online world, reserve some computer time for yourself and your loved one. Together, you can conduct research looking back at significant events and places in your parent or grandparent's life, or delve into new areas. Searching the internet actually engages the brain more than simply reading books. Newspapers blogs and websites can be found in every language for those who were born outside of the country.

#### 10 **Share some tunes**

MP3 music players (e.g., iPods) can be inexpensive. Load up a player with audio books, new music and even university lectures that can be enjoyed after you've gone home. Every couple of weeks, take the device back and switch up the content. Choose materials that you can talk about on subsequent visits. ●

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