

Creating Fun and Meaningful Moments for Elders with Dementia

Written by Sue S. Wilson, LMSW

Fun, meaningful activities are as important to the wellbeing of an individual living with dementia as they are for anyone. Bringing children and elders together can provide endless opportunities for creating moments of joy and mutual engagement. With a little planning, you can set the stage for fun, meaningful activities that support the strengths and abilities of individuals with dementia while growing compassion in children.

When I look back at caregiving with my mother-in-law who lived for many years with dementia and died from dementia, I remember both tough times and joyful times. The toughest times hurt and made me feel sad. The sadness stemmed from the loss and grief that I was feeling. The joyful times lifted my spirits and made me feel happy. The happiness stemmed from loving interactions and moments of connection. People with dementia experience these same feelings for the very same reasons. It is important to note; that individuals with dementia, are able to feel sadness and happiness longer than they are able to remember what caused the feeling.

Some of the happiest moments I remember involved my daughter and her grandmother. My daughter was young and my mother-in-law was still able to live at home with 24-hour supervision and assistance. I think of the wonderful ways that they would naturally connect and enjoy each other's company.

Ideas below draw on those experiences and are meant to provide ways that you can encourage connectedness and joyful moments for your loved one with dementia and your children or grandchildren.

Reading, Yes Reading

Like most young children, my daughter, loved to have someone read to her. She enjoyed the connection and would become totally engaged. As a toddler, she didn't know that her grandmother was living with dementia. But, she did know that she could bring her grandmother a board book or two, cuddle up beside her, and her grandmother would lovingly and patiently read to her. My daughter would usually ask to have the same book read to her multiple times. She knew all the words and would proudly say the word if her grandmother was having difficulty. My mother-in-law was proud that my daughter knew the word. It was not about judgment and correction, just loving interaction. I had no idea that my mother-in-law could still read books but she could and did. It was not about discussing the plot of the story but rather the opportunity for closeness.

Shoe Store

My mother-in-law always loved shoes and shoe shopping. My daughter loves shoes too, even as a little one. I remember one day, I was cleaning the kitchen, and it occurred to me that the house was a bit quiet. I dried my hands and went to check on my daughter and my mother-in-law. To my pleasure, as I approached my mother-in-law's bedroom, I could hear happy chatter. I peeked in the room and what did I see? The two were playing shoe store. My mother-in-law was sitting on the edge of her bed and my little girl was taking pairs of shoes from her grandmother's closet and putting them on and taking them off of her grandmother. Sometimes the shoes matched and sometimes they did not. But, they were

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having a grand time *together*. So, I backed away and felt a smile wash over me. It's those joyful moments that keep you going.

Scavenger Hunts

Like playing shoe store, scavenger hunts provide fun and entertaining opportunities for those with dementia and children to *play* together for a shared goal and even a prize! Team up your youngster and elder for a scavenger hunt. Give them some minor instructions and a list of things to find or do and you can turn even a chore into a game. Scavenger hunts can be timed and prizes given; they can be conducted inside or outside; they can be conducted at home or within a care community; and they can be modified to ensure success and safely challenge the ages and abilities of both those with dementia and children.

A list of TO DO's for a scavenger hunts might include a few of the following:

- Find and eat the chicken tenders
- Find a penny and stick it in your pocket
- Fold the towels on the bed
- Find something pink
- Find the yellow balloon and toss it in the air
- Read a book together (It doesn't matter who does the reading.)
- Draw a flower
- Color the flower
- Draw a circle
- Color a rainbow
- Find a pair of blue shoes

You can set a clock for completing the list of tasks or not. It is important to keep your ears and eyes open to make sure the scavenger hunt is continues to bring pleasure. But, try not to interfere. If they are having fun, let it run longer; if it looks like frustration may be setting in, then tell them they have one minute or two to finish the scavenger hunt and meet you in the kitchen. They can show you what they've accomplished and prizes given! The point is to provide an opportunity for togetherness and fun. Note changes in the strengths and abilities of your loved one with dementia and share with medical professionals.

Arranging Flowers

Floral arranging provides an opportunity for togetherness, reminiscing and making a beautiful creation to be admired and enjoyed for days to come! If your loved one lives in a memory care community, take a bouquet of fresh or artificial flowers and make arranging the flowers the focus of your visit. Doing something together can be engaging and satisfying even when language-processing skills are diminished by dementia. I remember doing this activity with my mother-in-law when she was living in residential care. When conversation was gone and she was having difficulty figuring out what to do with the flowers, I took a flower and put it in the vase. After a pause, I took another flower and put it in the vase. After a few flowers were in the vase, she picked up a stem and placed it in the vase. The arrangement began to take shape. Depending on the extent of brain changes that have occurred in your loved one, you may end up being the one who arranges most of the flowers and does most of the reminiscing. The flowers can then be enjoyed on the bedside table or on the kitchen table. The activity is doable and here are some thoughts on how to go about the activity of floral arranging.

- Set out an assortment of real or artificial flowers and a dark colored vase or two (unbreakable if needed). A clear vase is less visible for someone with dementia. Depending on the age of your child, you may have issues with sharing in which case you can either make two arrangements or address the issue of sharing with your child in advance.
- Invite your loved one to lend you a hand. If gardening and flowers were important to your elder, you might say “Mom, you have always been so good with growing and arranging flowers, would you please help me with this floral arrangement?” “I would love for you to show us how you make one of your beautiful flower arrangements.” Use this opportunity to compliment your loved one and teach your child something special about their grandparent.
- To accommodate the changes in visual and fine motor skills in the later stages of dementia and the developing skills of young children, your role can be to trim the stems and then hand each flower to your helpers.
- Pay attention to the pace of the activity. Don’t rush but stay tuned to the mood and level of interest. You can stop and restart periodically.
- Take turns adding flowers, turn the vase, and savor the addition of each flower.
- Ask questions of your helpers and give compliments – Which is your favorite flower? How does it make you feel? Why do you like it best? What does it smell like? What does it make you think of? Mom, I remember how beautiful the arrangements were that you made and took to the church each week. I remember helping you when I was little and being happy and proud to see your flower arrangements on the church alter.
- Stop, watch and listen.
- When finished with the arrangements, ask your mother if she would like her flowers in her room. Likewise, ask your child where they would like their flowers.
- If you are using artificial flowers, add to your collection and switch out flowers to add variety to your arrangements. If you are using fresh flowers, even better!
- Enjoy the time together see it as an opportunity to connect and engage. Floral arranging can become a regularly scheduled activity.

Use these suggestions to stimulate your own ideas. Be sure to build in the interests and preferences of your loved one with dementia and your children. Modify, modify, modify.

In my next article, I’ll share ideas for art and self-expression as a way for family members to enjoy meaningful activities with their loved ones living with dementia.

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