



Reflections of Perceptions of Old Age in the Drawings of Preschool Children

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the perceptions of preschool children aged 4–6 regarding the concept of old age. The research adopts a phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research methods. The study group comprises 25 children aged 4–6 who are enrolled in preschool education. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form consisting of questions and children's drawings. The collected data were analyzed through content analysis techniques. According to the findings, children perceive elderly individuals in terms of their physical characteristics, such as appearance and deficiencies; the activities they can engage in with the elderly, such as participating in activities, playing games, traveling, showing affection, and caring for garden animals; and the actions elderly individuals can perform, such as household chores, garden animal care, sedentary activities, worship, interacting with grandchildren, exercising, and working. Moreover, children associate elderly individuals with spending time with family members and other individuals. The findings of the study are discussed, and recommendations are provided.

KEYWORDS

Preschool period; old age; drawing; perception of old age.

INTRODUCTION

Old age refers to individuals, conditions, or phenomena associated with a certain age threshold within society, whereas aging describes the lifelong process of "growing older," beginning at birth and continuing throughout life (Kalkan, 2008). While aging is a continuous process spanning a lifetime, old age can be characterized as the final stage of this process (Yilmaz & Mermutlu, 2023).

Technological advancements in healthcare, societal changes, and improved living conditions have contributed to increased human life expectancy. Globally, the elderly population is steadily growing due to a decline in fertility rates. In particular, the proportion of elderly individuals within the general population is notably high in developed countries (Bulduk, 2014). Old age is a phenomenon that can vary depending on historical contexts and cultures. While various meanings are attributed to old age, research on this topic remains relatively new. The widespread demographic studies highlighting the increasing proportion of the elderly population, especially in developed societies, have heightened interest in aging within academic and political spheres (İçli, 2008). Children develop their own conceptual frameworks regarding the meaning of aging (Fillmer, 1984; Sanders et al., 1984).

From the preschool years onward, acquiring accurate knowledge about aging and old age is essential for developing positive attitudes toward aging, preparing for old age, and appreciating its meaning and value (Crawford, 2015; Moody & Sasser, 2018). However, negative perceptions of elderly individuals have occasionally emerged within the social structure. Older adults have been marginalized by associating them with traits such as slow movement, unfriendly demeanor, weakness, and irritability (Convey, 1988; Palmore, 1999). The most prevalent stereotypes depict elderly individuals as unproductive, unpleasant, senile, and unhealthy (Dycwald & Flower, 1989). Children's perceptions of older adults and the aging process are also influenced by these societal stereotypes. Young children often categorize older adults based on their physical or behavioral characteristics. Research emphasizes that children also adopt negative stereotypical images regarding older adults and the aging process (Falchikov, 1990; McTavish, 1971; Treybig, 1974; Weber et al., 2013).

These stereotypes are learned by children from an early age (Gilbert & Ricketts, 2008; Levy, 1996) and, according to some studies, discriminatory narratives tend to become more resistant as children grow older (Bennet & Gaines, 2010; Klein, Council, & McGuire, 2005). It has been noted that children often exhibit prejudices in their opinions of elderly individuals (McTavish, 1971). Given the ongoing increase in the number of older adults in society (Laney, Laney, Wimsatt, & Moseley, 1997), educators are tasked with preparing younger generations for the social, economic, and political implications of these demographic changes (Anasuri, 2023). Understanding how early interactions with elderly individuals influence the development and reinforcement of negative stereotypes is crucial for shaping children's perceptions of aging in a positive direction.

In contemporary societies, rapid technological advancements and social transformations have led to decreasing interactions between different age groups (Senior & Green, 2017). Children and young people often seek out older individuals solely for advice and frequently perceive them as a burden. For much of society, aging is equated with dependency, depression, dementia, and social isolation (Drury, Hutchison, & Abrams, 2016). Additionally, societal prejudices against older adults have increased (Allan, Johnson, & Emerson, 2014), and individuals' anxieties about their own aging have become widespread (Boswell, 2012). The difficulties elderly adults face in adapting to rapidly changing cultural structures further contribute to generational differences in opinions (Yıldırım, 2015).

However, the interactions that elderly adults establish with themselves and younger generations are of significant importance, particularly for the development of preschool-aged children. For children aged 1–5, spending time with elderly family members offers a rich environment for socialization and learning (Özmete, 2017). Moreover, older adults often act as mediators within families, facilitating communication between parents and children and contributing to the transmission of cultural heritage, thereby impacting children's lives meaningfully (King, Elder, & Conger, 2000). In this context, understanding preschool children's attitudes toward elderly individuals necessitates exploring their representational worlds.

One method frequently used for this purpose is the analysis of children's drawings (Cherney et al., 2006). The use of children's drawings to analyze their attitudes is supported by research that explains elements of cognitive development and social cognition (Anasuri, 2023). Cherney et al. (2006) noted that children's drawings reflect experiences within the family and provide valuable insights into their perceptions and attitudes. Similarly, Piaget (1977) emphasized that children project objects and people from their surroundings into their drawings through their schemas, while Gardner (1980) argued that this symbolic representation is a product of children's cognitive development and social intelligence.

Furthermore, unlike data collection tools such as surveys and interviews, drawings allow children to express themselves more freely (Pianta, Longmaid, & Ferguson, 1999). Children's drawings about elderly individuals can offer clues about their understanding of the aging process. Researchers suggest that human figures drawn by children can be utilized for personality evaluations and are reflections of their social worlds (Cherney et al., 2006; Konoff & Prout, 1985; LaVoy, Pederson, Reitz, Brauch, Luxenberg, & Nofsinger, 2001; Naglieri, 1988). In this regard, the role of children's drawings offers a significant opportunity to understand how intergenerational interactions shape their perceptions of elderly individuals.

The relevant literature includes studies that examine the reflection of perceptions of old age in the drawings of preschool children (Anasuri, 2003; Cherney et al., 2006; Robinson et al., 2015; Villar & Fabà, 2012; Weber et al., 2013). However, the limited number of studies on how perceptions of old age are represented in preschool children's drawings highlights the significance of this research.

The present study aims to determine the thoughts of preschool children aged 4–6 regarding the concept of old age. To achieve this aim, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the thoughts of preschool children about the physical characteristics of elderly individuals?
2. What are the thoughts of preschool children about the activities they can engage in with elderly individuals?
3. What are the thoughts of preschool children about the actions that elderly individuals can perform?
4. What are the thoughts of preschool children about the individuals with whom elderly people spend their time?

METHOD

Research Design

This study aimed to identify the perceptions of preschool children regarding the concept of "old age." The research was conducted using the phenomenology method, one of the qualitative research designs. Qualitative research allows for the exploration of environments, experiences, or phenomena, facilitates the emergence of interpretations, and enables the collection of broader and more flexible data (Creswell, 2009). Phenomenological studies aim to understand individuals' existing perceptions, knowledge, and behaviors concerning a phenomenon or event that is recognized but not deeply understood (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013).

Participants

The study group consisted of 47 preschool children aged 4-6 years who attended two independent kindergartens in the city center of Niğde in the Central Anatolia region of Türkiye in the 2022-2023 academic year. Among the participants, 28 were boys and 19 were girls. The children were selected using a convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling is defined as a sampling method that selects individuals who are easily accessible, in proximity to the researcher, and convenient to reach, thus facilitating the research process (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013; Patton, 2014).

Data Collection Tools and Data Collection

The data for the study were collected during the second semester of the 2022–2023 academic year using a semi-structured interview form created by the researchers and documents comprising the children's drawings. In the first stage, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the children, during which the questions in the interview form were posed, and their responses were recorded in writing. In the second stage, the children were asked to depict their thoughts about elderly individuals through drawings. Specific questions regarding their drawings were then asked, and their answers were noted.

Data Analysis

The research data were analyzed by both researchers using the content analysis method. Content analysis is a method used to analyze and interpret written and visual data (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In this study, the written and visual data collected were coded and classified in line with the research objectives, and categories and subcategories were derived based on these classifications. When presenting the categories, excerpts from the children's statements, coded as C1, C2, ..., were included.

Reliability

One of the most effective ways to enhance reliability in qualitative studies is to ensure inter-coder agreement (Huberman & Miles, 2002). To ensure the reliability of the coding, both researchers independently performed the coding process. The codes were then compared to identify commonalities and differences, and the degree of similarity was determined. The reliability of the data analysis was calculated using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula for the Consensus Percentage:

$$\text{Consensus Percentage} = \left[\frac{\text{Agreement}}{\text{Agreement} + \text{Disagreement}} \right] \times 100$$

The consensus percentage was determined to be 92%.

FINDINGS

Under this section, children's perceptions of the concept of old age were examined through their drawings and responses to interview questions, and the findings obtained are presented.

Table 1.

Children's Thoughts on the Physical Characteristics of Elderly Individuals

Category	Subcategory	Response Frequency
Appearance	Gray-white hair	23
	Facial wrinkles	18
	White beard	14
	Hand wrinkles	14
	White mustache	12
	Use of a walking stick	10
	Baldness	8
	Short height	5
	Use of a headscarf	4
	Use of glasses	3
	Body/posture curvature	3
	Difficulty in walking	12
Disability	Leg-foot pain	10
	Vision impairment	6
	Hearing impairment	4
	Headache	3

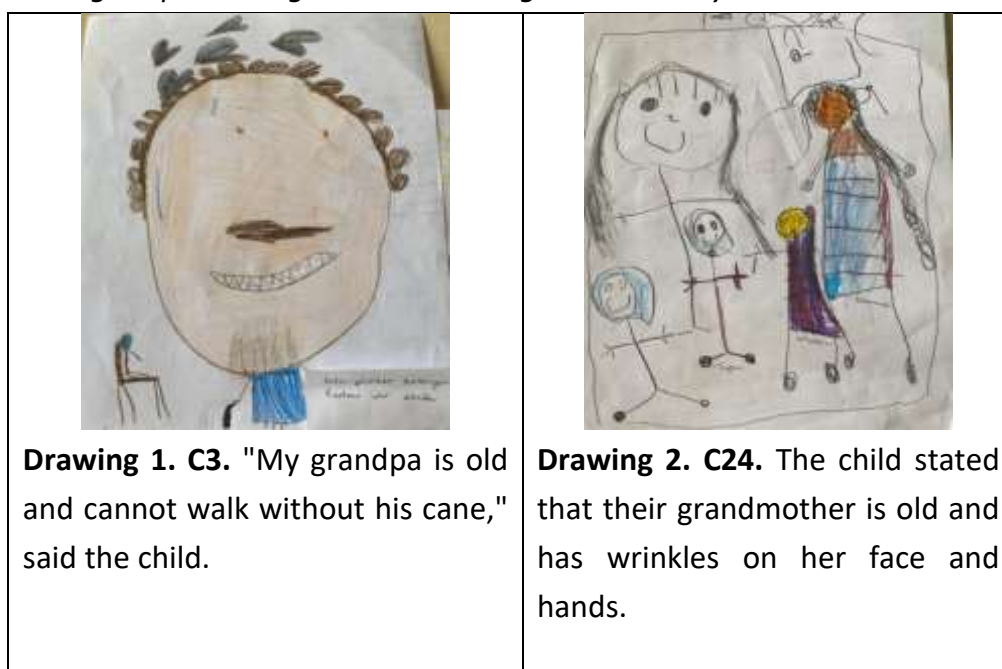
Upon examining Table 1, it can be observed that the responses given by children to the question "What are the physical characteristics of elderly individuals?" are categorized into two main groups: appearance and disability. The appearance category includes subcategories such as gray-white hair, facial wrinkles, hand wrinkles, white beard, use of a walking stick, baldness, short height, use of a headscarf, use of glasses, and body/posture curvature. The disability category comprises subcategories such as difficulty in walking, leg-foot pain, vision impairment, hearing impairment, and headaches.

Some examples of the children's statements are as follows:

- "My grandma's hands and face are wrinkled" (C1).
- "My grandma's hair has a different color; it's like both gray and white" (C40).
- "My grandpa always says his leg hurts, and he can't walk" (C15).
- "Sometimes my grandma can't even see me without her glasses" (C24).

Figure 1.

Drawings Representing Children's Thoughts on the Physical Characteristics of Elderly Individuals



Upon examining Table 2, it can be observed that the responses children gave to the question, "What do you enjoy doing with elderly individuals?", fall into five categories: activity participation, playing games, traveling, showing affection, and garden-animal care.

The activity participation category includes subcategories such as painting, drawing, watching cartoons, riding a bicycle, cooking, swimming, and going to the mosque. The playing games category comprises subcategories such as playing games, playing with toys, going to the park, playing hide-and-seek, playing tag, and playing with snowballs. The traveling category includes subcategories such as going shopping, going to the garden, and going to the amusement park. The showing affection category consists of subcategories such as hugging and

kissing. Finally, the garden-animal care category includes subcategories such as visiting the field and feeding cows.

Table 2.

Children's Thoughts on What Activities They Can Do with Elderly Individuals

Category	Subcategory	Response Frequency
Activity Participation	Painting	10
	Drawing	8
	Watching cartoons	7
	Riding a bicycle	5
	cooking	4
	Go swimming	2
	Going to the mosque	1
Playing Games	Playing games	18
	Playing with toys	16
	Going to the park	8
	Playing hide-and-seek	8
	Playing tag	6
	Playing with snowballs	2
Traveling	Shopping trips	6
	Going to the garden	4
	Going to the amusement park	2
Showing Affection	Hugging	2
	Kissing	2
Garden Animal Game	Visiting the field	3
	Feeding cows	2

Figure 2.

Drawings Representing Children's Thoughts on Activities They Do with Elderly Individuals



Drawing 3. C18. The child stated that they go out to their garden with their grandmother, and their grandmother helps them ride a bicycle.



Drawing 4. C32. The child stated that their grandmother was sitting on the couch while they played hide-and-seek with their grandfather.

Some examples of the children's statements are as follows:

- "My grandpa lets me watch the cartoons I want; I love watching cartoons with him" (C8).
- "My grandma and I play a truck-driving game" (C45).
- "I love going outside with my grandpa when the weather is nice, especially in the spring" (C24).
- "I like pinching and kissing my grandma's cheeks" (C20).
- "I enjoy going to the garden with my grandpa; he plants vegetables, and I help him by watering them" (C17).

Table 3.

Children's thoughts on the actions elderly individuals can perform

Category	Sub-Category	Response Frequency
Housework	Cooking	17
	Cleaning	6
	Repairs	4
	Preparing the table	2
Garden- Animal Care	Growing vegetables and fruits	7
	Planting trees	5
	Cleaning the garden	3
	Feeding cows	3
	Feeding chickens	3
	Milking cows	3
Static Activities	Watching TV	12
	Resting	10
	Sleeping	9
	Watching the outdoors	3
	Using a phone	3
	Knitting	9
Worship	Going to the mosque	6
	Reading the Quran	3
	Performing prayers	3
Caring for Grandchildren	Playing games	5
	Providing care	2
Exercising	Sports	2
	Walking	2
Working	Going to work	3

Upon examining Table 3, it was determined that the responses children gave to the question "*What actions can elderly individuals perform?*" are grouped into seven categories: household tasks, garden and animal care, static activities, worship, caring for grandchildren, exercising, and working.

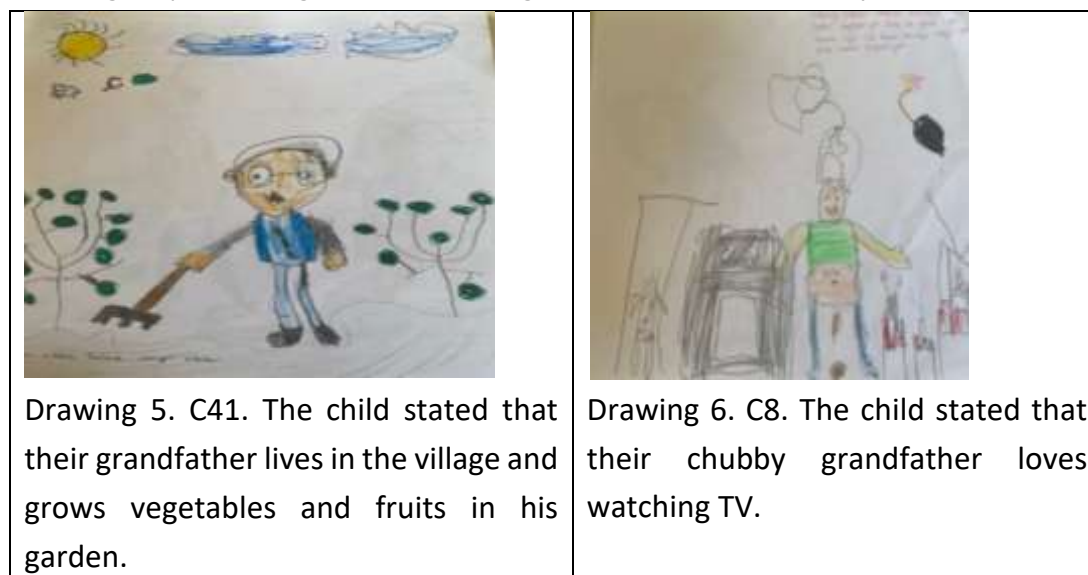
The household tasks category includes subcategories such as cooking, cleaning, repairs, and preparing the table. The garden and animal care category consists of subcategories such as growing vegetables and fruits, planting trees, cleaning the garden, feeding cows, feeding chickens, and milking cows. The static activities category includes subcategories such as watching TV, resting, sleeping, knitting, watching the outdoors, and using a phone. The worship category comprises subcategories such as going to the mosque, reading the Quran, and performing prayers. The caring for grandchildren category includes subcategories such as playing games and providing care. The exercising category consists of subcategories such as playing sports and walking. Lastly, the working category contains the subcategory of going to work.

Some examples of the children's statements are as follows:

- "My grandma makes delicious honey pancakes" (C19).
- "My grandpa and I planted tomatoes in the garden at the village; we'll harvest them in the summer to make tomato paste" (C12).
- "My grandma falls asleep while sitting on the couch" (C7).
- "My grandpa goes to the mosque, and sometimes I go with him" (C26).
- "My grandpa uses the exercise equipment at the park to work out" (C11).
- "My grandpa has a grocery store in the village, and he goes there every day to work" (C14).

Figure 3.

Drawings representing children's thoughts on the actions elderly individuals can perform



Upon examining Table 4, it can be observed that the responses children gave to the question, "*Whom do elderly individuals spend time with?*", are categorized into two main groups: with family and others. The with family category includes subcategories such as with their son, with their daughter-in-law, together with the family, with their father, with their

daughter, with their grandchildren, with their spouse, and with their sister. The others category consists of subcategories such as with other elderly people, alone, and with their neighbors.

Table 4.

Children's thoughts on whom elderly individuals spend time with

Category	Sub-Category	Response Frequency
With Family	With their son	13
	With their daughter-in-law	12
	Together with the family	8
	With their father	6
	With their daughter	6
	With their grandchildren	5
	With their spouse	4
	With their sister	1
The Others	With other elderly people	5
	Alone	3
	With their neighbors	2

Some examples of the children's statements are as follows:

- "My grandma lives with us, and I spend the most time with her" (C34).
- "My grandma has elderly neighbors; she always visits them" (C22)

Figure 4.

Drawings representing children's thoughts on whom elderly individuals spend time with



Drawing 7. C12. The child stated that they live in the same apartment building as their grandfather and grandmother. They mentioned visiting them in the evenings with their mother and father.



Drawing 8. C34. The child stated that they love going out and walking with their grandfather. In their drawing, they depicted a spring morning walk with their grandfather.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined how the perceptions of old age among preschool children are reflected in their drawings. According to the findings, it was determined that children define elderly individuals based on physical appearance and disabilities. Prominent physical appearance characteristics include gray-white hair, facial wrinkles, white beard, hand wrinkles, and white mustache. A review of the literature revealed studies supporting these findings. For instance, Crawford and Bhattacharya (2014) stated that elderly individuals are often represented with gray or white hair and beards. Similarly, studies conducted by Avcı and Erhan (2022), Danowski and Robinson (2012), and Villar and Fabà (2012) highlighted that prominent physical traits representing elderly individuals include skin wrinkles, vision impairments, and walking difficulties. In the study conducted by Nam Ki Won (2016), when 4- to 5-year-old children were asked to draw elderly individuals, it was found that they generally focused on negative physical characteristics associated with old age, such as wrinkles, the use of canes, hunched posture, and physical frailty.

As individuals age, physical disabilities begin to manifest (Kılıççı, 1988). These changes include difficulty walking, inability to remain actively employed, leg and foot pain, and visual impairments. In this study, it was also found that children perceive elderly individuals as those experiencing disabilities. These disabilities include walking difficulties, leg and foot pain, visual impairments, and hearing impairments. This suggests that children rely on specific imagery to distinguish between young and elderly individuals, indicating that stereotypes about elderly individuals may persist across generations. Such stereotypes may stem from the fact that elderly individuals are perceived as older than the parental figures within the family.

One of the elements that make the lives of elderly adults meaningful is their grandchildren. The responsibility of grandparents, who have raised their own children to adulthood, is reshaped when they take on the care of their grandchildren (Suwanrada et al., 2018). In this context, the environments where children and elderly individuals spend time together become diverse. This study found that children engage in activities such as participating in events, playing games, traveling, showing affection, and caring for garden animals with elderly individuals. Yakar and Yılmaz (2019) noted that elderly individuals engage in activities such as taking their grandchildren to the park or playing games with them. Bell et al. (2019) stated that grandmothers who care for children aged 1 to 7 not only provide basic caregiving but also support their grandchildren in various areas such as affection, attention, play, and nutrition. The same study also reported that grandmothers plan daily life activities—such as going to the market, setting the table, and preparing meals—to educate their grandchildren about healthy living. Similarly, Nam Ki Won (2016) stated that elderly parents who take care of their grandchildren are described as symbols of love and attachment within the family. Through such shared activities, elderly individuals can serve as role models for children, contribute to the transmission of cultural values, and positively impact the lives of their grandchildren (King et al., 2000). Additionally, it is thought that elderly individuals can support

their grandchildren by drawing on their life experiences (Horgan & Fees, 2018). Moreover, it can be stated that elderly individuals find happiness in spending time with children and may wish to contribute to their development (Statham, 2011). Caputo et al. (2023), Jernings et al. (2021), and Sneed and Scguiz (2019) stated that grandparenting is one of the most positive and fulfilling experiences for older adults. They found that this process positively affects the health of older individuals—including their cognitive functions—and provides emotional benefits. In their study, Pekesen et al. (2021) reported that older adults described children as a "source of life energy and happiness" and expressed great enjoyment in spending time with their grandchildren. Duflos et al. (2020) emphasized that the emotional closeness between elderly parents and their grandchildren plays a significant role in the psychological well-being, healthy development, and quality of life during the aging process for both parties.

Children's perception of elderly individuals as caregivers, playmates, and companions for outings may stem from the societal expectation placed on elderly individuals to take responsibility for caring for their grandchildren.

According to the study, it was found that children described the actions elderly individuals could perform as household tasks, garden and animal care, static activities, worship, caring for grandchildren, exercising, and working. Other studies in the literature support these findings. For instance, Arpacı and Tezel Şahin (2015), Anasuri (2023), Paz et al. (2018), and Ünlü (2017) have highlighted that elderly individuals often take on responsibilities such as caring for and engaging with their grandchildren. Similarly, Yakar and Yılmaz (2019) found that elderly individuals are engaged in activities such as cooking, household chores, and taking their grandchildren to the park. Duflos et al. (2023) stated that grandparents who spend time with their 3- to 5-year-old grandchildren engage in activities such as caring for animals, outdoor play, walking, and interacting with nature. The study revealed that these shared activities have a positive impact on the mental health and happiness of both the grandparents and the grandchildren. Crawford and Bhattacharya (2014) noted that elderly women typically deal with childcare, household, and garden tasks, while elderly men are more involved in farming and animal care. Scott et al. (2020) stated that engaging in gardening activities, and Adjei and Brand (2018) reported that participating in household chores, positively support the overall health of older adults by increasing their levels of physical activity. Studies by Lee et al. (2006) and Simcock and Lynn (2006) emphasized that elderly individuals are often represented within the stereotypical roles culturally and socially attributed to them. These studies demonstrate that stereotypes about elderly individuals persist across generations and that prejudices related to them continue. It can be said that children's perceptions of elderly individuals are shaped accordingly, reflecting societal expectations and stereotypes regarding elderly roles.

Children, like adults, have their own unique understanding of the aging process and the concept of old age. In their daily lives, they regularly interact with grandparents, elderly relatives, and other older adults around them. The increasing prevalence of multigenerational family ties facilitates more frequent and active communication between children and elderly

family members (Naissbitt & Aburdene, 1990). According to the study, children expressed that elderly individuals spend time with their families and others. Family members mentioned include their son, the mother of their grandchild, the father of their grandchild, their daughter, their grandchildren, their spouse, and their sister.

There are existing studies in the literature that support these findings: Belend and Mills (2001), Korkmaz et al. (2018). Öz (2002) noted that some elderly individuals choose to live with their children depending on their preferences. It can be said that elderly individuals spending time with their children and grandchildren positively impacts their quality of life and levels of happiness. Furthermore, in the context of intergenerational relationships, the presence of grandparents, adult children and their spouses, and grandchildren can foster closer intergenerational interactions and relationships. This dynamic may be perceived as contributing to a fulfilling life for elderly individuals, family members, and children alike (Canatan, 2008). In this context, such interactions may also influence how children form perceptions of elderly individuals.

Based on the research findings, environments that promote interactions between elderly individuals and children should be created in schools. Additionally, local governments could organize activities to enhance elderly-child interactions. The number of preschool picture storybooks focusing on elderly individuals could also be increased.

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