

Research indicates toddlers can become ageists by three

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Sheree Kwong See's research indicates that children who spend more time around seniors are less likely to become ageist.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Sometimes inspiration comes from the strangest of places. For Sheree Kwong See, it happened during a testing session with a subject while conducting a study on language and cognitive changes in the elderly. Kwong See was explaining the test to the research participant who reacted to the instructions in a quite unexpected manner.

"She said, 'I can't do that. I'm old,'" said Kwong See.

But after Kwong See spent some time comforting and encouraging the participant, Kwong See and the woman were amazed to see that the

woman who said she would be unable to complete the test scored significantly better than expected. And her initial reaction gave Kwong See the idea to research how beliefs about the elderly - specifically in terms of their perceived abilities - affect them and others.

As part of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded study, Kwong See partnered with fellow University of Alberta researcher Elena Nicoladis to investigate the early beginnings of stereotypes about aging. They measured the reactions of young children after being quizzed on vocabulary words by, either an older or younger adult, in order to assess whether toddlers have a bias against older people.

The results, which are to be published in an upcoming issue of *Educational Gerontology*, proved to be unsettling. Kwong See's study revealed that negative stereotypes about cognitive ability in old age may be held by some children between the ages of two and three, which could adversely affect them when they are older.

"We've been able to show that even young children have beliefs about older people's abilities," said Kwong See. "We're seeing what we could call ageism by about age three."

The researchers assessed bias by making use of a tendency of children when learning words to assume a new word refers to something they do not already know.

"We gave them a word they do not know, a non-word such as 'dax,'" said Kwong See. "We were looking to see if they're going to say it's the thing they don't know."

With the younger person, children readily identified the unfamiliar object. However, with the older person, children were more hesitant in pointing out the unfamiliar object. Their uncertainty, says Kwong See,

may be related to their perceptions of the older person as someone who is perhaps confused or not as competent as a younger person.

"They're making that shift where, all of a sudden, the older person isn't as good a teacher or they're not as reliable a source of information as a young person is," she said.

In analyzing the results, the researchers noted that children whose parents had declared that their children were frequently exposed to older adults reacted differently. These children showed a more positive bias toward the older person. They reacted as if the older person was more knowledgeable about words than the younger person.

"If you are interacting with 'nana' more frequently, you'll start to see that she's a pretty good teacher of words even though she's old," said Kwong See. "When you have little contact, dominant negative cultural stereotypes emerge. You think an older person isn't as alert or in-the-know as a young person and maybe is not as good a teacher."

However, before making frantic trips to grandmother's house to curb the bias, Kwong See cautions that this is not the sole factor from which these biases can develop.

"[Children] are getting negative images of aging from cartoons, from their storybooks, from watching how other people interact with seniors," she said. "But, they also start picking up some of the positive images as well if they get lots of good interactions."

The long-term implications for these negative biases can be damaging in their interaction with and treatment of the elderly throughout their lives and in their own self concept as they grow older, says Kwong See.

"Eventually those same [children](#), once they know those stereotypes, may

find that the stereotypes become a self-fulfilling prophecy," said Kwong See. "They will become their stereotypes about themselves as they grow older."

Provided by University of Alberta ([news](#) : [web](#))

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