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# Lessons from My Grandmother's Garden: Intergenerational Learning and Managing Type 2 Diabetes

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## Abstract

Type 2 diabetes is one of the major health crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the number of people struggling with this debilitating illness is skyrocketing. Diabetes is the 7<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in the United States [1]. There are many causes of type 2 diabetes; however, food intake plays a crucial role in the development and management of the illness. Although the role of grandmother has been well documented over time and across cultures, one important contemporary contribution of grandmothers that has not been fully explored is related to intergenerational sharing of gardening practices, growing and cooking healthy organic foods, and the role of food in maintaining cultural values and norms, promoting well-being, and managing chronic illnesses, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Exploring the relationship between the role of grandmothers in families, particularly related to food practices, and the management of chronic illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes. This essay explores the role grandmothers can play in the intergenerational learning of health promotion, as it relates to the transmission of practices such as food preparation and the management of type 2 diabetes.

## Introduction

Researchers suggest that grandmothers are often the invisible support helping to maintain the health and well-being of the family and community [2]. Studies have explored the important role that grandmothers play in the well-being of families over time [3]. “Learning family” is a concept focused on how family learning, between grandparents and grandchildren, can lead to mutual respect and life-long learning across the generations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a research project in China has explored ways that family learning activities can lead to skill development for both grandparents and grandchildren [4]. Industrialization has transformed family roles, including those of grandparents. One outcome has been delocalization and a decrease in grandmother's involvement in extended family learning [5]. During the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a growing interest in traditional sustainable

practices in the home. Lockdowns provide an opportunity for informal learning practices associated with food preparation, health promotion, and illness management. While not all elders have an interest in growing food, for those who do, the knowledge and skills they may have gained in early life, can now serve to promote positive intergenerational learning experiences [6]. By adopting the role of keeper of sustainable practices in the home—such as gardening, cooking, fermenting, canning, and more—many grandmothers can take on the vital role of intergenerational teacher and mentor [7].

Although sustainability activities have received considerable attention in recent years, very few projects have focused on the health lessons to be gained from the wisdom of grandmothers, particularly as it relates to growing and eating healthy foods while managing chronic illnesses such as type 2 diabetes. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has catalyzed an increased attention to home,

health, and well-being. Pandemic isolation has resulted in a heightened emphasis on self-reliance, support for community food programs and locally accessible foods. This paper explores the role grandmothers may play in intergenerational learning related to growing food, preparing healthy food, general health promotion and the management of type 2 diabetes and other chronic lifestyle related illnesses.

The coronavirus pandemic has presented challenges for maintaining overall health and well-being, particularly for those who are struggling to manage a chronic illness. Eighty percent of older adults have at least one chronic condition. More than 200 million people in the world have been diagnosed with diabetes, including more than 35 million in the United States. The number of people struggling with this debilitating illness [1]. In addition to the millions of Americans who have diabetes, many more have pre-diabetes or undiagnosed diabetes, and the rates are significantly higher for minority and immigrant populations [1]. Type 2 diabetes is a global health concern and a leading cause of death in the United States and elsewhere. While there are many causes of type 2 diabetes; life-style factors such as food intake and lack of exercise play a crucial role in the development and management of the illness [8]. Managing any chronic condition during a pandemic is stressful. For those who are attempting to manage type 2 diabetes, maintaining healthy eating and exercise routines can be especially challenging. For example, anxiety about leaving the house, trouble procuring healthy foods, and the desire for comfort food—much of which is highly caloric and often laden with carbohydrates—combined with the loneliness and isolation associated with quarantine can increase difficulties associated with illness management [8].

Although much has been written about the changing life experiences of women around the world, the literature focusing on women's development has not fully addressed the contributions made by grandmothers. Seventy-five percent of all adults become grandparents for nearly one-third of their lives. Of the women who have adult children, approximately 94% have grandchildren [9]. Contemporary social and cultural changes—such as the increase in single parent homes, rises in maternal employment have resulted in an increase in the number of grandmothers who provide a range of support and care for their families. Gardening, growing and preparing health promoting food has the capacity to allow grandmothers to showcase life skills they may have learned early in life and to pass on the customs of food preparation, preservation, and healthy food consumption to future generations [10]. For grandmothers who are interested in gardening and growing food, this can serve as one potential avenue for strengthening intergenerational connections and mentoring [11]. As community gardens and farmers

markets have increased in popularity, participation in personal and community gardens can lead to access to nutritious foods, ways of promoting well-being, and help with illness management. For older grandmothers, gardening not only provides physical activity, healthy food, stress relief, illness management, but also an opportunity for teaching and sharing age old practices to younger generations in COVID-19 safe outdoor spaces.

The roles accorded to grandparents are embedded in a social, cultural, and historical framework [12]. The potential contributions of grandmothers in gardening, growing health-promoting herbs and vegetables, and preparing food is one way of passing on knowledge of sustainable skills including gardening, farming, and related sustainability activities that have not been sufficiently explored. At this historical moment, it is useful to consider the wisdom to be gained from grandmothers and other elders interested in gardening and food preparation whose family roles have evolved to embody all aspects of well-being. Contemporary global forces have impacted the role of grandparents in the family in a variety of ways. Modernization theory [13] one early controversial theory exploring the role of elders stated that a positive correlation exists between the technological advancement of societies and the devaluing of the contributions of elders. Industrialization and the take-over of technology in contemporary life has led to an increase in prejudice and biases against older adults [14]. At the same time, contemporary grandparents also have the flexibility to define the nature of their relationships with their grandchildren. The current social health crisis provides a sociocultural moment and a unique opportunity for grandmothers to establish, or in some cases, reclaim, their position in playing a role as a conduit of knowledge and skills pertaining to health, well-being, and illness management via the transmission of food practices and the management of illnesses such as type 2 diabetes. The recent interest in sustainable development and food production and consumption has increased the potential contributions grandmothers and other elders can make to the family and the community. Given that many elders were socialized in more rural environments during periods where skills such as growing food and preserving food were more common and at times necessary for survival [15], the renewed interest in these skills can serve as an intergenerational bridge for grandparents and grandchildren.

Research on intergenerational relationships and their varied contributions is an important area of investigation [5,16]. In the past, intergenerational learning—the exchange of information between young and old—tended to occur within the family and community. However, in industrialized and post-industrialized societies, there has been a decline in such learning opportunities. Learning and education tends to be relegated to educational or religious institutions. As a result, contemporary

societies, have become more age segregated. A lack of meaningful exchange across the generations increases ageism. Population mobility, changes in the traditional multigenerational family structure, and cultural changes have widened the generational gap and increased age-related stereotypes and biases [14].

The COVID-19 pandemic is once again reshaping family and intergenerational relationships. Pandemic concerns can and isolation can lead to opportunities for families to focus on knowledge, skills, and the development of cultural and family traditions. This time also provides a chance to revisit relationships with food and provides a unique opportunity to explore grandmothers' contributions as they relate to sustainability activities such as gardening and healthy food preparation practices and as they help with managing type 2 Diabetes. Combating a devastating illness such as type 2 diabetes is a challenging and difficult process. A number of intersecting factors shape health promotion and illness management behavior. Participating in a gardening project and learning to grow and preserve food can be one factor motivating type 2 diabetes patients' health illness management and promoting activities [17]. Increasing consciousness and awareness related to growing and preparing healthy food is one small step in the illness management process, but it is a step that can also connect generations and provide support for older and younger family members. Kurtz added incentive for managing their illness. Growing and preserving food can promote feelings of accomplishment and self-efficacy, which can help improve general health and well-being for individuals and multigenerational family units. Listening to the voices of grandmothers who garden can also connect children and younger adults to their cultural backgrounds and the historical context of their families and communities. In short, growing food, gardening, preparing culturally contoured healthy food, spending time together and talking about these processes can facilitate exchange across the generations and develop respect and provide meaningful and valuable knowledge about health promotion and illness management.

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