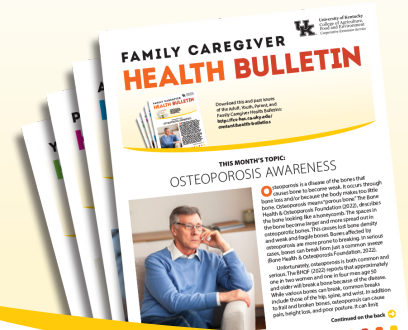


FAMILY CAREGIVER HEALTH BULLETIN



AUGUST 2023

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THIS MONTH'S TOPIC:

USING A STORYBOOK TO TEACH CHILDREN ABOUT ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE



More than 6 million Americans live with Alzheimer's disease. This disease hits close to home for many families, including those with children. Have you ever talked to your children or grandchildren about Alzheimer's disease? Dr. Laurie Zelinger is a board-certified psychologist who has focused her career on childhood issues. She has written a variety of books that explain difficult topics to children, including, "Please Explain 'Terrorism' to Me" and "Please Explain 'Anxiety' to Me." Now she has written, "Please Explain 'Alzheimer's Disease' to Me."

Zelinger wrote this book to help children understand the changes

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Alzheimer's disease causes. The story provides a way for parents and children to talk about how or why an adult, like a grandparent, could become increasingly forgetful or may need help with day-to-day activities. Experts agree that giving children developmentally appropriate explanations helps decrease anxiety. Zelinger stresses that ignoring an issue does not make a child's concern go away or the problem less worrisome. In fact, Zelinger reinforces that children can become more upset when they do not understand, when they do not know what they are experiencing, or do not know what to expect.

"Please Explain 'Alzheimer's Disease' to Me" features two children, Seth and Shepard, who notice changes in their grandmother's memory and behavior. Zelinger highlights situations that may seem all too familiar:

"Grandma's refrigerator started to ring!... We saw Grandma's phone in there, right next to the cream cheese! We laughed so hard that I got a pain in my side. ...[Mom] didn't think it was so funny. ...I saw her whispering to my aunt. They both looked worried."

The children know something is different, but they are too scared to talk about it.

Recognizing their worry, the mom in the story begins to ask the children questions and talks to them about their grandma's "special kind of forgetting." The mom then talks about changes in the brain that cause these behaviors. The children learn that doctors cannot make Alzheimer's disease go away. They talk about the ways in which family and professionals can help, including the prospect of moving grandma to a special place that can help her. The dialogue also includes ideas for the kids to change activities they like to do with their grandma, how to help her, and how to better communicate with her.

In the second half of the book, Zelinger gives parents background information on Alzheimer's disease, suggestions for talking to kids about dementia, tips for families with loved ones who have Alzheimer's disease, and a question-and-answer section that offers a variety of scenarios a family may encounter. Zelinger ends the book with references and resources.

This book helps parents better understand

the disease and how to talk about it at different developmental levels. Zelinger believes that parental teaching is crucial to a child's understanding and development.

Zelinger's books create opportunities for important conversations and serve as a creative outlet for processing feelings and emotions.

Montana State University Cooperative Extension received a National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences grant to highlight Zelinger's book and other select storybooks for children to help them learn about Alzheimer's disease and aging issues. It is their goal to "positively influence the social-emotional well-being of children who may be experiencing a loved one with Alzheimer's by providing age-appropriate information and positive modeling to children through storybooks." To learn more about increasing parent/caregiver confidence to talk to children about Alzheimer's, increase positive family interaction when faced with challenging circumstances, and to enhance positive child and grandparent interactions, contact your local FCS Extension agent, Montana State Cooperative Extension, or your local Alzheimer's Association.

RESOURCES:

- Marsha A. Goetting, Ph.D., CFP®, CFCS Extension Family Economics Specialist, Montana State University Extension. phone: (406) 994-5695 fax: (406) 994-4838; E-mail: goetting@montana.edu
- Jennifer Munter, Program Manager, Montana State University Extension. jennifermunter@montana.edu
- Using Storybooks to Teach Children and Adults About Alzheimer's Disease. NEAFCS Endowment Grant Online Training; May 10, 2023. <https://apps.montana.edu/extension/alzheimers/neafcstraining/handouts/recommendedpractices.pdf>
- Alzheimer's Association. <https://www.alz.org/>

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FAMILY CAREGIVER HEALTH BULLETIN

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