



## Changing Attitudes: Aging in America Lesson Plan

### Introduction

Society has not always viewed older adults in the same way. In colonial America, the tendency was to revere older people. By the mid- 19th century, the attitude was becoming more disrespectful. This lesson describes how this change came about. It is appropriate for units in history and sociology. It can be included in units on the colonial and Revolutionary War periods of United States history.

### Objectives

Students will:

- explain ways in which attitudes toward old age have changed;
- give evidence of changing attitudes during different historical periods; and
- consider ways in which attitudes continue to change in contemporary United States.

### Key Terms

age discrimination, attitudes, gerontophobia

### Materials

Handout: "Changing Attitudes: Aging in America"

### Procedures

1. Introduce the handout by inviting student comments about how they think older adults used to be treated and how they are treated today.
2. Have students read the handout and answer the review questions.
3. Use the "What Do You Think?" section for class discussion or additional writing assignments.

### Extension Activities

Have students identify vocabulary words in the reading, give definitions and use them in new sentences. Suggested vocabulary words in the reading are:

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|-----------------|------------------|
| • contemporary  | • instinct       |
| • pejorative    | • mandatory      |
| • emulate       | • endearment     |
| • gerontophobia | • venerated      |
| • opprobrious   | • discrimination |

Have students bring evidence to class of changing attitudes toward old age, e.g., advertisements on business and fashion trends; or conduct a survey among peers, family or neighbors.

## Changing Attitudes: Aging In America

The experience of aging is not the same today as it was in earlier historical times. Until the last 50 years or so, only a minority of people lived to old age. The social, political and economic roles of older people during the colonial days differed greatly from contemporary expectations. As the older population becomes larger, we can expect to see continued changes in attitudes toward old age. The following highlights some of the historical changes which occurred in the United States.

David Hackett Fischer, a social historian, studied the changing role of older people from colonial times to the present. In *Growing Old in America* (Oxford University Press, 1978) Fischer wrote that older adults in colonial America were not only respected, but venerated. Old age was treated with respect, partly because few people reached old age - only one out of 50 (two percent) were age 65 and over. Not just those elders who held chief religious and political positions, but all old people were given special consideration. For example, church seating was assigned with the oldest members of the congregation near the pulpit, with the rest of the church generally seated according to age behind them. Much was written during this period to instruct young people on proper behavior to exhibit toward elders. In fact, it was a Puritan belief that old age was a sign of God's favor. Respect for the old was viewed as an innate instinct, a natural law which any young person would obey instinctively.

The veneration of age was characterized more with awe than with affection. While power and prestige were reserved for older adults, emotional distance between young and old existed. The veneration of age continued through the colonial period and increased to the point where people not only venerated age but emulated it. The powdering of hair and wearing of white wigs is an example of this effort by the young to appear older.

When and how did the attitudes toward and status of older adults change? According to Fischer, the change in age relations began in the half century between 1770 and 1820, roughly the period of the American Revolution and establishment of the republic. Evidence indicates that the reaction against the elderly was part of the general revolutionary spirit of the times. Since elders largely controlled society in terms of politics, religion and property ownership, it was natural for a revolt against the "establishment" to carry with it a reaction against age itself.

The new attitudes toward age and the aged were manifested in many ways. Instead of powdered hair or wigs, toupees and dyed hair became fashionable ways to disguise one's age. Clothing, previously tailored to make one look old, now was tailored to create a youthful appearance. Prior to this time, adults often claimed to be older than they were, but now people often claimed to be younger. Seating by age in churches was abandoned; instead, pews were put up for auction with the best seats going to the highest bids in support of the church. Terms of respect for older people became pejorative expressions, and some new terms of disrespect came into use. Gaffer, a term of endearment contracted from grandfather or godfather, became a term of contempt. Foggy, which had referred to a wounded military veteran, became a disrespectful term for an elderly man. Other opprobrious terms appeared - old goat, codger, fuddy-duddy, geezer, galoot and baldy.

The revolution in age relations grew through the 19th and 20th centuries into a "cult of youth." Henry David Thoreau expressed the new attitude of the young when, in 1847, at age 30, he wrote: "I have lived some 30 years on this planet and I have yet to hear the first

syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing and probably cannot teach me anything."

Gerontophobia, the fear of aging and the aged, took many forms and spread to all age groups in society, including older people themselves. Although the average age of workers increased steadily as the general population grew older, discrimination against older workers began. This eventually led to a widespread practice of mandatory retirement, meaning mandatory poverty for many older workers.

The old system of family responsibility for the aged began to break down. The early 19th century witnessed the establishment of the first old-age homes for people of the upper-middle class. By the end of the 19th century there were old-age homes, or "poor houses," under a variety of names throughout the country. These were for older people who were unable to provide for themselves and who had no one else to provide for them. Literature no longer assigned active and attractive roles to older characters. When older characters did appear in stories of the time, they often were treated as objects of pity or contempt.

The cult of youth affected the behavior of older people as well as young. Even when people did not lie about their age, a kind of denial of age became common in such expressions as: "You're only as old as you feel," or "I'm 60 years young." A popular saying of the time was "age before beauty," which implied age is ugly and beauty is young.

Ironically, as education of young people improved in the United States, the relative condition of older Americans grew worse. "Old" knowledge became outmoded. Moral authority of old age was eroded. Age prejudice in employment opportunities increased. The growth of the factory system increased the growth of retirement, which brought increased poverty among the aged.

Fischer's historical investigation spanned the period from 1600 to 1970. Since 1970, the United States has experienced a demographic revolution. Our young country is growing old. The current generation of older adults is healthier, lives longer, and has more money and education. The attitudes of the 19th century still prevail but probably not for long. We are witnessing continuing changes in attitudes toward old age as society notices the opportunities as well as the difficulties of later life. Our participation in these changes affects us as individuals as we grow older.

## Changing Attitudes: Aging in America – Review Questions

Instructions: Based on the reading "Changing Attitudes: Aging in America," answer the following review questions.

1. What was the attitude toward older people during the colonial period?
2. What changes in attitudes during the American Revolution influenced people's attitudes about aging and the aged?
3. What are the original meanings of gaffer and foggy?
4. Why did old-age homes develop?
5. Give evidence of a youth-oriented culture in 19th century United States.

### What Do You Think?

1. Do you think a revolutionary spirit that affects attitudes and behavior toward older people still exists?
2. According to the reading, Puritans thought it was instinctive to respect the old. Do you think respecting older people is instinctive or must it be learned? Why?
3. Give an example (other than those given in the reading) of an opprobrious term you have heard used for older people. What feelings or attitudes do you think underlie such terms?
4. The reading gives age discrimination on the job as an example of gerontophobia. What attitudes have you observed among young people who work for or with older adults?

5. What reply would you give to Thoreau's statement that seniors probably have nothing to teach a 30-year-old person?
  
6. In what ways do you think old-age homes of the 19th century differ from retirement communities and nursing homes today? How might the history of old-age homes perpetuate negative images of nursing homes today?