LEARNING ABOUT OLDER ADULTS
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LEARNING ABOUT OLDER ADULTS

"Learning About Older Adults" is a project that was developed to help 4-H members better understand older people. Older people can also help 4-H'ers learn about themselves. To complete this project, you will need to spend some time doing activities with or for older people. If you are 11, 12, or 13 years old, you should spend at least 2 hours each week for 15 weeks with an older person. During this time, you should work with at least three different older persons.

If you are 14, 15, or 16 years old, you should spend 4 hours each week for 25 weeks working with older persons. During this time you should work with 10 different older persons.

Before you begin the project, read your project booklet completely. This will help you understand what you are to do for the project. If you have questions, ask your 4-H leader to help you.

OBJECTIVES

How Can This Project Help Me?

- It can help you learn many interesting, beautiful, and important things from people who have experienced more of life.
- It can make you a more interesting person to really know people from an "older generation."
- It can give you more ideas of different ways of doing useful things.
- It can help you make an older person's life richer and happier by being his or her friend.
- It can help you understand all people better.
- It can help you understand and like yourself better.
- It can help you understand the aging process better.

WHAT ARE OLDER PEOPLE LIKE?

Older People Can Be Good Friends

Some young people believe that older people are not fun to be with. That is probably because they have never been around older people. When young people take the time to understand older people, they learn a lot from them. Older people can tell stories about how life used to be, and are often easy to like as friends.

Older people may have learned from experience many things that would be helpful for younger people to know. They may have more time to listen when you need someone to talk to, and they may have more patience to do tedious work.

Young people and older people have some things in common that may help them like each other. Neither group has as much power to change things around them as the generation in the middle; both old and young people are considered less useful. Young people may not have a lot of experience, while older people may not have spent much time in school. Both groups may not have any money. Even with such things in common, members of these two groups may disagree. However, any two individuals may disagree.

People who have aged successfully often seem to be wise and calm, and seem to have more time to care for people. This may not be true of super-busy younger people.
All Older People Are Not “Cranky”

Researchers have found that the personality of an older person does not usually change very much from what it was when the person was younger.¹ Sometimes it may appear that the personality of an older person has changed when it really has not. For example, an older person may seem to be less friendly by not visiting or entertaining a lot. The real reason for this may be that this person has very little money or no way to go anywhere, not that there is less need for human friendships.

How old does a person have to be, to be old? Is everyone “old” at the same age? Some people seem to be young at 75; others seem old at 25. Retired people are thought to be old because the way they live (their “lifestyle”) changes when they retire. When working people give up their jobs, they are no longer considered able to work. For many reasons 65 was chosen as retirement age when the Social Security Act was passed. So, many people decided that 65 was the beginning of old age. This definition is useful for deciding who can legally receive certain benefits. It is not, however, accepted by the whole world as the age at which all people are old.

In reality, people grow older from the moment of birth. This means that each of us is always growing older. People do not suddenly become old. They slowly grow older day by day. Growing older is pleasant when you understand how people grow and mature. Life can be enjoyable at every age. Can you think of some things that you like to do now that you did not enjoy doing 2 years ago?

1. __________________________________________

2. __________________________________________


Understanding Older People

Understanding older people requires that you understand about the aging process. You have just learned that each of us is aging — even you! You must also remember that people age physically, socially, and mentally, as well as chronologically.

All parts of the body seem to be affected by the process of aging. Some very obvious examples are graying hair and wrinkling skin. People wear glasses or contact lenses because they cannot see as well as they would like; they may use a hearing aid to help them hear better; and they may season their food more so that they can taste it better. It is thought that the senses of smell and touch are also somewhat decreased, but this has not been thoroughly studied.

The cardio-vascular (blood), skeletal, reproductive, digestive, respiratory (breathing), and other systems of the body show some breakdown with the aging process. Older people are likely to have less strength, take more time to react, and move more slowly than they did when they were younger.

The overall thinking ability of people does not seem to become less as a result of aging. Though there are some changes, most older people can think as well as or better than when they were younger adults. Research on the thinking process is difficult to understand,² and reports may appear to say different things.

Some changes may have very little to do with the aging process directly. Social changes occur because children grow up, work changes, spouse and friends die, and style of living changes. For example, when children become adults, they and their parents can have an adult-adult relationship instead of the old parent-child relationship. This change is as much due to the child becoming an adult as to the parent becoming old. Change of lifestyle may be the result of a lowered income rather than the result of aging.
When a person believes something very strongly he can often behave in such a way as to make it true. We call this "self-fulfilling prophecy." Self-fulfilling prophesies may operate to cause people who are past seventy to become old socially. They may decide not to be actively involved in church or other organizations, and they may often use the excuse of "being too old" when friends invite them to share in fun activities. This may be true but is not always related to the individual's age. Sometimes the social changes that come about during the later years are very positive. Retired people often have more time to do things they enjoy. What are some things that you would enjoy doing if you had more leisure time?

1. 

2. 

There is no attempt to say that people do not change as they grow older. Our bodies change, our thinking abilities change, and our social lives change. However, these changes are not all for the worse. People seem to have a wonderful ability to make up for their losses.

With what we know today, we can prevent or at least delay many of the physical changes that have in the past been associated with aging. We can, at least to some degree, control our surroundings. We can eat food that is good for us, and we can ask our doctors how to stay healthy. We can also exercise and effectively cope with stress.

Though older people may not be able to see or hear as well as, or to move as quickly as younger people, this does not mean that they cannot enjoy life. It does mean that it may be more difficult for them to do some things. Some of the following activities can help you understand what it is like not being able to hear or see so clearly, or to move so easily. These exercises are intended to help you understand what it feels like to live with a loss of physical ability.

Decreased vision can perhaps best be understood by taking a piece of yellow cellophane and placing it over your eyes. Now try to read telephone numbers or other small print. If you cannot get the cellophane, smear vaseline on the lenses (side away from the eyes) of some old sunglasses. Be sure that you wear your vision-blurring device long enough to experience the frustration of not being able to see clearly, but not long enough to make yourself tired.
Wrapping tape around bent index finger and thumb is an adequate imitation of arthritic hands. To further understand the crippling effect of arthritis, place other joints such as knees and elbows in splints, and try sewing on a button or walking up stairs.

A large piece of chewed gum placed behind the upper front teeth will give you an idea of the dental and speech problems that older people may experience. Imagine trying to give a 4-H presentation with such a handicap!

**Helping Older People**

Helping an older person do something can help you feel good about yourself. You can also learn something about how other people feel by helping them. By helping older people, you learn how to help people. Knowing how to help people may help you to get a job, and to know how to help your family and yourself. Check the following list of possible things to do for older people. You may think of other things that you would like to do, or that your older friends need to have done. Be sure that you discuss with your older friends how you wish to help before you make your final plans. Also, be sure that you can do what you say you will do. For example, make sure someone can drive you to the grocery store before you promise to help your friends do their shopping.

**THINGS TO DO**

Following are some suggestions of things to do with older people. Remember that older people can do many different things. Some people will require more assistance than others.

— Visit the library or a museum with your friend.
— Play tennis with your friend.
— Have a dessert party for a group of older persons.

---

2 cups flour
1/2 tsp. baking powder
Sift flour and baking powder together
1/2 cup shortening — blend in
2 eggs — add
Refrigerate 1 hour. Roll into small balls.
Press flat. Bake at 400° for 6 to 8 minutes.
— Go fishing with your older friend.

— Ask the older person to help you make a list of items under the title, "Common Things That Many Older Persons Enjoy Discussing." Save this list and try these topics later with the older person.

— Ask your older friend to talk about people of his generation or earlier who helped to make his home community what it is today, and how they did it. Report on this at school or a 4-H club meeting and tell your older friend how your audience liked it.

— Look through magazines and newspapers for pictures or articles which show what older persons did continues to affect the life you live today. Discuss these with your older friend.

— Ask your older friend to talk to you about what he did when he was younger that helped him when he got older, and what he would do now if he were a young person.

— Ask your older friend to tell you how people managed during the Depression — how they felt and acted.

— Make a list of equipment and supplies in your home. How many of these items were in your older friend’s home when he was your age? If some things were not in your older friend’s home, what did his family use instead?

— Plan an automobile trip (ride) so that your older friend can see the spring flowers or some other scenery. Keep his room supplied with fresh flowers and plants. Discuss the uses that plants have.

— Gather the items to make a small terrarium. Ask your older friend to help or supervise while you plant it and keep it growing.

— Ask your older friend to teach you how to do something that he does well — something that you would like to learn to do, or learn to do better than you can now. Practice under his supervision.

— Talk about what your older friend thinks might be good work for a young person to prepare for now. Talk about how he or she earned a living.

— Start a bird study project. Discuss it with your older friend. Set up a birdfeeder outside your friend’s window. Keep it supplied with bird food and ask him or her to help you keep a list of all the kinds of birds which visit it during the seasons. Make a bird scrapbook by clipping pictures from magazines.

— Ask your older friend to teach you good household skills you will need when you have your own home. Practice them under his or her supervision until you can do them well.

— Celebrate your older friend’s birthday. Give him or her a card or small gift you have made.

— Remember special days throughout the year. Some suggestions are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>New Year’s Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>Ground Hog’s Day</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lincoln’s Birthday</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Valentine’s Day</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Washington’s Birthday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Spring Holidays</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spring Gardening</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>St. Patrick’s Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>April Fool’s Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Older American’s Month</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother’s Day</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Memorial Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Father’s Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>Independence Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>Summer Vacation</td>
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<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Labor Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Columbus Day</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Halloween</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Veterans’ Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thanksgiving Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Winter Holiday Season</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

— Clean your older friend’s cabinets.
— Help your older friend grocery shop.
— Rake the leaves or straw from your older friend’s yard.
— Cut the grass for your older friend.
— Pull the weeds in your older friend’s vegetable or flower garden.
— Play parlor games with your friend. Teach him a game that you enjoy, and learn to play a game that he enjoys.
— Invite your older friend to have dinner with your family.
— Take your older friend as a guest to your 4-H club meeting.
— Help your older friend start an exercise program.
  Be sure that a physician approves the exercises.
— Wash windows for your older friend.
— Help your older friend clean the bathroom.
— Vacuum your older friend's carpet.

— If your older friend is a family member who must stay in bed, you may wish to clean his room. Remember to use damp dust cloths to keep dust to a minimum.
— Make his bed. Bed linens may need to be changed more than once a day and surely they will need to be straightened several times a day. Pillows fluffed often make a bed patient more comfortable.
— Help with meals.
— Clean glasses and dentures.
— Help with bathing and dressing.
— Help give medication. Be sure that your parent or guardian supervises this.
— Read to him, or take turns reading to each other.
— Sing to him or sing together.
— You may be able to help your older friend with certain exercises for physical therapy. A physical therapist can teach you how to do these.
— You may go walking with your older friend.
— If your older friend is no longer able to write, you may write letters for him.

These are just a few suggested things that you may wish to do with and for your older friend. There are many more things that you may think of. Whether or not the things that you do are listed here, be sure to keep a record of them on the form that is included in this project.
Walt Whitman, a poet, wrote *Leaves of Grass* at age 62.

Jomo Kenyatta, a political leader, became President of Kenya (a Republic of Africa) when he was 71.

Gabrielle Bonheur "Coco" Chanel, a fashion expert re-introduced her famous "Chanel Look" when she was 71 years old.

Marian Hart, a pilot, completed a solo transatlantic flight in a single engine Beechcraft Bonanza at age 84.

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, a jazz composer was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize at age 64. When not selected, his comment was, "Fate doesn’t want me to be famous too young."

Margaret Mead, anthropologist, was elected president of the American Anthropological Association at the age of 69.

Duncan MacLean, a track runner, ran 200 meters in 44 seconds when he was 90 years old.

Anna Mary Moses (Grandma Moses), a famous artist, began painting at the age of 75 when her arthritic hands would no longer allow her to do farm work.

Frank Lloyd Wright, an architect, was asked at the age of 70 to design the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

Albert Schweitzer, a doctor, scholar, and musician, was awarded the Nobel Prize for his work at the Lombarine Clinic in French Equatorial Africa at age 77.

George Burns, an entertainer, received an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor in the movie, "The Sunshine Boys" when he was 78. At age 84 he is still an active entertainer.

Virgil Conner, an historian, earned his Ph.D. at age 92.

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DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Demography is the study of the size, density, and distribution of human populations. The 1980 Census of Population reports 2,249,023 people in Florida who are 60 or older. That is 23 percent of Florida’s total population. As more people live longer, and those who have retired move to Florida, the number of older persons and the percentage of our population that is over 60 will continue to increase. Can you think of some of the effects that this will have on Florida?

1. 

2. 

3. 

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF PEOPLE PAST SIXTY

Some people believe that people who are past 60 are no longer able to do anything. We hear such statements as, "They are over the hill," or "They are too old to do anything!" We know that such statements are not true for many, many older people. Following are some examples of outstanding things that persons past 60 did.

Albert Einstein, an academician obsessed with physics, rewrote *Unified Field* at age 69.

Michaelangelo, an artist, began sculpting the Florence Pieta when he was 72.

Mark Twain, an author, dictated his autobiography when he was 75.

Thomas A. Edison, an inventor, at 80 years old was still involved in research trying to obtain rubber latex from domestic weeds.

Marc Chagall, an artist, at age 70 did the sets and costumes for the Metropolitan opera, "The Magic Flute" by Mozart.

---

Find at least five people you know who are at least 65 years old. List their names and some of the things they have done recently. Example: Joe Doak is 85 and serves as a telephone reassurance volunteer.

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

To help your 4-H Club members understand that older people can be quite active and productive, make copies of the following crossword puzzle and ask them to fill it in.

**ACROSS**

(1) An architect who at age 70 designed a New York Museum.
(2) At age 69 rewrote *Unified Field*.
(3) Anthropologist was elected President of American Anthropological Association at 69.
(4) Artist who at age 70 did sets and costumes for the Metropolitan Opera, "The Magic Flute."
(5) Author who dictated his autobiography at 75.
(6) Jazz composer who worked quite successfully past 64.

**DOWN**

(1) Poet who wrote *Leaves of Grass* at 62.
(2) Political leader who became president of his country at 71.
(3) Pilot who completed a solo transatlantic flight at 84.
(4) Fashion expert who was a fashion leader at 71.

**HOW'S YOUR ATTITUDE**

The beliefs, feelings, and attitudes that you have toward older people will affect the kind of relationship that you can have with them. You should have filled out the following questionnaire when you first started your project. Your leader should have kept that copy for you.

Now fill out the same questionnaire again. Ask your leader for the first copy. This will allow you to see whether your attitude toward older people has changed as a result of your project.
### AGING ATTITUDE CHECK LIST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Older People</th>
<th>Myself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) good company</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) very helpful around the house</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) like to be waited on</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) meddle in other people's affairs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) out of step with the times</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) feel that their (my) family neglects them (me)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) disapproving of the younger generation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) keep up with new ideas and events</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) sometimes in the way</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) easy to get along with</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) very stubborn</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) confident of themselves (myself)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) bossy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am a bad patient(s) when ill)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) dislike changes in ways of doing things</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) usually cheerful (see the bright side)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) hoard money</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) get easily upset</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) respect a person's privacy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) grouchy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) miserable most of the time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) likely to gossip</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) accept suggestions readily</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) remember names well</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) rarely get upset</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) like to learn new ways of doing things</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) fussy about food</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) self-reliant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) have good table manners</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) approve of other generations</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people) (I) prefer to support themselves (myself)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Older people are) (I am) tidy and careful about appearance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Adapted from: Isabelle Buckley  
Specialist in Aging  
North Carolina State University  
By: Evelyn Rooks  
Human Development Specialist  
University of Florida
RECORD BOOK

You might have chosen to do this project for any of a number of different reasons. Some of these might be:
A. To help you learn about a person from an older generation.
B. To help you learn more about yourself.
C. To help you learn how to do some things that an older person could teach you.
D. To help your family take care of an older family member.
E. To be a friend to an older person.

In the following blanks, write why you chose to do this project.

1. _______________________________________
2. _______________________________________
3. _______________________________________  

There are many, many things that you might have done with or for your older friend. List things that you did. (Example: I cleaned my friend’s flower bed.)

1. _______________________________________
2. _______________________________________
3. _______________________________________
4. _______________________________________  
5. _______________________________________
6. _______________________________________  
7. _______________________________________  
8. _______________________________________  
9. _______________________________________  
10. _______________________________________ 
11. _______________________________________ 
12. _______________________________________ 

Older friends do many things for younger people too. List things that your friend did or does for you. (Example: My friend told me how his family celebrated Thanksgiving when he was a child.)

1. _______________________________________
2. _______________________________________
3. _______________________________________  
4. _______________________________________  
5. _______________________________________  

6. 

7. 

8. 

9. 

10. 

Older friends can teach young people how to do many things. List things that your friend taught you. (Example: My friend taught me how to identify different birds.)

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

5. 

6. 

7. 

8. 

What was your favorite thing that you did for or with your older friend? (Example: The thing I enjoyed doing most for my older friend was preparing his favorite food.)

1. 

What was the most important thing that you learned from your older friend? (Example: The most important thing I learned from my older friend was how to grow a vegetable garden.)

1. 

When younger and older people become friends, they learn that, in spite of age differences, they both like some of the same things. What are some things that you and your older friend both like? (Example: My friend and I both like the color yellow.)

1. 

2. 

3. 

4.
When your older friend was your age, we did not have as many technical gadgets as we now have. List 10 things that you have in your home that your older friend did not have in his home when he was your age. (Example: My older friend did not have a food blender when he was my age.)

1. ____________________________________________ 6. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________ 7. ____________________________________________
3. ____________________________________________ 8. ____________________________________________
4. ____________________________________________ 9. ____________________________________________
5. ____________________________________________ 10. ____________________________________________

How did you celebrate special days with your older friend? (Example: On Ground Hog Day, I went to the library and checked out a book that explained what Ground Hog Day is. We read this together, and my friend told me what he knew about Ground Hog Day.)

Holiday or Special Day ______________________________________________
What we did: ____________________________________________________

List some things that your older friend did or said that made you feel good. (Example: My older friend told me that he really appreciated my helping him clean the windows. This made me feel good about being able to do something for another person.)

1. ________________________________________________________________
2. ________________________________________________________________
3. ________________________________________________________________

While you were working on this project, did you hear anyone say unkind things about older people? If your answer to this question is yes, why do you think the unkind things were said? (Example: A girl said that her older neighbor is always fussy. The girl only sees her neighbor when neighborhood children decide to play in the neighbor's young orange tree. The older neighbor does not want the limbs broken out of her young fruit tree.)

1. What was said: _________________________________________________
2. Why? ________________________________________________________
ACTIVITY AND TIME RECORD

To do this project properly you should interact with older people. You should keep a record of what you did with the older person and for how long. This is so that when you have finished your project you can analyze the time you spent with older people and the kinds of things you saw them doing before deciding what you think about them. If you are 11, 12, or 13 years old, you should spend at least 2 hours each week for 15 weeks with an older person. During this time, you should work with at least three different older persons.

If you are 14, 15, or 16 years old, you should spend 4 hours each week for 25 weeks working with older persons. During this time you should work with 10 different older persons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
<th>TIME SPENT</th>
<th>DATE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Example: I read a story to my grandmother).</td>
<td>(20 minutes)</td>
<td>(January 7, 1981)</td>
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