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# How to Conduct Activities Involving Children and Dolls With People Who Have Alzheimer's

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Alzheimer's Reading Room

The purpose of this article is to provide down-to-earth, practical advice on how to involve children and dolls to engage, comfort, communicate with, and bring joy to your loved one who is living either at home or in a care community.

The tips presented are based on my personal experience as a caregiver, articles and books I have published, articles and books published by other specialists in Alzheimer's care, and information obtained during interviews with national experts.

Activities involving children and dolls can engage persons living with dementia and make them more lively and in touch.

Children and dolls can usually reach those in the latest stages of the disease—even when they no longer talk or recognize loved ones.

Today's article discusses how to conduct activities involving children and, in some cases, dolls to reach them.

## Advice for Conducting Activities of All Types

1. Select activities the person liked before he or she had Alzheimer's
2. Be sure the activities are not too hard or too easy
3. Focus on the process not the quality of the end product, especially in art activities
4. Actively participate with your loved one in the activity. Don't use activities as a babysitter
5. If the person appears to be tired or distracted, or appears not to like the activity, stop it.

## Activities Involving Children

### General Advice for Conducting Activities Involving Children

1. Have the child do some activity with the person – not just entertain them —with an activity based on the personal interests of the person with Alzheimer's (Moore, Brenners).
2. Don't put the pair in front of a television. Rather, have them actively interact. (Brenners)
3. Never force either party to interact if one or both of them doesn't want to (Moore, Brenners)
4. Keep visits short (Moore)
5. If the child or the person with Alzheimer's appear to be tired or upset, end the visit (Moore, Fox)
6. Let the visit unfold naturally (Brenners).
7. It is probably best to only have one child at a time interact with people who have dementia. If there are multiple children the person may become confused or agitated (Marley)

According to the Brenners (interview),

“Older people with dementia and children meet at the crossroads of wonder. **Magic happens when children visit with people living with Alzheimer's.** Both live in the present, and children have a natural tendency to mentor older persons.”

You can have your own child or grandchild visit the person with Alzheimer's or have a neighbor's child do it. If your loved one lives in a memory care community, you could also have a staff member bring in a child or grandchild.

You might want to allow some extra time for visits to your loved one in a memory care community so that you can take the child around to briefly see other residents as well. Most of them will love it!

## Activities Using Dolls

### General Advice for Conducting Activities Using Dolls (Wonderlin)

1. Never push a person with Alzheimer's to accept a doll if they don't want to.

2. Hold up the doll and ask the person what it is and whether they want to hold it. If the person says “no” don’t proceed. Go with however the person responds to the doll.
3. Don’t select a doll that closes its eyes as it may upset the person if he or she can’t wake the doll up.
4. Have a spare doll available in case the original one gets lost (especially in a care community). If the doll gets lost, the person may become agitated.
5. Select a doll that is washable. It will definitely get dirty!

Persons in the mid- to late-stages of the disease will probably react more favorably than those in the early stages. The latter will most often be aware that the doll is not a real baby and may have little interest in it.

Try giving a doll to people who are scared or agitated. It will often calm them down.

Where to Purchase Dolls for People With Alzheimer’s: Three companies sell very lifelike dolls made especially for people who have Alzheimer’s:

## The Controversy Regarding the Use of Dolls

Some family members, staff and experts on Alzheimer’s care believe that giving a doll to a person with Alzheimer’s is beneath the dignity of the person and shouldn’t be done. But many of them change their minds once they see the person’s positive reaction.

### [Alzheimer's Care, Baby Dolls Calm Dementia Patients](#)

I asked my panel of experts about this issue.

The Brenners stated, “We’re for anything that gets people with dementia to open up and be present. We don’t use dolls but we honor whatever works.”

Irene Moore told me “I cringed when I saw my mother with a doll, but it did calm her. If family members or staff of care communities are upset by it, they should step aside. The reaction of the person with Alzheimer’s is what matters.”

Finally, Rachael Wonderlin believes that you have to change how you communicate with a person who has dementia. “For them the doll may be

their whole world,” she said.

**Mary Fox’s Personal Experience With Children:** Mary Fox (interview) told me about a lady with Alzheimer’s at Maple Knoll Village senior care community in Cincinnati, Ohio. After a visit with the children from the Montessori PreSchool located there, the woman enthusiastically hollered out, “Come back soon! Come back all the time! Just come back!”

**My Personal Experience With Dolls:** At a memory care community where I volunteer to visit some ladies with Alzheimer’s, one lady carried a doll with her everywhere she went and no matter what she was doing – 24/7. It seriously interfered with her participation in activities being conducted, so the staff told her, “Let’s take her to a babysitter.” The woman readily agreed!

This is the third of four articles that explore how to use the following with people who have Alzheimer’s: 1. Music, 2. Art, 3. Children (and Dolls) and 4. Pets (and Stuffed Animals)