Children in an Aging Society

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**Objectives.** This article explores ways in which population aging in the United States between 2010 and 2030 might impact the well-being of children, with a distinction made between advantaged and disadvantaged children.

**Methods.** A variety of economic and demographic statistics are used to describe the changing age structure of the population and changing public spending on older people and children. Data from the 1985 General Social Survey and Wave 2 of the National Survey of Families and Households are also used to examine connections between older people and children.

**Results.** In recent decades, there has been a graying of the federal budget, and programs for children have received a declining proportion of domestic spending. These trends will be exaggerated between 2010 and 2030 unless structural changes occur. Grandparents may provide increasing resources for their grandchildren. Age segregation results in relatively few older people being directly involved with children not related to them by kinship.

**Conclusions.** The implications of population aging for children are relevant primarily for disadvantaged children. Disadvantaged children have grandparents with fewest resources and are most in need of public spending. As costs of supporting the older population increase, intentional social changes will be needed to prevent growing inequality among children.

**Key Words:** Age segregation—Child well-being—Grandparents—Population aging—Welfare state.

The proportion old in the U.S. population will increase rapidly as the baby boom cohorts pass age 65 between 2010 and 2030. Anticipating this aging of the population, a great deal of attention is now focused on questions related to how well the needs of old people will be met. There seems to be no end to the literature dealing with the challenges of meeting the income, health care, and caregiving needs of the burgeoning population of older people. Although less discussed, population aging also is likely to have significant implications for children and their well-being. In this article, I begin to explore how changes in the size and composition of the older population between 2010 and 2030 in the United States may be connected to the experience of children.

The article is divided into five parts. The first two sections provide a necessary background for examining the implications of population aging for children over the next several decades. First, a demographic perspective on changing age distributions is provided. As the proportion of the population older than 65 years increases from 13% to 19% over the two decades following 2010, how will the proportion under age 20 change? The second section draws attention to the large and growing inequality among children in the United States: the gap between most privileged and least privileged children. The implications of population aging for children are not uniform across these different segments of the child population. The remainder of the article considers three possible ways in which population aging could be connected to the experience of children. These connections involve state resources available for investment in children, grandparent resources available to children, and involvement of older people in directly meeting needs of children not related to them by kinship.

**Demography of Age Composition**

The long-term change in population age distribution as a society experiences the demographic transition is quite straightforward. When a population has sustained high fertility and high mortality for a long period of time, it will have a large proportion of children and a small proportion of old people. Correspondingly, when a population has sustained low fertility and low mortality for a long period of time, it will have a much smaller proportion of children and a much larger proportion of old people. Using stable population models, the magnitude of this shift in age composition can be seen. (A stable population shows the age distribution that would ultimately result if age-specific reproduction and mortality rates were unchanging over time. It can be determined by specifying life expectancy and the gross reproduction rate [GRR], which is the average number of daughters that women would have by the end of their reproductive careers if, at each age, they experienced the fertility rates of a particular period. The statistics that follow are from the stable female population data available in Coale & Demeny, 1983.) In a stable population with relatively high mortality and fertility (a life expectancy of 40 and a GRR of 2.5), 47% of the population is younger than 20 and 4% is older than 65 years (p. 88). In a stable population with relatively low mortality and fertility (a life expectancy of 80
Following a drop in fertility previously described help us to understand changes in the age composition of the U.S. population between 1970 and 2030. The total fertility rate (TFR) in the United States dropped abruptly after the baby boom, going from 3.7 in 1960 to 2.0 in 1973 (National Center for Health Statistics [NCHS], 2008), and then it remained relatively stable thereafter. (The TFR indicates the average number of children that women who survive to the end of their reproductive careers would have if they experienced, at each age, the fertility rate existing at a particular period.) Figure 1 shows how the age distribution of the U.S. population changed in the years following the rapid fertility decline that occurred in the 1960s. Between 1970 and 1990, the proportion of the population younger than 20 years declined by 9.2% (from 37.9% to 28.7%), whereas the proportion aged 65 and older increased by only 2.7% (from 9.9% to 12.6%). Reflecting these changes, the total dependency ratio fell from 0.92 to 0.70 between 1970 and 1990. After only modest changes in the age distribution between 1990 and 2010, there will be a rapid increase in the proportion older than 65 years between 2010 and 2030 (from 13.0% to 19.3%). As the population ages over these two decades, the proportion younger than 20 years will change by less than 1% (from 27.1% to 26.2%). As a result of these changes, the total dependency ratio, which was 0.67 in 2010, is projected to increase up to 0.83 by 2030. The demographic dividend resulting from the fertility decline of the 1960s will essentially be eliminated as the population ages rapidly.

**Increasing Inequality Among Children**

As fertility declined in the 1960s, American families on average had fewer children. But other large changes in the family also occurred after the 1960s, and these changes have significant implications for children. Two widely recognized changes were the increasing proportion of children born to unmarried mothers and the increasing proportion of children experiencing the divorce of their parents. The proportion of children born to unmarried mothers steadily increased from about 5% in 1960 to 37% in 2005 (J. A. Martin et al., 2007; Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). The proportion of children experiencing their parents’ divorce increased rapidly from 7.2 per 1,000 in 1960 to 16.8 per 1,000 in 1990 (Clarke, 1995) but probably has not increased since then. (National data on the number of children experiencing their parents’ divorce are not available after 1990, but divorce rates have not increased since that date.) As a result of these changes, the proportion of children living with two parents declined from 88% in 1960 to 67% in 2007 (Federal Inter-agency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2008). This change in family structure significantly increased the proportion of children at risk of living in families with limited resources. Risk of economic deprivation is much greater for children in one-parent families—poverty rates for children in mother-only families in 2007 were 42%, compared with...
8% for those living with two married parents (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2008). In addition, parental time investment in the care and supervision of children tends to be less in one-parent families compared with two-parent families (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008).

In an insightful article, McLanahan (2004) extends our understanding of the growing disparity in children’s resources by focusing on differing education levels of mothers. Part of the growing inequality related to mother’s education is a result of the different trends in premartial childbearing and divorce among women with differing educational backgrounds. A recent study of children born in two different cohorts (1970–1974 and 1990–1994) illustrates the divergence in family structure experienced by those born to well-educated mothers versus low-educated mothers (Martin, 2004). Among children born to mothers who completed 4 years of college, the proportion whose mothers were married at the time of their birth and did not divorce over the next 10 years increased from 70% to 76% across these cohorts. In contrast, the proportion of children born to non-college-educated mothers who were married and remained married for 10 years declined from 53% to 42%.

But other changes related to mother’s education are also relevant to the growing gap between most privileged and least privileged children. Because of increasing educational attainment of women (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2006), increasing marital homogamy (Schwartz & Mare, 2005), and increasing employment of mothers (McLanahan, 2004), a growing proportion of children since 1970 have lived in families with well-educated mothers, few siblings, and high incomes resulting from two parents working at high-paying jobs. Meanwhile, children born to low-educated mothers have made little progress, as they are likely to live either in two-parent families where neither parent has a high-paying job or, increasingly, in single-parent families with low income. The actual increasing economic disparity of children over time can be seen from statistics in the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2008), which track children from 1980 to 2006. These data show that the proportion of children living in families below the poverty line in 2006 (17%) was about the same as it had been in 1980 (17.3%). However, the proportion of children in wealthy families (defined as family income more than 600% of poverty) tripled—from 4.3% in 1980 to 13.8% in 2006. Correspondingly, the proportion of children in medium-income families (between 200% and 400% of poverty) declined from 41.1% to 31.6%.

Thus, an increasing proportion of children experience the multiple advantages of growing up in stable families with two highly educated parents and very high incomes. In contrast is the large proportion of children who grow up with the multiple disadvantages of living in poverty with a single low-educated parent. The significance of this growing division of children between the “haves” and the “have-nots” should not be underestimated. The discussion that follows examines how the changes in the older population between 2010 and 2030 will differentially affect the most privileged and least privileged children in the United States and thereby further exacerbate the growing divide among children.

**Population Aging, Children, and the Welfare State**

A first possible connection between population aging and the well-being of children relates to the increasing cost to the welfare state of supporting a growing dependent older population. The costs of supporting an increasing number of older people could challenge efforts to increase, or even maintain, the level of state resources that are invested in children (in things like child care, income security, social services, education, and health care). Focusing on how the domestic spending portion of the federal budget (the budget minus defense, homeland security, and international affairs) is allocated provides evidence of how various programs competing for domestic priority have fared recently. Between 1960 and 2007, the domestic portion of the federal budget grew rapidly, both in absolute size and as a percent of gross domestic product, as government programs proliferated. As previously noted, this expansion of government spending was aided by the demographic dividend provided by the rapid drop in fertility. During this period, spending on children’s programs grew but at a slower pace than total domestic spending and at a far slower pace than spending on programs for the older population. Consequently, the three largest programs for older people (non-child parts of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid) grew from 22% of the domestic budget in 1960 to 46% in 2006 (Carasso, Steuerle, Reynolds, Vericker, & Macomber, 2008). In contrast, all federal spending on children declined from 20.2% of domestic spending in 1960 to 16.2% in 2007 (Carasso et al., 2008).

If current arrangements persist, projections of federal spending to the year 2018 suggest that the declining priority of children in the federal budget will continue. These projections show that by 2018, programs for children will be just 13.8% of the domestic budget, whereas the portion going to older adults will increase to 59.2% (Carasso et al., 2008). And, of course, the proportion committed to older adults would then continue to increase over the following decade as the proportion old in the population continues to increase rapidly until 2030. The relevance of the impressive growth in spending on the older population compared with that on children is simply that as an increasing proportion of public spending goes to older people, a decreasing proportion is available for all other programs. Recognizing the challenges created by the graying of the federal budget for funding children’s programs does not, of course, mean that older people are receiving too much or that children must receive too little.
In a provocative article, Preston (1984) noted that whereas poverty rates for older Americans declined rapidly between 1970 and 1984, poverty rates for children increased substantially. These divergent trends in poverty occurred as government spending on older people grew much more rapidly than spending on children. This finding led to an argument that programs for the old were growing at the expense of programs for the young. Other economists (Kotlikoff, 1992; Thurnow, 1996) have further explored future implications of the expanding claims of the older population on the federal budget. The suggestion of a growing competition between young and old for public support generated a heated political debate over “generational equity.” Is the increased spending on the older population that accompanies population aging creating conflict between age groups? And is conflict between age groups for scarce resources likely to escalate as baby boom cohorts enter old age? A number of social scientists have effectively responded to these questions by arguing that political conflict between age groups has not developed and is unlikely to develop in the future (Hamil-Luker, 2001; Quadagno, 1989; Schulz & Binstock, 2008; Street & Cossman, 2006; Williamson, Watts-Roy, & Kingson, 1999). Further, the literature that is critical of the generational equity hypothesis points out that increasing spending on the old does not require less spending on children. Indeed, an international comparison of different developed countries found that high levels of public spending on older people was positively associated with high levels of spending on children (Pampel, 1994). Thus, it does not appear that generational conflict is a necessary consequence of population aging.

Nevertheless, it is clear that social spending has developed in such a way that the gap in government spending on older people and children is now huge, and this gap is continuing to increase. The Congressional Budget Office (2008) estimates that average federal spending per person older than 65 years in 2010 will be $21,000 (in 2000 dollars), compared with $3,000 per child. If spending from all levels of government, rather than just the federal level, is considered, the ratio of per capita spending on older people compared with children is reduced, but only from 7:1 to about 3:1 (Pati, Keren, Alessandri, & Schwarz, 2004). The point is that the discrepancy in per capita public spending on children and old people in the United States cannot be ignored when considering the shifting budget priorities related to population aging. The aging of the population between 2010 and 2030 will significantly increase government spending on the entitlement programs for older people. Over these 20 years, there is no reason to expect that needs of children will decrease—the proportion of the population who are children will decline by less than 1%. Potentially taxes could increase, or other shifts in the budget could occur that would permit increasing spending on children at the same time that spending on older people is increasing. But the emerging political challenges of balancing competing demands for the shrinking proportion of the domestic budget not going to support old age programs should not be ignored.

As previously noted, the demographic dividend created by the decline in birth rates in the 1960s is ending, and the total dependency ratio will increase between 2010 and 2030. Because all the increase in the dependency ratio is created by the growing old age dependency ratio, the economic significance of the demographic change is amplified.

Actually, dependency ratios that use simple age composition statistics are not the best way to measure support available to dependents in a population because labor force participation rates of the adult population can change. Rather, it is preferable to look directly at the ratio of people in the labor force to the size of the child and older population. Using projections of the labor force and population, data in Table 1 indicate changes in the ratio of workers to children and old people in coming decades. As is well known, the number of people in the labor force per person older than 65 years will drop precipitously between 2010 and 2030—from 3.9 to 2.4. But during these decades, the number in the labor force per person younger than 20 years also declines—from 1.9 to 1.7. Consequently, looking ahead, the growing burden on the working population to support an aging population will not be mitigated by any decline in the burden to support children.

In the United States, parents are expected to be the primary source of support for children and there is widespread opposition to the idea of societal responsibility for bearing the cost of childrearing. That is the reason why per capita government spending on children is relatively low compared with spending on older people. Compared with other welfare states, collective responsibility for the cost of raising children in the United States is quite limited (Lundberg, Aberg, Kolegard, Bjork, & Fritzell, 2008; Osberg, Smeeding, & Schwabish, 2004). Thus, in the United States the abundance enjoyed by children in privileged families stands in contrast to children in the least privileged families who rely primarily on the resources of their economically disadvantaged and stressed parents. Thus, if there is a declining priority for children’s programs in public spending, the impact will be experienced precisely by those children who are most vulnerable and dependent on public support. Although the growing cost of supporting the older population in coming decades does not require declining public support for poor

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>LF/Pop. &lt;20</th>
<th>LF/Pop. 65+</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<td>2030</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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Note: Sources—U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division (2008) and Toossi (2002).
children, the political implications of a graying federal budget raises concerns. Almost certainly, this change in the budget will increase the political challenge of adequately responding to the needs of disadvantaged children.

**Grandparents’ Contribution to Grandchildren**

The negative implications of the graying federal budget for the well-being of children should be balanced by assessing the potential for increasing positive direct contributions from older people to children. The clearest way in which older people directly contribute to the well-being of children operates through kinship ties, and these are considered first. Changes in fertility and mortality that are responsible for population aging have affected opportunities for grandparents to play a significant role in the lives of children. Mortality declines have the obvious effect of increasing the supply of living grandparents for children. I have estimated that under mortality conditions existing in 1960, only about 23% of children aged 10 would have all four biological grandparents still living (Uhlenberg, 2005). As death rates in later life have declined, the number of living grandparents for children has increased, and by 2020 almost half of all 10-year-olds are expected to have all grandparents alive. Indeed, we anticipate that 80% of those reaching age 30 in 2020 will still have at least one living grandparent.

The decline in fertility that leads to population aging also increases opportunities for living grandparents to make large investments in their grandchildren. As family size decreases, children have fewer siblings who compete for the attention and resources of their grandparents. About 60% of the children born to baby boom families in the 1950s had three or more siblings; only 30% of the children born after 1980 grew up in such large families (Uhlenberg, 2005). When low fertility persists over several generations, there is an additional reduction in competition for grandparents. Children born to parents who have few siblings have few sets of cousins who share the same grandparents. The proportion of children who have four or more sets of cousins competing for the attention of a particular grandparent is estimated to have declined from 50% in 1950 to 25% in 2000 (Uhlenberg, 2005). The trend toward fewer grandchildren per grandparent will continue as the baby boom cohorts enter old age; by 2020, a majority of children will have no more than one set of cousins linked to a particular grandparent and only 20% of grandparents will have more than two sets of grandchildren.

There are other obvious ways in which grandparents’ resources have increased since 1960, and these are likely to continue to increase in coming decades as the proportion old in the population increases. Not only do children have more grandparents alive but also their grandparents are wealthier and healthier than in the past. The trend toward increasing economic resources of people approaching old age is expected to continue as baby boomers retire (Butrica, Iams, & Smith, 2004). Similarly, the trend toward lower disability rates among the young-old population is expected to continue (Manton, Gu, & Lamb, 2006). Further, most grandparents older than 65 years are now retired, giving them time to spend with grandchildren. Despite increasing rates of labor force participation by the older population in recent years, less than one-third of those aged 65—69 years were in the labor force in 2005 (Copeland, 2007). Thus, from the perspective of children in general, there has been an increasing likelihood of having multiple grandparents who have valuable resources (money, health, time). And children have fewer siblings and cousins with whom they share these grandparents. These patterns suggest that population aging between 2010 and 2030 might be associated with increasing direct contributions of older people to their grandchildren.

However, this happy scenario of increasing opportunities for grandparents to invest in the lives of children is not realized by many children because the opportunities are spread unevenly. As discussed earlier, there is a growing disparity between most advantaged and least advantaged children. Because the connection between children and grandparents tends to be mediated by the middle generation, it is children in the most advantaged families who gain most from the increasing resources of older people. Children in single-parent families and those with less educated mothers are much less likely than children living in more advantaged families to have multiple grandparents with resources to make significant intergenerational contributions. This does not mean, of course, that grandparents with limited resources do not make important contributions to their grandchildren (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 2005). Indeed, older women in poorer health are more likely than other women to become custodial grandparents (Hughes, Waite, LaPierre, & Luo, 2007). But the point is that disadvantaged children are disproportionately linked to grandparents who are relatively disadvantaged.

The extent of inequality of grandparent resources for advantaged compared with disadvantaged children can be seen from data collected by the National Survey of Families and Households (see http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/nsfh/). Statistics in Table 2 show maternal grandparent characteristics for most advantaged children (living with two married parents, mother with a college education, and household income in the upper quartile) compared with least advantaged children (living with one parent, mother with less than a college education, and household income in the lowest quartile). The same proportion of all children (12%) was in the least advantaged as in the most advantaged category. Compared with the most advantaged children, the least advantaged were twice as likely to have maternal grandparents who had economic concerns, were in poor health, or had 10 or more grandchildren (Table 2). Further, grandparents of disadvantaged children were much more likely to have limited education and to be unmarried. The most advantaged children tend to have access to abundant grandparent
resources, which are somewhat "socially redundant" because these children already have generous family resources (Elder & Conger, 2000). In contrast, the least advantaged children have access to severely limited grandparent resources. Because children with the greatest need are linked to grandparents who are most likely to be divorced and to have poor health, low education, and low income, they are likely to benefit little if at all from the anticipated overall increase in resources of grandparents in coming decades.

**OLDER PEOPLE’S INVOLVEMENT WITH NONKIN CHILDREN**

Although the primary way in which older people directly contribute to the well-being of children is through the grandparent–grandchild connection, it also is possible for older people to assist children who are not their kin. Through involvement in volunteer programs, older people have the potential to improve the welfare of children and to improve their own well-being (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003). For example, evaluations of the Foster Grandparent Program, which matches people older than 60 years with disadvantaged children, report positive outcomes for the children involved (Senior Corps, 2008). But this program involves only about 1 in 1,500 older adults. A variety of other intergenerational programs have been found to benefit both older people and needy children, but there is no evidence that these volunteer programs involve more than a tiny fraction of older adults (Newman, Ward, Smith, Wilson, & McCrea, 1997). We lack detailed data showing how many older people interact with children not related to them by kinship, how much time they spend with nonkin children, what the interaction involves, and what difference it makes to children and to old people. However, there is evidence of pervasive age segregation in American society (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005), suggesting that overall there is little interaction between children and nonkin older people.

One indication of the extent of age segregation in the United States comes from analyzing data collected in the 1985 General Social Survey that asked adult respondents to identify up to five other adults with whom they had discussed important matters over the past 6 months (see Burt, 1985). I have calculated the age distribution of the individuals identified as nonkin members of the personal networks for individuals of different ages. The extent of age segregation of nonkin network members is shown by data in Table 3. For every age category, the largest proportion of network members is in the same age category occupied by the respondent (indicated by the percents in the diagonal). Fewer than 2% of the nonkin network members of persons aged 18–39 were older than 60 years. (And no one younger than 30 years selected anyone older than 70 years as a network member.) Reciprocally, fewer than 7% of the network members selected by respondents older than 60 years were younger than 40 years. (And no one older than 70 years identified anyone younger than 30 years as a network member). Although this survey asked respondents to identify only adult members of their personal networks, it seems unlikely that older people would have identified any nonkin children if that had been permitted.

Additional evidence of age segregation of children from nonkin old people is seen from the age composition of the adults involved with children in the dominant nonfamily settings. Only 3% of all teachers of children in kindergarten through eighth grade are older than 60 years, and only 3% of day care workers are older than 65 years (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). Similarly, older people are rarely the coaches of recreation league sports teams, the counselors at children’s camps, or the pediatricians or dentists that children see. If they thought about it, children, as they go about their daily activities, might well ask, “Where are the old people?” But children are not likely to ask this question because it is so taken for granted that our social institutions designed to care for children largely exclude older people. As older people comprise an increasing proportion of the adult population in coming decades, it is possible that the average amount of time that children spend interacting with older nonkin could increase. But the starting level of interaction is so small that any plausible increase in older people caring for nonkin children would be too small to make a noticeable difference in the lives of disadvantaged children. It would require large structural
changes that promote greater age integration before a
significant level of direct involvement of older people
with nonkin children could develop.

**Conclusions**

Demography is not destiny because social structures can
change in multiple ways in response to a changing age dis-
tribution. However, because age is a central organizing fac-
tor in social structure, the changing age composition of
the population has potential implications for children. Under-
standing what these implications of population aging are is
a first step toward thinking about what social changes could
protect or enhance the well-being of children. Because of
the central role that families play in the lives of children,
there is little reason to expect that population aging would
have any adverse consequences for children in families with
two well-educated parents. Indeed, the changing older pop-
ulation could bring advantages to these children because they
are increasingly connected to grandparents with significant
amounts of social and economic capital. Therefore, it is
most important to focus on implications of population aging
for the more disadvantaged children in the population.

A significant proportion of American children are grow-
ing up in disadvantaged families. A majority of children
have mothers who are not college graduates, 17% are living
in poverty, and 33% are living in single-parent families.
Children who have the least parental resources potentially
have the most to gain from involvement with grandparents,
but they are the least likely to have grandparents with sig-
nificant resources. Disadvantaged children have the most
to gain from involvement with resourceful older nonkin, but
age segregation means that few older people are involved in
such helping relationships. Disadvantaged children are most
dependent on public spending that could compensate for
their weak parental resources, but children are a decreasing
priority in public spending. Unless priorities in public
spending change, funding for children’s programs will be
challenged by the growing cost of programs for older people
associated with population aging between 2010 and 2030.

The growing divide between advantaged and disadvan-
taged children in an aging American society is not inevita-
able. It would be possible for the welfare state to redistribute
more resources to disadvantaged children. This would re-
quire either further expanding the size of the domestic bud-
get or reordering priorities in the budget. Either option is
sure to face political opposition, so changes that favor dis-
advantaged children are unlikely to occur without organized
efforts. It would be possible to better support grandparents
who care for disadvantaged children (Baker & Silverstein,
2008). It would be possible to encourage resourceful older
people to be more involved in mentoring and caring for dis-
advantaged children other than their own grandchildren.
This could be accomplished by expanding intergenerational
programs, which have the potential to benefit both old and
young. Ways to expand involvement of older people with
nonkin children could include expanding incentives for
older people to become engaged, increasing awareness of
opportunities for and benefits of engagement, increasing re-
cruitment efforts to get older people to participate, and in-
creasing financial support for intergenerational programs.

All the changes discussed here to protect vulnerable chil-
dren are more likely to occur if critical attention is given to
implications of population aging for children, and to the
way in which later life is socially structured. It should also
be noted that failing to adequately invest in children now
will complicate the challenge of meeting needs of the older
population in the future. Investments in children pay divi-
ends of increased economic productivity when these chil-
dren enter adulthood (Esping-Andersen, 2008).

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