

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([00:01](#))

Hello everyone, welcome to Better Health While Aging, a podcast that gives you strategies and information about improving the health and wellbeing of older adults. We discuss common health problems that affect people over age 60, the best ways to prevent and manage those problems, and we also often address common concerns and dilemmas that come up with aging parents and other older loved ones. Like what to do if you're worried about falls or safety or memory, or even the quality of an older person's healthcare.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([00:30](#))

I'm your host, Dr. Leslie Kernisan. I'm a practicing geriatrician, so that means I'm a medical doctor, specialize in geriatrics, which is the art and science of modifying healthcare so that it works better for older people and for their families. So in today's episode we are going to be talking about intergenerational connections, and how grandparents can connect with grandchildren.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([00:54](#))

My guest is Kerry Byrne, she is an expert in family caregiving who has developed a special interest in these intergenerational connections. And earlier this year she founded a website called The Long Distance Grandparent. She also has an academic background related to aging. She has a PhD in Rehabilitation Sciences, and has been studying aging, care and connection for 20 years. She has a position as an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the School of Public Health and Health Systems at the University of Waterloo in Canada where she does some collaborations with their research team focused on improving family centered care and transitions.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([01:32](#))

And I met Kerry earlier this year at an event and I was just really intrigued by her

focus on how grandparents can remain connected with grandchildren, and on the broader question of how we can help generations connect and how we can help people of different ages be more connected. Because I know how important those family connections are, and because I also believe that those kinds of connections between different generations in society are so important to everybody. So Kerry is really an expert in this, she's doing really interesting work in this area, and so I'm so delighted to have her join me today to talk about these intergenerational connections and more specifically about connecting generations within families and grandparents connecting with grandchildren. So Kerry, welcome to the show.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([02:18](#))

Thank you, Leslie. Delighted to be here.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([02:21](#))

Yes. So before we get into the question of grandparents and intergenerational connections, I always love to start off by inviting our guests to talk a little bit more about how they became interested in aging and found their way to doing the work that they're doing. So why don't we start with that?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([02:38](#))

Well, I started out wanting to be a child psychologist, so in my first year of university, way back when, that was my major and I took an elective course on gerontology, and truthfully I didn't know what it was besides the definition that was provided in the course syllabus, the study of the aging population. And I took it because it fit into my schedule. It was a night class and I was working full time and going to university at that time. And so I took this course and as part of the course we were offered bonus points for volunteering at a seniors facility, and so I was a keener, I jumped on that opportunity and I started volunteering there once weekly.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([03:19](#))

And when I first met the director, she told me that she had partnered me with a woman who was living in that facility only because her husband needed extra care. And so she had been in a domestic abuse situation for most of her life and she had this new found freedom. And so I would go pick her up, I was 19 at the time, I'd go pick her up in my Dodge Colt, and we would drive across the street to the shopping center and eat at the food court and go to the Dollar Store and look around. And we had deep wonderful, beautiful conversations that just really changed the way that I thought about aging.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([04:00](#))

Now really briefly, how old was she? Age is just a number, but people in retirement facilities can have... or be quite a spectrum.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([04:08](#))

Do you know what? She... I don't know. I think she was probably in her 70s-

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([04:11](#))

Yes. But when you're 19 everyone over age 40 seems old.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([04:18](#))

Yes, exactly. Yes, now that I am over age 40 it doesn't seem so old. But yes, true enough. And so this really shaped me, I would say academically, forever. So at the time I was at a university where the only talk of gerontology was a gerontology certificate. So I switched and had a minor in gerontology. But I really turned my attention to studying everything aging from that point forward. And so in that course I learned about pet therapy and music therapy and intergenerational therapy and it set me on a career course where throughout my masters and PhD I studied issues that were related to aging and care.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([04:58](#))

I'm a bit unoriginal to an extent as I've reflected back on how I've ended up studying aging and care for the last 20 years, it's based on a relationship with my grandparents, and in particular with my maternal grandmother. When I was 12 years old, I was in the room when she died. And looking back on it, I studied family caregiving and it took me a long time to figure out that I was actually a young carer at that time. But I didn't identify as such, like many family caregivers who don't identify in that role. But I was sent home first to this rural community that we lived in Canada, where she lived, I was to take care of her. And so I spent all kinds of time with her and was there in the moment that my grandfather was holding her as she took her last breath.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([05:51](#))

What a formative experience because I actually got to see a beautiful death. She was surrounded by her family and I'm still grateful to this day that I wasn't shielded from that experience. All the men left the room, we put makeup on her and dressed her before she was taken away. But looking back, that has definitely been an influential relationship in my life. And I was also quite close to my maternal grandfather for years and years. So yes, again, I'm not unlike a lot of people that end up studying aging in that I had a powerful relationship with my grandparents.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([06:31](#))

Right, right. Well, we're going to delve into that more because I'm suspecting that you're going to tell us this is one of the many benefits of intergenerational connections. But yes, it sounds like you are an example of having been quite touched and shaped in a very wonderful way by these connections with your grandparents. But even those of us who had close or powerful relationships with our grandparents don't end up necessarily studying that relationship much less starting a website to help grandparents connect with grandchildren. So how did you become interested specifically in that grandparent grandchild relationship and come to start this website that you have?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([07:15](#))

I do remember studying intergenerational programs, way back when, in that introductory course. And it was something that I always thought, I just always thought it was really neat, but didn't go beyond it. So I guess my interest specifically in this relationship was truly ignited when I had my first son, because at the same time, I like to say I also birthed six long distance grandparents and was immediately intrigued by the joy they received from my son.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([07:45](#))

And also I was quite fascinated by his instant comfort and ease with them, even though they all lived at a distance. And so my husband's family is in England, at this time we were living in Canada. And it was through Skype calls that we really got to know his grandparents and they would come to visit and we would go there.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([08:07](#))

When my son was two my husband was transferred to Dubai, and so... Again we were living in Canada, but we became ultra long distance to the grandparents. And I clearly remember the moment being at the airport, walking away from my father who has, had and still has a very close relationship with my oldest son. I remember walking away because I had left and moved away before. I'd left home in my 20s and had walked away from my parents or my husband's in England, so I've lived in England, but I had never walked away with someone's grandchild in my arms before.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([08:46](#))

And so you have these moments that are quite poignant that happen to you personally that I think drive you professionally. And I do remember clearly thinking I will not let this connection suffer. This is important for his grandparents, and it's important for my child, so I had one child at the time. So that really set me

on... really did renew my interest and passion for connecting generations and in particular supporting the connection of generations within families.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([09:18](#))

Right. And I think I remember, when we met that you said that living in Dubai, you actually started... Well first of all, there were quite a lot of ex-pats, people who move there for work and so who are far from family, and that you noticed that there were patterns of when grandparents would come to visit and you found yourself studying that right around you. Right? Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([09:39](#))

Yes. So I call November in Dubai grandparents season, and it's because it's when it starts to become manageable from a weather perspective. And when you're on the beach, you just start to see more grandparents there with their grandchildren. And I was at that time on maternity with my second child who I had in Dubai, and honestly, I was going a little bit stir-crazy and not working at that point, and I wanted to make sense of this experience of having lived in Dubai. And so I put out a request to a moms group that I was part of, asking to interview grandparents. Because there were so many of them around and I really wanted to just talk to them about why they find this role so meaningful, and the opportunity to talk to just a diverse set of grandparents.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([10:25](#))

So I did, and I never was able to interview everybody who responded. So we left Dubai shortly after, but I was able to talk to I think over 20 grandparents. And what stood out to me was this feeling of that their relationship was magical, right? Like it was often described as a surprise, that they were surprised that they felt that way. But then also that because they were living in a distance from their grandchildren, that it took extra to stay connected. Right?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([10:54](#))

And I have since found this just through doing my own research in different forums for grandparents that, in particular long distance grandparents are worried that their grandchildren won't know them. That they won't build close bonds with them, because of the distance. And here I was sitting in a situation where I knew that it's quite possible to build these bonds from a distance, but of course, it takes time and preparation. And so all of these things came together to really hone in my focus and niche around the long distance grandparent.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([11:26](#))

Right. Yes. Well I can understand why they would have that concern because yes, the distance. Right? And how are you going to overcome that distance? But since you brought that up, I just wonder about grandparents who aren't as far from their grandchildren. Do you know if they also, how common it is for them to feel like they're not as close to their grandchildren as they want? Or to be interested in how one can foster that? Or have you mostly really focused on the long distance ones?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([11:57](#))

I focus mainly on long distance, but what I will say is that as grandchildren get older, it's a bit tougher to maintain that connection no matter the distance. And so I focus a lot, because my children are younger, I focus a lot on the connection with grandchildren that are 10 and under. But I do share ideas that are valuable for any age of grandchild. And I do have grandparents in our community who are not long distance, and who are just looking for ideas to stay connected.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([12:27](#))

So yes, I mean I think, but if you get to see your grandchild all the time because you can... But if you live half an hour away from your grandchild, that can be an impediment to seeing them more regularly, especially if you're in a major city. Grandchildren are busy with their own schedules and sports and so trying to fit into that, and it can sometimes be tough for grandparents. And it is really why it's important to work with parents and set up that intention that the relationship's

important to you. And I can talk about that more when we get into some of the more practical components of it.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([13:01](#))

But it's a good point. I mean, it's not just long distance grandparents that value this relationship and, or that are looking for ways to stay connected. And so this is actually evidenced by the number of... And I've been linked into this community more. It's great the grandmother bloggers who are out there who are sharing ideas for crafts that you do with your grandchildren, they're pointing to-

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([13:24](#))

Yes. Yes. So and I'm less than crafty so, but I'm happy to share. I'm happy to share other people's ideas.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([13:31](#))

Oh yes. Well I think several in our audience would be interested. And so of course, when we publish this episode, we'll have a link to [your site](#) and we're going to have you talk a little bit more about it. Because I know you have lots of resources and ideas for grandparents who are at a distance and want to stay connected. But I think also you'll have to let me know afterwards a few [other resources](#) that we can point the audience to, some of your favorite [grandmother bloggers](#) because I think this is a recurring, definitely and it's strong area of interest.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([13:59](#))

You probably know this research and literature better than I do, but we know that in general as people get older, they become more interested in relationships. Whereas when people are earlier in their life in their 20s and 30s and 40s they're often very busy with their career, and then also I think just with their nuclear family.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([14:22](#))

Yes.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([14:23](#))

Putting one foot in front of the other as I sometimes feel, and maybe you do too. And then later in life we can sometimes step back and start thinking about the things that matter most, including those extended relationships or maybe to a certain extent, it's about legacy too. So, I want to come back to more about your site, but before we go there, so we've said the term intergenerational connections. Can you speak a little bit more about what that means in research and what we know about why they're important?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([14:56](#))

Yes. So really intergenerational connection is, I guess what it sounds like, right? Connecting people from different generations. And so-

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([15:05](#))

Well, one question I had is, is that people you're related to or does that also include connecting with different generations who you're not related to?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([15:14](#))

So I would say it's both. I mean I tend to focus more on the intergenerational connection within families and my logic is that, and it's actually after years of studying family caregiving and seeing how innovative and adaptable families are towards reaching a goal. And so I think that families are probably one of the most adaptable social structures that we have. So I think the power within our own family units to improve intergenerational connection is large. But it absolutely includes connection broadly speaking with people in your community. So not necessarily related to, and I mean, from a young age, our most important relationships can be characterized as intergenerational, right? With our parents,

our siblings, our grandparents, our cousins, it's all over. And these connections are naturally occurring, in families, in our education system, in health care and in our workplace.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([16:09](#))

And yet at the same time, we live in a fairly age segregated society. I've been personally quite influenced by the work of Marc Freedman. And so he is the founder and CEO of an organization called [encore.org](#) and I love the work they're doing because it is an organization that's focused on really leveraging the skills and talents of adults who are aged 50 and older, to serve their communities and in particular children and youth. And so I'm a bit excited to turn 50, so that I can get involved in some of these programs, but he wrote a book called [How To Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting The Generations](#) and talks to social innovators all over the world about bringing generations together, and this is inside your family or outside your family.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([17:03](#))

Anyone interested in connecting generations will definitely enjoy this book, and he talked about age apartheid and how we used to have communities where relationships and connections between generations occurred naturally, but that we now have retirement communities. We have, many people don't necessarily have their grandparents living around them. And then so they go to school without exposure to older adults. And so there are loads of different programs that are bringing together the young and old. For example, [Generations United](#) is a not for profit that focuses on improving the lives of children and youth and older adults through intergenerational programs and also policies and strategies. And they're really, the authority I would say here in the US on intergenerational connection.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([17:52](#))

They have [cataloged](#) over 700 programs in the US alone that focus on connecting the youngest and oldest. And so this can be in programs. So for example, in a school where older people in the community come in and read to the children,

right? Or probably listeners have heard about initiatives in the UK for example, where... and here in the US as well, but where they have younger people coming into older people's communities and interacting in that way. And intergenerational connection it's all around us.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([18:36](#)), I was thinking a lot of opportunities are around us and so it sounds like it's partly about making people aware of the opportunities. Right? So one opportunity for older adults who are interested in this is that they could look around for opportunities for them to volunteer or connect with younger generations.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([18:55](#))

Yes. So I'm happy to provide also just a few different links. So I mentioned Generations United and you can actually go and search in their [database](#) and find something that exists in your community and, or reach out to them so that they can help to connect you with a program. And then also encore.org has a [program directory](#), again, just hundreds of different programs about... There's also an organization called [Foster Grandparents](#) and so you can become a foster grandparents to a young person in your community.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([19:29](#))

So yes, there are tons of ways that you can get involved with youth and children in the community. I was even looking at a virtual volunteering and so that if you can't get out of the house, and especially if you're family caregiving and you're at home quite a bit, but want to be able to contribute to youth and to children, the United Nations has an [online volunteering portal](#). And I can provide links to all of those so people can check them out and see if anything resonates for them in terms of getting involved.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([20:03](#))

Yes. No, that's so exciting. And also this conversation is making me think of the recent podcast episode with Bill Thomas, which was episode 100, it was his third time. But he's been working to change the narrative about aging for quite a while.

And you're echoing what he said, which is about age segregation. I don't know that he used the term age apartheid, but I like that too. That is fairly pervasive in the United States. He talked about how the housing has fostered that, that we had this movement decades ago for houses in the suburbs. Right? Which effectively were like castles with moats. You drive right into your garage and go into your house. And so people are not very connected to their neighbors and that we need to move towards living in communities that are more interconnected with our neighbors and communities that are multi-generational, multi-ages, multi abilities to have more of this connection opportunity.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([21:00](#))

If I'm echoing anything that Bill Thomas says, then I'm on the right track.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([21:04](#))

Oh yes. For sure. For sure. So I think this is a movement that we need to continue to foster.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([21:11](#))

Yes, I agree. And I would say also that grandparents are a powerful force towards ending ageism. And I've been thinking through this more and more over the last couple of months and I started thinking about it after I read this study that got a lot of press and it was out of Belgium, a university in Belgium. And they looked at the impact of contact with grandparents on children's and adolescent's views about older people. And so I was intrigued by the findings because they talked about how it's actually the quality of contact with your grandchild that matters towards them having more favorable feelings to older adults.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([22:02](#))

And so I liked it for my audience because for long distance grandparents, they don't get to see their grandchildren very often, but they have this opportunity to make sure that the interactions they have with them are high quality. And so that

study really just got me thinking about what potential role could grandparents play towards ending ageism. And secondly, I think grandparents, I really want to leverage findings that grandparents see themselves as playing an important role in their grandchildren's lives. The American Association of Retired Persons, did a great survey all about grandparents and over 50% of grandparents see themselves as a source of wisdom. And they teach children about sexism and racism and all of these things. And so I think they're just, they're really well placed to teach about ageism.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([22:51](#))

Right, right.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([22:52](#))

Well, I want to delve more into that, but before briefly for the study in Belgium, so did they find that the quality of interactions was more important than the quantity or just that you could still have a strong effect even if you didn't have a lot of quantity, if the quality was good?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([23:06](#))

No, it was just about quality. It was actually the most important factor that affected their views. It was the quality of contact.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([23:15](#))

Okay. And how did they assess the quality of contact, right? So if one of our listeners is like, "Huh, am I having good quality contacts with my grandchildren?"

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([23:26](#))

I mean it was looking at, I think it was a one item, two item kind of scale, but that was just really about their perception of their relationship with their grandparents.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([23:38](#))

They were surveying the grandchildren?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([23:40](#))

Yes, grandchildren. And so they looked at how emotionally close they were to grandparents and then how appreciative of their contact with their grandparents that they are. So that was how they measured it.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([23:53](#))

Well, good. Well, so yes. So let's delve into that idea more about the role that grandparents might play in countering ageism. And which ties into something else that I wanted to ask about, which was myths about grandparents. Because part of the broader countering of ageism is challenging these myths and narratives that are faulty about aging. Right? So do we also have some myths or narratives about grandparenting that you found aren't true? And is that part of how grandparents can counter ageism?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([24:25](#))

Yes, well, one of the myths about grandparents I think is that they're all older in like their 80s and that they're frail. And of course, while some are, some absolutely are. The average age that someone becomes a grandparent in the US is 50. And so I thought, and this translates when I'm trying to look for photos to use in my own business about grandparents. Because when I work with different designers the photos that come back, they don't represent grandparents. Right? And so your becoming a grandparent at age 50 and seven years, for me, I'm actually closer.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([25:10](#))

I became a mum I think closer in age to a first time grandparent than I did for the

average first time mother. And so, I mean this is similar in Canada and the UK. And really that there's a range. I think the AARP study reported that people become a grandparent, the youngest being around 38 years old and the oldest being 100 plus years. And so there's this huge span of time, of 60 plus years in between of the age of the grandparent. Right? And so I think it's quite similar when we talk about just aging in general-

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([25:46](#))

Right. Yes. It's a diverse group. It's a pretty broad age spread.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([25:51](#))

Yes.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([25:52](#))

And then of course, at any age there's a like wide diversity. And so it sounds like grandparents are often, may not be as... Many of them are younger than we might think. And also most of them are not particularly frail.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([26:05](#))

Yes, absolutely. And actually that the period of healthy grandparenthood is actually increasing. So we think that sometimes because of delays in grandparenthood due to fertility postponement. So people are having children at a later age, but that's not really translating. And so the time that people are in healthy grandparenthood can become much longer and you can be a grandparent for 30 to 40 years. So the idea that you will have... Not idea, but I mean my assertion that you will have a very important impact on your grandchildren and you have a long period of time to do it. Right? You have about 30 or 40 years to get it right.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([26:47](#))

And now do you know if, are younger grandparents more likely to be involved with grandchildren than older ones? Do you know?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([26:54](#))

I don't... I'm just trying to think about any research that I've seen specifically about it. I mean, I've read about it in the context of younger grandparents potentially being more active with grandchildren, but I mean, younger can be... my dad's 78.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([27:16](#))

Right, right.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([27:17](#))

I mean, he's on the floor, he's in the park, running around on the slides. I mean, he's in quite good shape. So I don't... Nothing stands out. Nothing stands out.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([27:28](#))

Yes. Well great. Well, so, and then what are some other myths that you have come across?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([27:34](#))

Well, I think, so one of them also is that grandparents are retired with tons of time on their hands. And so again, while this is true for a group of grandparents. In this [survey](#) that the AARP did, they found that four in 10 grandparents are still in the workforce. And so generally speaking, we tend to think of grandparents as having all of this extra time, and that's just not really the case. So it's actually busy. So it's busy schedules of, we talked about how busy schedules of children can get in the way of connecting, but it's also the busy schedules of grandparents. But they are often times into their third act and they maybe are starting their own businesses or having serious responsibilities at work, and so that influences the

amount of time that they're able to spend with their grandchildren.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([28:26](#))

So we shouldn't assume that they have plenty of time on their hands. And then any other myths that you want to just share and debunk with us?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([28:35](#))

I don't think any myths, but one of the numbers that I found to be quite surprising that was reported, there were a couple of professors out in Australia, Susan Moore and Doreen Rosenthal. So they wrote a book on grandparenting just in the last couple of years, and they estimated that there are almost a billion grandparents in the world. And so, yes. I don't know, that number just really stuck with me.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([29:01](#))

Right.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([29:01](#))

And that worldwide between 70 to 80% of older adults are grandparents and they extrapolated it from a bunch of different demographic studies, but again, a billion grandparents in the world. And this comes back to why I believe that grandparents will be a powerful force towards ending ageism. The sheer numbers of grandparents, and the potential length of time that they have to influence the values and morals of grandchildren.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([29:34](#))

Yes. So say more about that, about how grandparents can counter ageism. I think you mentioned that they can... Well actually... Yes, just tell us more about that.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([29:44](#))

Well, so they can do it within families, at the dinner table. I mean much like they call out and actually see themselves as contributing to calling out things like sexism. I mean, you can call out ageism. It's also about the way that you talk about yourself, right? It starts with how you talk about yourself and you can model how you want them to see an older person. And I think a lot of grandparents do this naturally and they have these phenomenal relationships with their grandchildren. And so just by the nature of the relationship, there will be a lot of good towards the perception of people that are older.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([30:29](#))

Yes. I was actually thinking, this is so interesting. I was again thinking about the recent podcast episode with Bill Thomas where at the end his advice to the audience in terms of countering ageism was to be sure to think about your own internalized ageism, because most of us have some or a lot, right? Which manifests with things like looking in the mirror and being dissatisfied, because our face looks older than 10 years before, for those of us, especially once you're in your 40s, 50s, 60s and beyond or complaining about getting old.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([31:02](#))

And so it's interesting to me to think about how that it's important to not just do that for ourselves, but to realize that if we say things like that in front of younger children, we might be contributing to ageism. And if we instead talk about our aging faces and bodies in a way that is accepting and loving then we would be modeling the opposite. Right?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([31:24](#))

Definitely. And I think also talking about... and I'm changing my language, I think since turning 40, that I've had... You just end up with a bit of reflection at that age, and so I think about aging as a privilege. And once you've been in a scenario where you've lost friends and you've lost family, you start to realize what a privilege that is. And I think also this is how I talk to the grandparents, and it's about how I model behavior to my son as well, right? How I talk about

grandparents to him. Right? And like the value of what... So we often times will talk about my father who was a footballer in his day in Ireland and played for Ireland. And so we've got a framed picture of his cap and I mean, so we just really, so that he can see himself in his grandfather and see that his grandfather was this amazing footballer. And so they play... And sorry I should say I'm talking about soccer.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([32:26](#))

Right.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([32:29](#))
[crosstalk 00:32:29] Right. Soccer, not-

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([32:30](#))
It's good to clarify that for a US audience.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([32:32](#))

Yes, yes. So yes, I don't know. I mean, I think that people, yes, the grandparents definitely have a role at the dinner tables in the conversations, in your conversations that they have, and I think it's that they're well-placed to introduce the concept and dangers of ageism and that sounds a bit foreshadowing. But no, they've likely experienced it, and without a massive shift in the narrative of aging, their grandchildren will face it too and be limited by it one day as well.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([33:02](#))

I have been reading Joseph Coughlin's book called The Longevity Economy. And I was struck by this assertion that he made that the world's most advanced economies will evolve around the needs, wants and whims of grandparents. And it's a great quote when you start to break it down a little bit. I think that there will be increasingly businesses who are often staffed by people from different generations are really being forced to figure out how to talk to grandparents. It's a huge industry. The average grandparent spends just over \$2,500 a year on their

grandchild, between gifts and vacations and schooling.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([33:44](#))

And so I think advertisers are really needing to figure out how to reach this market and what's important to grandparents, that they will say it is family. And so anything that reeks of ageism isn't going to fly. And so just as a group who spends money and is really forcing different generations to actually have more realistic perceptions of what it means to be a grandparent, and what it looks like. Right? What it looks like to be a grandparent, and that's important.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([34:18](#))

Yes. Yes. Well, so now let's talk a little bit more about your website and this community you're building and how you're trying to help them with, it seems like you identified a need, which is that many of them are far from their grandchildren and would like to be more connected. And so that you've been figuring out ways, ideas to give people and ways to do this. So tell us what you've learned through doing this. Because I'm sure we have lots of people in the audience who are grandparents and would love to learn more about how, what they can do to stay connected even if they live far away.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([34:53](#))

Yes. So, because I love talking about this, so you might have to stop me if I-

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([34:57](#))

I will, if I have to.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([35:00](#))

Okay. Yes feel free to intervene and bounce me out of this conversation because it is something that I can get really fired up about, and do love to talk about. One of just, I want to back up because I think that the distance is one of the biggest

barriers to seeing grandchildren. And I think what the American Association of Retired Persons, and I refer to this survey because I just think it's really interesting. It didn't one-

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([35:26](#))

Yes. No, we'll post the link to it in the show notes. But yes.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([35:28](#))

Yes. That it's quite recent, and so they... I think it was about over half of grandparents reported they had at least one grandchild who lived more than 200 miles away, and almost half of grandparents also reported that distance is a challenge they face as grandparents. And so this is where the research and the findings are really dovetailing with what I'm experiencing personally about trying to keep my children connected to their grandparents who live at a distance.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([35:59](#))

So we have since left Dubai and we are now in Houston, Texas. And so we have grandparents, back in Canada and in England. And so I really have learned from the best about how to stay connected. So we have some, yes, phenomenal grandparents that range in age, they're in their 60s all the way into their 80s. And I've been able to see what they do that has really made a difference with my own children. And for long distance grandparents, I'd break it down into, excuse me, three different areas that are sort of... the three different ways that you can stay connected to your grandchildren, and that's through Snail Mail, so the mailbox, through video chatting. And so some people are Skyping or FaceTiming with their grandchildren and then through in person visits.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([36:52](#))

And I always think of mail as being one of the best tools in the long distance grandparent tool kit. And it's all the more special now because it is less common, right? So it's easy to send off a text or a video, but to actually receive a piece of

mail is quite exciting. I still get excited by it. My grandfather used to call it real mail. I'd go to the mailbox with him and he'd say, is there any real mail in there? That's mail that's not a bill or a flyer, but from a real person.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([37:20](#))

And so for grandparents though, at a distance, the key to sending mail is to make it interactive in some way and to try and make it extend beyond the mailbox. So most recently I shared with my audience about if you send them a gift, buy yourself the same gift and you can play with it together online, so buy the same tea set and then have a tea party together. Even buy the same Barbie or stuffed toy or a remote control car, so that you can play together. Buy the same book so that you can read it together online.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([37:52](#))

Right. I was wondering how gifts, were going to fit in with the ways to stay connected. Because you had mentioned before, the grandparents spend a lot on gifts and certainly something that I think of as a way that grandparents are involved. But that's a neat idea to not only send a gift, but if you're at a distance, have a version for yourself so that then I guess when you're on Skype or a video call you can both play with it. Okay. And it's funny that you mentioned Snail Mail too because...

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([38:21](#))

So in our family, my husband's parents are older than my mother. My father died at 61 relatively young, although he was one of those people who didn't model the best attitude about aging, my whole life. I remember him always moaning about getting older and saying how he wished he was 10 years younger. So I miss him. But then I think, well at least he's not modeling that.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([38:48](#))

Yes. I just wanted to quickly share that my grandfather used to say, that if he knew he was going to live so long that he would have taken better care of himself.

And so we had the same kind of childhood experience.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([38:58](#))

Right. Yes. But my mother had me relatively young and then I think like many professional women I had my children after age 30 although even in your early 30s is on the young side for professional women. But so when my daughter was born, my mother was not even 60 but my husband's family, his mother got married relatively late for her generation and had children. And then he got married relatively late.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([39:27](#))

And so my mother in law right now is 90, and what has been very charming is that she's always been... They're at a distance, they're in New York. She has always sent postcards to the kids and calls and we see them. But recently, I'm not sure why, she and my daughter have struck up a mail correspondence where they are mailing each other letters. And it's been really charming, my daughter's now 11, to see how interested my daughter is in this. And I think it's because it does stand out in this era of electronics.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([39:58](#))

Absolutely. I think becoming a Penpal with your grandchild is just another wonderful idea for grandparents and the audience and in particular sending and telling them stories about their parents. Children love that. I have a friend whose father does that, sends to his grandchild stories about the mum at the same age that the granddaughter is right now. And she loves it-

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([40:24](#))

Oh, I love that. So send stories about when you're... So I guess grandparents can send stories to the grandchild about one of the parents when the middle generation was the child's age.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([40:37](#))

Yes. Yes. And-

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([40:39](#))

Oh, that is really fun.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([40:41](#))

We just research all kinds of things, don't we? And that's actually in the research about how to keep kids' attention is talking to them about their own parents. Your mother in law, she's on the right track.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([40:56](#))

Yes. And I think also this is another skill that an older generation can model to a younger one is letter writing. I mean, I hate to say it, but I write so few letters and I feel like I came of age right when email was taking off in college. And so I do remember writing letters when I was in high school. My family moved abroad my last year of high school and I wrote long letters to my friends and some letters in college. But during my time in college, in the mid-nineties everybody transitioned over to email. So I think there's something I was appreciating my mother-in-law's letters because I was thinking, "I don't know that I can really write letters anymore." But she's quite good at it and I'm glad for my daughter to have that example.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([41:43](#))

Well, and I love it. I encourage grandparents after they've spent time with their grandchild to send a thank you note thanking them for that time together. And the reasoning behind it is exactly what you've just said, right? Is that, I mean teaching first of all, the long lost art of writing thank you notes and that was always really important in my husband's family. And so we try and stick to it as well. We're behind right now, we've just had Halloween and birthdays and so my son Finn who just turned five is going to be sat at the table writing thank you

notes, probably to try to finish up the ones before Christmas.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([42:23](#))

But for grandparents, it's an opportunity to show children how much it means to write a letter about time that you've spent together, and it also serves as a keepsake as well. And so I have loads of postcards. My grandfather and I used to send postcards back and forth. And he's since died and those, they really mean a lot. Right? And having that, I think, like you said, when you're in your 20s and 30s you don't necessarily realize how important that relationship is. And so I think that's a wonderful gift that grandparents can give to their grandchildren are these things like letters and keepsakes because it will, if it's not important to them right now or they don't see the importance of it, they will see the importance of it.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([43:03](#))

Right, right. And now you also mentioned a little while ago when you were talking about three ways to stay connected, you mentioned Snail Mail, you mentioned in person visits, and I thought you were going to mention the telephone, but actually I think you mentioned Skype and video chats. And so that's certainly a more modern phenomenon is that now we have all these technological ways to connect that were not so common. Even 10 years ago, I think it's really expanded the options, never mind 20 years ago.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([43:34](#))

So can you talk a little bit more about how you see... First of all, what you've learned about the way these, the different formats, phone versus video chat seems to affect people but also like what are the options people have available that you think are especially useful?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([43:49](#))

Yes, so I have definitely a love hate relationship with technology. I used to work with a technology company and I was the Director of Research, and the in house

joke was not to let me touch the technology. Right. I would talk to the people using the tool. But so I will say, and my dad who's 78 I always call him a pioneer of Skype because he learned about Skype early days. We have family in Ireland and so video chatting he's been doing that for many, many years. And so things like Skype or FaceTime are certainly things that grandparents are using and are very interested in using with their grandchildren.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([44:31](#))

And not surprisingly because you can see them, right? You can actually see their face, you can have more meaningful interaction when you're having a video chat as opposed to a phone chat, and for the reasons that you can ask your grandchild to take you for a tour of their bedroom. Ask them questions, like ask them to show you things, which is how you keep the attention of younger grandchildren. So I've actually got on my site at The Long Distance Grandparent a downloadable with just a whole bunch of ideas about [how to keep children's attention on video chats](#). And this does include things like getting a little bit silly, wearing hats and masks and lots of singing and all kinds of things that have been shared with me by long distance grandparents about how to stay connected.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([45:19](#))

And also, I've also really just in the last several months we've been using an app called [Marco Polo](#) and it doesn't sound like much when I describe it, it's a video walkie talkie is how they describe it. The mission of the company is to keep people close. And I have to tell you, everybody from, I mean my 18 month old to my mother in law who's in her 80s we're all on this app together and so you can send video back and forth and it works particularly well when you are in different time zones like we are. This is a struggle for long distance grandparents, how do you get into the schedule of your grandchildren? Right? They're busy. And so this way my mother-in-law can send something at night or whenever it works for her and then we can look at it whenever we want. We can look at that video and then respond. It's hard to describe.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([46:11](#))

You're not trying to schedule the live video FaceTime?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([46:15](#))

Yes but which we love as well. And so in some ways nothing really compares to having that back and forth. But this comes pretty close, I will say, because it addresses a lot of the challenges that people face when they're trying to find this time to connect through video. But I also encourage grandparents to just keep a bag beside whatever tablet or phone or however near the computer that they use to stay in touch with their grandchildren, with hats and masks and toys that they can pull out to be more interesting.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([46:50](#))

Oh, to have a little costume and props bag?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([46:52](#))

You know what? Yes. And you don't have to be a three ring circus, but I can tell you that if my son answers a Skype call or FaceTime call and the person on the other side has something funny on their face, yes, the chances are about 150% more likely, that he's going to at least stop for a minute, and engage in that conversation. And I think also just having some jokes around for children, I encourage grandparents to keep a list of questions to ask besides, "How was school today?" The question that always results in, "Fine."

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([47:25](#))

Yes. That's a question that eternally falls flat. So yes, what are better questions?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([47:31](#))

Yes. And keep a list of these, and so I've got a [blog on my site](#) all about it, but ask who was the funniest person at school today? Who made you laugh? If you could

be the teacher for the day, what would you teach? There are just a multitude of questions that you can ask-

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([47:47](#))

And then, show me your room. I like that one.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([47:50](#))

Yes, the tour. The grand tour. And this is it. Like, there's an opportunity for grandparents to do what they do best, which is to make their grandchildren feel special. Right? And unique and listened to. And so there's just a lot of value in that.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([48:10](#))

Yes. Because they're not in that role of like day to day hurtling them along through life. Right?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([48:16](#))

Yes.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([48:17](#))

That's part of, I mean I think as parents we're there trying to help them feel special and I feel like often I'm caught up in moving along through everything and that I need to do to get them to do, that's why it's nice to go on vacation actually to get a break from that dynamic.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([48:32](#))

This is especially the case for, I mean it's funny for long distance grandparents because they would talk about how... So they'll go and stay for more for longer periods of time. And so there are grandparents that will see their grandchildren

every week and so that they have Sunday dinner together. But for long distance grandparents, you're in the thick of it, right? Like you are there for the morning wake ups and the breakfast routine and the nighttime tantrums. I've always found that that's actually really brought us closer together with grandparents because we do share so intimately that space together, and for longer periods of time.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([49:12](#))

And so they really do, even though they don't get to see my children as often, they have these extended periods of time together and get to know each other. And these in-person visits I think are quite important for long distance grandparents in particular. And so trying to spend one on one time with your grandchildren during these visits. But I also recommend the grandparents just try and surprise and delight whenever they can. And one of the ways that you can do this is by leaving something behind. And my uncle just did this and so he's an honorary grandparent. He's a great uncle to my children and he left a present for them under his pillow in the room that he stayed in. Okay. So honestly it was actually a fart machine. So-

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([50:05](#))

A dream gift for little boys?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([50:07](#))

The absolute dream gift, and so I had some-

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([50:09](#))

And for little girls too. I think my daughter would love that too.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([50:12](#))

You know what? I think anyone would love it. I remember the whoopee cushion in my day just being fantastic. Right? And like putting it everywhere and laughing hysterically. I've just since hidden the fart machine, I can no longer listen to it. But

he also left some Christmas decorations that they put up. And so I think leaving something behind is just a really powerful way to connect with them. It's an opportunity to connect, right? So leave a letter in their coat pocket, maybe even a sticky notes inside their closet, a message inside their drawer, just saying, "Grandma loves you."

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([50:45](#))

I think also that you can ask for some interaction. And so I actually quite like the idea of for older grandchildren of leaving gift cards, and then ask them to take a selfie of themselves and send it in the coffee shop, right? Like, whether it's in the Starbucks at their university. So there are a multitude of ways that you can just go just that extra mile to stay connected and to make sure that it's just really all about getting in front of your grandchildren, and being part of their everyday life even when you're not there.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([51:20](#))

Yes. Well, Kerry, this has been such a wonderful conversation. I mean, I guess if I were to try to summarize what you have been saying, I think people once they are grandparents feel drawn to their grandchildren, it sounds like that's easy, but that maybe some people are sometimes assuming that the distance is going to make it hard to be close or have felt like that distance is a barrier. And what I'm hearing you say is that there are still lots of opportunities to connect.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([51:51](#))

And that, some of it starts with really setting an intention because especially at a distance, it's not going to happen automatically. But that if grandparents set an intention to maintain, to foster and maintain that connection, that there are lots of doable ways, and that this can end up playing an incredibly important role in the family and in their grandchild's life. And also be really good for the grandparent of course, because we all thrive on purpose and meaning and connection with others.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([52:22](#))

Wonderfully summarized.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([52:25](#))

Okay. And then what specifically led you to start your site?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([52:29](#))

Probably just a combination of all the things that we've talked about that it's personally really important to me to make sure that my children are connected with their grandparents and I'm watching as their grandparents are doing all of these really neat things to keep them connected. And I want to be able to share that. And now, especially since I've had conversations and connection with long distance grandparents as they're sharing what they're doing. And so I feel quite called just to serve this group. There are a lot of grandparent blogs or grandmother blogs, but none that are focused specifically on the long distance grandparent.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([53:06](#))

And I see, like you said, that it's important to set the intention and it's important to plan for these connections. And so I want to be able to help empower grandparents to do that and to just make sure that they always have an idea at hand about how to stay connected. And truly that distance is a barrier. It is. Would I prefer that we lived in the same community as the grandparents? I would. I would, but I also see how amazing the relationship is that my children have with their grandparents. And that is, like you said, from being intentional about it.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([53:45](#))

And I think at this time of year in particular, and we're thinking of our new year's resolutions, that there are all kinds of resolutions that we can make that we, a

couple we won't keep up, but what a beautiful resolution to connect more with your grandchild. And so I hear from grandparents that say, "Oh, I just feel like I could be doing just a little bit extra, to forge that connection, to build that bond and to maintain it, to maintain that bond." And so I think setting a connection resolution is quite a lovely way to start the new year.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([54:16](#))

Yes. And the decade? Right? So that is wonderful. So we will definitely post a link to your site in the show notes. I think it's thelongdistancegrandparent.com but we'll have a link in the show notes as well. And again, on your site, people can sign up to get helpful articles with ideas about what they could try next. And I think you mentioned you also have some downloadables that are on specific themes?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([54:45](#))

Yes. And there are a variety of different topics covered on the site. So we also talk about traveling with your grandchildren, right? Skip Gen travel is quite a popular thing right now where you travel without the parents and just travel with the grandchildren. And so I've got some information about groups like [Road Scholar](#). It's a not-for-profit organization that creates experiential learning opportunities for all ages. I love this organization. They have an entire... Yes, they have this entire section just focused on grandparents and grandchildren with really neat adventures like learning about Marine biology or taking a six day trip all about magic.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([55:22](#))

Oh. That's great. Because people always need ideas for like specific implementations. Right? So I love that. That there are these organizations that are making it easier for people to come up and implement those kinds of trips. Well, Kerry, this has been really wonderful to have you on the show. I learned a lot actually listening to you. And so yes, for our audience who are grandparents, definitely check out Kerry's website. And then even for people who are not grandparents, we also have an important role to play in connecting with people of other generations.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([55:57](#))

Whether that's in connecting with people of an older generation or connecting with people of a younger generation depending on where we're at. And so we will also have links to some of the resources that you shared that can be useful to people who just want to do more of that connecting outside of the grandchild, grandparent relationship. And any last tips or key takeaways that you want to share with the audience?

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([56:20](#))

No, I think, well you know what I want to share actually is about my favorite news story. So I'm going to end on this because it's a story about, it's called Grandma Joy's Road Trip, and it represents two different things to me. And one is just that people are really enamored with this relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, and it is important to me. And so this is a guy who's in his 30s who is taking his 89 year old grandmother to see all the national parks across the US and it's a beautiful story. They were estranged for years. They are now I think at their 50th park. And so I suggest it as a story because I think that it does highlight a few different pieces of intergenerational connection that's important. And it's just a feel good story too. So I didn't want to not share that story because I love it. So there you go.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([57:13](#))

Yes, that's a beautiful story to end on. And I guess in closing, I'll just again highlight the thing you said a little while ago, that if you are setting some intentions for the new year for 2020 or the whole decade, it's a beautiful idea to ask yourself, "How could I connect more with the people who matter to me?" And if you have grandchildren thinking about how you could do that.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([57:39](#))

Absolutely. I couldn't summarize it any better. Thanks so much for having me, Leslie. It's been a real treat to be able to talk about this.

Leslie Kernisan, MD: ([57:45](#))

Thank you.

Kerry Byrne, PhD: ([57:46](#))

All right, cheers.

[About Kerry Byrne's Website The Long Distance Grandparent](#)

Earlier this year, Kerry decided to combine her 20 years of research in care & connection with her own personal experience of keeping her children connected to the long distance grandparents in their lives. On her website, she shares ideas and inspirations for grandparents. She makes sure that you always have ideas at hand to build strong and meaningful relationships with your grandchildren. Grandparenting from a distance is tough but there are ways to bridge the miles.

Find out more about how to be the best long distance grandparent you can be on Kerry's website called [TheLongDistanceGrandparent.com](#). Be sure to sign-up for her weekly ideas & inspirations delivered to your email!