How can early childhood leaders work for more caring communities? This article outlines the potential of building reciprocal relationships among the young and the young at heart.

What Age Gap? Building Intergenerational Relationships

Stephanie R. Davidson and Beverly Boals-Gilbert

Few people are willing to admit that senior adults and young children share many common characteristics, including

- changes in development,
- need for companionship, and
- the desire to be understood.

These two groups are connected mostly through direct interaction with middle-aged adults. Even so, the leading advocacy group for seniors observed that “we tend to segregate our communities by age, which allows each generation to see itself as a separate entity rather than an integral part of a larger community” (American Association of Retired Persons ([AARP], 1996, p. 7).

One very practical way to build a greater sense of community—and reach people across the human age span—is to develop and become active in intergenerational programs. Intergenerational programming has been defined as the purposeful bringing together of different generations in ongoing mutually beneficial activities designed to achieve specified program goals (Generations United, 2007).

Intergenerational programs can successfully bridge the perceived generation gap between the young and the young at heart. These programs enhance the lives of both young children and senior adults by providing unique opportunities to celebrate diversity and develop more culturally conscious and sensitive citizens. The Foster Grandparent Program, established in 1963, was one of the first systematically planned intergenerational programs in the United States. Older adults were employed to work with children and youth considered to be at risk (Larkin & Newman, 1997).

Dr. William Thomas founded the Eden Alternative program, now located in more than 200 long-term care facilities in Alabama, Indiana, Missouri, Nebraska, and Texas. The program is designed to combat what Thomas called the three most prevalent problems in nursing homes: feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and boredom. Thomas has described the intergenerational approach as “a holistic approach to care, a creation of a human habit where people thrive, grow, and flourish, rather than wither, decay, and die” (Clark, Allison, & Gilbert, 1995, p. 18).

What are intergenerational programs?

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Settings for Intergenerational Programs

Intergenerational relationships can blossom through interactions in a variety of different types of settings.

Senior Care Homes. During holidays, for special events, and often on a regular basis, senior care homes welcome young visitors. Some senior care homes provide child care on site for staff. In either type of situation, young children can have regular opportunities to visit senior adults in their residences, individually or in small groups.

Stephanie R. Davidson, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

Beverly Boals-Gilbert, Ph.D., is Professor of Early Childhood Education at Arkansas State University, Jonesboro.
When children visit seniors, they enjoy each other’s companionship and typically entertain each other with shared activities such as singing, playing games, or reading stories.

With an adult’s guidance, young children taking part in intergenerational programs can gain a sense of the value of community service. Their presence and actions in the senior care home are welcomed and necessary for the happiness, fulfillment, and care of senior adults.

**Early Childhood Settings.** Another example of an intergenerational setting is where senior adults visit (or volunteer with) young children in an early childhood facility such as a child care center, Head Start program, family care home, or public school classroom. Young children are likely to view the seniors as welcome visitors. Children look forward to the visits daily, weekly, or monthly.

When seniors visit early childhood facilities, children might share the process of discovery, such as science experiments with sinking and floating, with seniors. Sometimes children orally or in writing tell seniors about their learning experiences. Cooking together, story-telling, and joint art projects are among the possible exchanges that captivate children and older adults. Children learn how to host guests and help them feel comfortable.

For the senior adults, the change of scenery outside of senior care homes, or their own homes, is welcome recreation. The seniors may also gain a sense of community service and continue to feel important in the lives of others.

**Shared Facilities.** In other situations, both the young children and the seniors receive care under the same roof, and in many instances, in the same room, such as in community centers. This arrangement offers the same benefits as the other settings.

Regardless of the setting, if the interactions are regularly scheduled and planned for the benefit of all involved, two additional benefits can be realized.

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grandparent through death or distance, and senior adults may be missing frequent contact with their grandchildren.

- Through the continual presence of the senior adults, young children (and perhaps their families as well) come to understand and appreciate senior adults as people. Young children’s exposure to senior adults through participation in intergenerational programs can help to minimize any fear that they may have of older people and teach them that aging is a normal part of the life cycle (Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences, 2003).

Intergenerational Relationships and Human Development

Both young children and senior adults are experiencing a variety of changes in their development. Each person’s life stages are formed by social influences interacting with a physically and psychologically maturing organism (ReVille, 1989). Positive intergenerational contact may be an especially important facet for supporting mental health, including emotional, social, and spiritual growth.

Erikson (1950) identified eight stages of psychosocial development across the age span. The first three stages—trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt—emerge in early childhood. Interestingly, these stages seem to link well with seniors and their changing life stages.

- Young children and seniors can become more trusting of each other, and other generations, through regular, satisfying contact.
- Children are seeking to establish their own autonomy, and senior adults are seeking to maintain theirs. For young children this is a time to exert and foster their new-found sense of independence. They are learning to maneuver and operate on their own. For the first time, toddlers are experiencing some control over their world and they enjoy the effects of asserting themselves (Graves, Gargiuloa, & Sluder, 1996).
- Young children are branching out, taking more initiative, and have lively imaginations. Their energy and curiosity may well delight seniors who...
can then feel freer to express their own interests more fully.

For senior adults who are a part of an intergenerational relationship, spending time with young children is a value-added experience. According to Graves and Larkin (2006), for senior adults, serving in the role of teacher, guide, and caregiver for the younger generation contributes positively toward the feeling of spiritual autonomy and leads into the feeling of integrity (a developmental stage of later adulthood). For senior adults who may be facing the decline of physical and sometimes mental health, interacting with young children can foster a sense of utility, respect, and individual importance.

### Programming Considerations

#### Shared Activities

What types of activities are especially suitable in intergenerational programs? Five categories of intergenerational activities—recreation, education, health promotion, public service, and personal development—were recommended by Ames and Youatt (1994). Foster (1997) noted that recreation, education, and personal development are most relevant to preschool intergenerational programs.

**Recreation.** Young children and senior adults can interact in a fun and leisurely way, often without any structured goals. Balls, hoops, musical instruments, scarves, and similar props can encourage everyone to take part, regardless of their skills or mobility. By engaging in simple recreation activities, relationships and trust are built.

**Education.** Young children and older adults can informally or formally exchange knowledge and skills. This is one of the most valuable mutually beneficial aspects of intergenerational relationships. Senior adults are able to pass wisdom from their life experiences to the children. They can share nursery rhymes, traditional games, skills such as sewing or carpentry, and vivid memories. At the same time, young children can aid the senior adults by supporting their new skills (technology) and sharing information about what they are learning. This situation is a win-win for everyone.

**Personal development.** Each group involved in intergenerational experiences shares skills and insights that lead to the development of better people. Senior adults can model skills such as sharing, self-control, and friendly interactions. Senior adults benefit from social interactions with young children, through which they often realize greater self-esteem as well as happiness. Both children and the adults gain new perspectives and topics for conversation.

### Arrangements

A number of considerations are essential to develop a successful program, including:

- **Staff preparation.** All staff, from both the early childhood program and any senior residences, will benefit from knowledge about developmental stages of children and senior adults, daily routines, and the characteristics of good-quality care for both young children and adults.

Individuals who interact with young children and senior adults will come to understand that these populations have unique as well as shared characteristics. The type of care they receive and the interactions in which they take part are pivotal to their lifespan development. Liaisons, preferably one from each age group, can help communicate with young children and senior adults about their differences and similarities. The message for both groups is that differences are to be celebrated. Each has something to share that adds to the other group’s realm of knowledge.

**Schedules.** Routine is essential to the success of intergenerational programs. Change and the unexpected are two elements that have the most potential to disrupt stability and calm of both age groups. Plan schedules, develop smooth transitions, and be prepared to make the most of unexpected situations. Developmentally appropriate practices—for children and older adults—apply to all activities, communications, standards of care, and environments.

**Volunteers.** Intergenerational programs thrive through the work of volunteers—both to become senior participants as well as to assist with transportation, supervision, and other details. The coordinator of one after-school program stated that the paid staff runs the program but the volunteers provide the magic (Grossman & Furano, 1999).
Before recruiting senior volunteers in the community, either in residences or those living independently, plan how to address topics such as accessibility, transportation, languages, dietary requirements, scheduling, and health issues. Make sure that program and/or state licensing standards are met to assure the health and safety of all involved in the intergenerational program.

Recruiting senior volunteers may be a challenge for intergenerational programs that are not based in a senior care home. Good places to recruit senior adults are senior centers, community-service groups such as United Way, faith-based organizations, with newspaper ads, and through personal contacts.

Intergenerational programs are a very important resource in the development of cohesive communities. Senior adults and their life experiences are very beneficial to young children and their development into tomorrow’s leaders. Intergenerational programs

- expose young children to more diverse people,
- help young children to appreciate and respect senior adults,
- support children’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development,
- applaud the contributions of senior adults within their communities,
- offer care and opportunities for growth,
- validate the importance of all stages of life, and
- bridge the gap between the young and the young at heart.

Positive intergenerational contact may be an especially important facet for supporting mental health, including emotional, social, and spiritual growth. Both young children and senior adults are experiencing a variety of changes in their development.

### Intergenerational Books for Young Children

References

Selected Resource Agencies and Organizations for Intergenerational Programs
AARP
www.aarp.org
Dedicated to enhancing quality of life for all in the aging process. Leads positive social change and provides members with information, advocacy, and service.

Center for Intergenerational Learning
http://templecil.org
Located at Temple University, dedicated to strengthening communities by bringing generations together.

Experience Corps
www.experiencecorps.org
Americans older than 55 years tutor and mentor children in urban public schools across the country.

Generations Incorporated
www.generationsinc.org
Nonprofit organization committed to intergenerational awareness through clubs, after-school activities, and other programs.

Generations Together
www.gt.pitt.edu
Promotes intergenerational activity as a positive force in society, as a professional field, and as a rewarding area of academic inquiry. A program of the University of Pittsburgh.

Generations United
www.gu.org
Provides resources and networking for organizations promoting intergenerational strategies, programs, and policies.

Intergenerational Programs and Aging
http://intergenerational.cas.psu.edu
Program developed at The Pennsylvania State University aims to increase cooperation, interaction, or exchange between any two generations.

Rainbow Bridge
www.rainbowb.org
Facilitates the matching of volunteers, including youth, adults, and families, who become companions, advocates, and families for nursing home elders who have little or no visitation.
Put These Ideas Into Practice!

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Settings for intergenerational programs

Intergenerational relationships can blossom through interactions in:
- senior care homes
- early childhood settings
- shared facilities

Senior adults and young children share many common characteristics, including:
- changes in development,
- need for companionship, and
- the desire to be understood.

Changing life stages link young children and seniors

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Personal development. Senior adults can model skills such as sharing, self-control, and friendly interactions. Senior adults often realize greater self-esteem as well as happiness. Both children and the adults gain new perspectives and topics for conversation.

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.