

The Benefits of Intergenerational Programs

Introduction

In 1963 the first widespread intergenerational program, the Foster Grandparent Program, was created as a component of the “war on poverty.” The program’s primary purpose was to provide opportunities for low-income persons aged 60 and over to provide supportive one-to-one services to children with special or exceptional needs while reducing isolation and poverty among the elders. Since that time, intergenerational programs have evolved to include people of multiple ages and address a broad array of social concerns. Topics covered through intergenerational programming include changes in family structure, drug use, violence, and bridging stereotypes and cultural differences. Generations United, the national organization focused solely on improving lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational strategies, is the central source of information on intergenerational programs and maintains an on-line directory of programs from around the world.



Photo: Juliann Joerres

What Are Intergenerational Programs?

Intergenerational Programs are social vehicles that offer younger and older generations the opportunities to interact and become engaged in issues concerning our society.¹ These programs purposefully bring together people of different generations in ongoing, mutually beneficial, planned activities, designed to achieve specified program goals. Through intergenerational programs people of all ages share their talents and resources, supporting each other in relationships that benefit both the individuals and the community. Successful programs are based on reciprocity, are sustained and intentional, and involve education and preparation for all ages. Young and old are viewed as assets not problems to be solved.

Why Intergenerational Approaches?

Older People as a Resource:

Americans over the age of 65 volunteer more time, an average of 96 hours per year, than any other segment of the population and are often the most reliable and committed volunteers.² The estimated dollar value of the volunteer time of American adults through volunteer activities and time spent caring for family members in 2000 was

equivalent to \$239 billion dollars.³ This is, however, a largely untapped volunteer pool with only 24.8% of older adults volunteering in 2005.⁴ However, older Americans do not just want to volunteer at things that take up their time, they, like young people, want meaningful and substantial volunteer opportunities.⁵

Youth as a Resource: Younger volunteers are able to provide companionship to older people and participate in service projects both to assist older adults and to serve alongside older adults to benefit their community. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, 38% or an estimated 10.6 million students reported that they have participated in community service.⁶ Youth volunteering is at record levels, they are more likely to be very engaged in their communities than their predecessors.⁷

The Aging Population: The U.S. population age 65 and over is expected to double in size within the next 25 years. By 2030, almost 1-out-of-5 Americans, some 72 million people will be 65 years or older. The age group 85 and older is now the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population.⁸

“Somehow we have to get older people back close to growing children if we are to restore a sense of community, a knowledge of the past, and a sense of the future.”

~ Margaret Mead

Changes in Views of Retirement: 50% of Americans age 50 to 70 are interested in taking jobs – now and in retirement – that help improve quality of life in their communities.⁹

Change within Families: Family members are living further apart from each other and are losing their natural intergenerational composition.

Age Segregation and Isolation Among Generations: Society has become more age-segregated, providing very little opportunity for interaction between the generations. Intergenerational programs provide a venue for regular contact, while encouraging people of different generations to advocate for one another.¹⁰

Gaps in Services Provided to Children and Youth: There is a strong need for tutors, role models, mentors and creative programs for children and youth in urban and rural communities.

Gaps in Services Provided to Older People: Increasing numbers of older people with varying supportive needs will require more innovative adult care programs.

Examples of Intergenerational Programs

Young Serving Old: Friendly visiting in homes or senior living facilities; home services; teaching computer skills or English as a second language; and service learning projects such as oral histories.

Older Adults Serving the Young: Mentoring programs; child care centers with older adult staff or volunteers; teen parenting guidance; tutoring and telephone reassurance.

Older Adults and the Young Serving Together: Performing/visual arts programs; family support programs; environmental preservation and community service.

Older Adults and the Young Sharing Sites: Intergenerational community centers; childcare centers in senior housing and senior centers in schools and libraries.

Benefits for Older Adults

Studies show that active and engaged older adults remain in better health. Older adults who volunteer live longer and with better physical and mental health than their non-volunteering counterparts.¹¹

Enhance Socialization: Older adults want to remain productive and engaged in the community. A way to prevent isolation in their later years is to increase interaction with children and youth.¹² Forty-five percent of Americans working in retirement say they want to work with youth.¹³

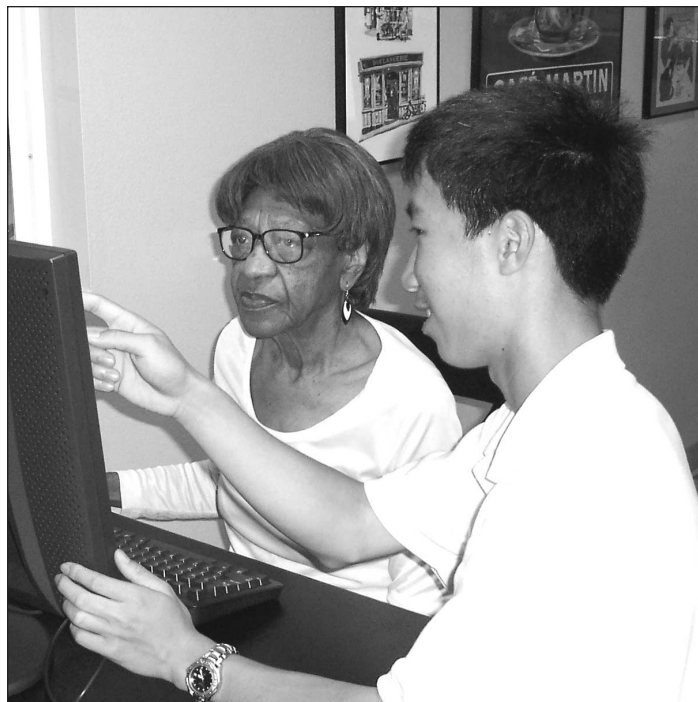


Photo: Martha Spinks

Stimulate Learning: Older adults learn new innovations and technologies from their younger counterparts. They want to continue to use the skills they have acquired in their lifetimes as well as acquire new ones. Motivation and commitment to intergenerational programs comes when they feel they have taken part in their development.¹⁴

Increase Emotional Support: Regular participation in structured social and productive activities and membership in large social networks have been shown to independently benefit health and functional outcomes as people age.¹⁵

Improve Health: Older adults who regularly volunteer with children burn 20% more calories per week, experienced fewer falls, were less reliant on canes, and performed better on a memory test than their peers.¹⁶ Also, older adults with dementia or other cognitive impairments experience more positive effect during interactions with children than they did during non-intergenerational activities.¹⁷

Benefits for Youth and Children

Volunteerism and civic engagement among youth is very strong today. Being involved in the community has many benefits including developing skills, values, and a sense of empowerment, leadership, and citizenship.

Improve Academic Performance: Children build their foundation for reading and related activities from kindergarten through third grade, playing an important role in literacy development.¹⁸ In schools where older adults were a regular fixture (volunteers working 15 hours per week) children had more improved reading scores compared to their peers at other schools.¹⁹

Wherever there are beginners and experts, old and young, there is some kind of learning going on, some kind of teaching. We are all pupils and we are all teachers.

~ Gilbert Highet



Photo:Richard Derwald

Enhance Social Skills: Interacting with older adults enables youth to develop social networks, communication skills, problem-solving abilities, positive attitudes towards aging, a sense of purpose and community service.²⁰ Volunteering also promotes good self-esteem. Young children who interact with older adults in a co-located facility, or shared site, experienced higher personal and social development by 11 months compared to children in non-intergenerational facilities.²¹

Decrease Negative Behavior: Youth involved in intergenerational mentoring programs are 46% less likely to begin using illegal drugs, 27% less likely to begin using alcohol, and 52% less likely to skip school.²²

Increase Stability: Children and youth gain positive role models with whom they can interact on a regular basis. They develop many positive relationships to civic attitudes and behaviors including volunteering habits, sense of efficacy and trust.²³

Benefits for the Community

Strengthen Community: Intergenerational programs bring together diverse groups and networks and help to dispel inaccurate and negative

stereotypes. Sharing talents and resources help to create a unified group identity. Children, youth, and older adults are less alienated while the community recognizes that they can be contributing members of society. These programs also help preserve historical and cultural traditions, enhance community spirit and strengthen partnerships among community organizations and individuals.

Maximize Human Resources: Intergenerational community service programs can multiply human resources by engaging older adults and youth as volunteers in different types of opportunities and populations.

Encourage Cultural Exchange: Intergenerational programs promote the transmission of cultural traditions and values from older to younger generations, helping to build a sense of personal and societal identity while encouraging tolerance.

KNOW THE FACTS...Common Misconceptions about Intergenerational Programs

Myths

Facts

You just need to bring young and old together for instant intergenerational magic

Preparation, planning and training are necessary to successful intergenerational programs and must be used to prepare young and old for the experience.

Older adults are not interested in volunteering with children and youth.

59% of Americans over age 55 currently volunteer and say retirement is a time to be active and involved in the community, to start new activities and set new goals.²⁴

Young people admire people in the media most (athletes and entertainers)

When asked to name someone they admire, 18-25 year olds are twice as likely as older Americans to name a family member, teacher, or mentor. ²⁵

Only a parent can effectively teach a child values

Connectedness to another adult, such as a mentor is highly effective in helping youth .²⁶

Maximize Financial Resources: When groups representing young and old approach local funders, they have a better chance of response because funders can see a broader use of their investments. Intergenerational programs can save money and stretch scarce resources by sharing sites and/or resources.

Expand Services: Intergenerational community service programs can expand the level of services to meet more needs and address more issues.

Inspire Collaboration: Intergenerational programs can unite community members to take action on many different types of issues that address human needs across the generations.

Conclusion

Research shows that when the generations come together everyone benefits, children and youth, older adults and the community at large. There are clear positive outcomes for all involved. Children are exposed to their elders' traditions and wisdom. And because of these interactions, adults are able to expand their social networks and stay physically active, which betters their health outcomes. Communities benefit when all are engaged and feel included. Intergenerational programs help to dispel age-related myths and stereotypes. They can also address societal concerns such as literacy, environmental issues, health, crime prevention, and much more. Public policies can support intergenerational programs through the promotion of intergenerational civic engagement and encouragement of intergenerational solutions to community issues. Connecting generations through programs and public policies makes sense. Together we are stronger.

**generations
united**

Because we're stronger together

Generations United (GU) is the national membership organization focused solely on improving the lives of children, youth, and older people through intergenerational strategies, programs, and public policies. GU represents more than 100 national, state, and local organizations and individuals representing more than 70 million Americans. Since 1986, GU has served as a resource for educating policymakers and the public about the economic, social, and personal imperatives of intergenerational cooperation. GU acts as a catalyst for stimulating collaboration between aging, children, and youth organizations providing a forum to explore areas of common ground while celebrating the richness of each generation

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The GU website at www.gu.org contains additional information about intergenerational programs and public policy including the on-line intergenerational program directory.

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¹ Generations United (2002). *Young and Old Serving Together: Meeting Community Needs Through Intergenerational Partnerships*. Washington DC

² Bureau of Labor Statistics. (December 2005). *Volunteering in the United States, 2005*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.

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⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics.

⁵ Butts, Donna M. (2003). "Intergenerational Service Learning and Volunteering". Edited by: Burlingame, Dwight F., *Philanthropy Across the Generations*.

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⁸ Butts, Donna M.

⁸ US Census (2006) <http://www.census.gov/Press->

⁸Release/[releases/archives/aging_population/006544.html](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/aging_population/006544.html)

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¹⁴ Butts, Donna M.

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²² Tierney, J.P. & Grossman, J.B. with Resch, N. (2000). *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.

²³ Corporation for National and Community Service (2006). *Youth Volunteering and Civic Engagement Survey*. Washington, DC: Author.

²⁴ Glass, T.A., Freedman, M., Carlson, M, et. al. (2004). Experience Corps: Design of an Intergenerational Program to Boost Social Capital and Promote Health. *Journal of Urban Health*, Vol. 81, No. 1, p. 94-105.

²⁵ The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (January 2007). *A Portrait of "Generation Next" How Young People View Their Lives, Futures and Politics*. Washington, DC: Author

²⁶ Tierney, J.P. & Grossman, J.B. with Resch, N.