

Generations in Partnership

Rewards of Intergenerational Activities



Everyone has potential to benefit when older adults and children come together in formal and informal activities. Older people feel useful, valued and connected to their communities. Children feel respected, appreciated and important. With increased contact, older people become more understanding of youth and children develop healthier attitudes about the aging process.

Introduction

Changes in family structure and the way we live have limited the contact that children and older adults have with one another. The segregation of the generations has a negative impact on individuals and on society as a whole. Children may develop negative attitudes and stereotypes of older people. Older people may develop negative attitudes and stereotypes of children. Social support networks may decrease. Children may become fearful of growing old. Older adults may become lonely and depressed.

As our population ages, developing intergenerational unity becomes particularly important. The significance of this task is underscored as political fights over scarce resources pit young and old against each other. Intergenerational activities provide a promising way to relieve tension among generations. Research has shown that intergenerational activities offer a wide variety of rewards. The benefits of intergenerational activities include:

- fostering cooperation and sharing,
- improving social skills,
- building friendships and social networks,
- enhancing self-esteem and morale,
- reducing stereotypes,
- improving attitudes about the aging process.

Activity Examples

Activities that work well with older adults and children typically include interactive, participatory activities where everyone is given an important role. Examples include:

- Teaching a game or skill to one another. For example, older people might teach an old-fashioned game, thereby providing a fun history lesson. Children might teach an activity they excel at, such as using computers.
- Sharing a meal and related activity, such as making ice cream or learning about different meal customs.
- Taking part in community service tasks, such as a neighborhood clean up.
- Participating in an arts and crafts project. The project should fit with individuals' skill level and give everyone a chance to lead and follow.
- Sharing favorite things, such as favorite memories, books, foods, games, songs, family stories or jokes.

Promote Healthier and Safer Lives

Tips for Success

- Let participants help plan the event to give them ownership in the outcome.
- Educate participants about each other:
 - Tell older adults about the skills and behaviors to expect from children.
 - Tell children that most older people live in homes just like their own (only about 4% of adults 65+ live in nursing homes).
- Give everyone a role in the activity.
- Choose interactive, participatory activities.
- Provide opportunities for each group to teach something to the other.
- Make participation voluntary

Resources

Kansas Intergenerational Network
132 South Main
Ottawa, KS 66067
(913)242-5466

Generations Together
university Center for Social & urban
Research
121 university Place, Ste 300
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
(412)648-7150

Generations United
c/o Child Welfare League
440 First St., NW, Ste. 480
Washington, D.C. 20001-2085
(202)662-4283

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Help Yourself While Helping Others

Intergenerational activities are sometimes promoted as a way to address important needs of elders and youth. Because in-home services for older people can be costly and hard to find, children might offer companionship and help with chores and light housekeeping. Similarly, as schools and youth programs face tight budgets, the growing population of healthy older adults might provide a variety of useful volunteer services. Volunteering to help elders and youth not only benefits these populations but provides rewards to the volunteers, such as an increased sense of fulfillment, opportunities to make friends, and a chance to learn or practice skills. Please note, however, that for these volunteer activities to be safe and successful, they should be arranged and overseen by experienced leaders.

Importance of Planning

Intergenerational activities appear useful and even essential to healthy families and a healthy society. Despite all the potential benefits of intergenerational activities, they can backfire if not well planned. For example, research has shown that children who visit nursing facilities without preparation often come away with more negative attitudes toward older adults and the aging process than those who don't take part in such visits. Simply getting the generations together is not sufficient to ensure a rewarding event. In fact, it may do more harm than good. Careful planning, along with knowledge of the needs and abilities of the participants, is essential to the success of intergenerational activities.

Developmental Assets

The Search Institute, based in Minneapolis, MN, has identified 40 skills, experiences and beliefs that it calls "Developmental Assets." The Search Institute considers the developmental assets to be the "building blocks of healthy development." Examples of the 40 developmental assets that may be fostered by intergenerational activities are:

- **Community Values Youth:** The young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
- **Youth as Resources:** The young person is given useful roles in the community.
- **Service to Others.** The young person serves the community one hour or more per week
- **Adult Role Models.** The young person sees parents and others model positive, responsible behavior.
- **Caring.** The young person places high value on helping others.
- **Cultural Competence.** The young person has knowledge of, and comfort with people of different backgrounds.

Helping Adults and Kids Build Relationships

Most of the 40 developmental assets are built through positive relationships. While family and peers are key, there is a third type of relationship - friendships between adults and kids who aren't related to each other - that is often overlooked as critical to development. These cross-age friendships (some people use the term "intergenerational") are key to asset building whether or not people have strong family and peer ties. They can provide both youth and adults with support, new perspectives, and sensitivity to the needs of people of different ages. Here are some suggestions for how to nurture these relationships for yourself and others:

Building Your own Intergenerational Relationships

- Make a commitment to connect and spend time with at least one person who is significantly older or younger than you are. One resource for ideas on things to do together is Search Institute's booklet, *Creating Intergenerational Community: 75 ideas for Building Relationships Between Youth and Adults* (published in 1996).

Encouraging Others to Build Intergenerational Relationships

- Encourage people of all ages to offer spontaneous gestures of support to one another. These are simple, easy things to do, such as calling people by name, smiling at them, asking them about their day, and spending a few moments talking to them.
- Support and encourage mentoring programs in your community. Mentoring programs carefully match caring adults with young people and encourage them to build relationships.
- Take advantage of congregations' natural intergenerational community. Encourage congregations to plan events that include people of all ages.
- Encourage and train older people in the community to view themselves and act as "elders." Discuss the important role that older people have in the lives of young people.
- Identify and celebrate people, places, and programs that connect old and young, adults and youth, teenagers and children. Encourage others to emulate these successful intergenerational connections.
- Organize intergenerational community service projects, such as cleaning up a local park or preparing a meal for a shelter.
- Find mutually beneficial ways to bring together people of many different ages for growth and learning, such as intergenerational music or theater groups, support groups, community education classes, or walking clubs.

The developmental assets are 40 opportunities, skills, relationships, values, and self-perceptions that all young people need to succeed. From *Pass It On! Ready to Use Handouts for Asset Builders*, copyright 1999 by Search Institute, 700 South Third Street, Suite 210, Minneapolis, MN 55415 (612)376-8955; (800)888-7828; www.search-institute.org. This handout may be reproduced for educational, noncommercial uses only (with this copyright line). All rights reserved.

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