

The Benefits of Intergenerational Programs

INTRODUCTION

In 1963 the first intergenerational program, the Foster Grandparent Program, was designed 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 in health, education, welfare, or related settings to help alleviate the physical, mental, or emotional problems of children with special or exceptional needs. Since that time, intergenerational programs have evolved to 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 (GU) is the only national organization focused solely on promoting intergenerational strategies and currently maintains a database of over 350 intergenerational programs from around the country.

WHAT ARE INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS?

Intergenerational programs are defined as activities that increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between any two generations.¹ These programs purposefully bring together people of different age groups in ongoing, mutually beneficial, planned activities, designed to achieve specified program goals. Intergenerational programs provide children, youth, and older adults with opportunities to volunteer while contributing meaningfully to society.² At the same time, intergenerational programs are designed to provide a supportive environment conducive to supporting emotional, intellectual, and social growth and physi-



“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

cal activity. Intergenerational programs may take many forms but all demonstrate benefits across the ages.

WHY INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACHES?

- **Older People as a Resource:** Senior service may be utilized in many non-traditional organizations and raises public awareness of the value of older adult volunteers.
- **Youth as a Resource:** Younger volunteers are able to provide companionship to older people and participate in service projects to assist older adults and other community members.
- **The Aging Population:** There will be twice as many Americans over the age of 65 by 2030 than there were in 1990.
- **Changes in Views of Retirement:** 80% of older Americans do not plan to retire in a traditional manner³. Many retirees choose to volunteer now that they are not working.
- **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 intergenerational interaction.

- **Gaps in Services Provided to Children and Youth:** There is a strong need for tutors, role models, and mentors.
 - **Gaps in Services Provided to Older People:** Increasing numbers of older people with varying supportive service needs will require more innovative adult care programs.
- 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 and not problems to be solved.

TYPES OF INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING

Young Serving the Old

EXAMPLES

Friendly visiting in homes or senior living facilities, chore/maintenance service, and teaching computer skills or English as a second language.

Old Serving the Young Young and Old Serving

Mentoring programs and child care centers with older adult staff and volunteers.

Together

Performing/visual arts programs, family support programs, environmental preservation, and community service.

Young and Old Sharing Sites

Intergenerational community centers, childcare centers in senior housing, and senior centers in schools.

BENEFITS OF INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR THE COMMUNITY

- **Strengthens Community:** Intergenerational programs bring together diverse groups and networks and help to dispel inaccurate 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 are contributing members of society.
- **Maximizes Human Resources:** Intergenerational community service programs tend to multiply human resources by engaging older adults and youth as volunteers.
- **Maximizes Financial Resources:** When groups representing young and old approach local funders, those funders are more likely to respond positively because they can see broad-based community support. Intergenerational programs can save money and stretch scarce resources by sharing sites and/or resources.

- **Expands Services:** Intergenerational community service programs can expand the level of services to meet more needs and address more issues.
- **Encourages 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.
- **Inspires Collaboration:** Intergenerational programs can unite community members to take action on public policy issues that address human needs across the generations.

BENEFITS OF INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

- **Enhances Social Skills:** Interaction with older adults enhances communication skills, promotes self-esteem, develops problem-solving abilities, and fosters friendships across generations. Positive attitudes are developed regarding sense of



“The way we treat our children in the dawn of their lives and the way we treat our elderly in the twilight of their lives is a measure of the quality of a nation.”

— Hubert Humphrey



purpose and community service. Additionally, youth involved in mentoring programs have been shown to be almost one-third less likely to hit others.⁴

- **Improves Academic Performance:** Intergenerational programs increase school attendance and performance. Students tutored by older adults made significantly greater gains in achievement test scores than other students.⁵
- **Decreases Drug Use:** Youth involved in intergenerational mentoring programs are 46% less likely to report the initiation of drug use, and among minority youth that statistic increased to 70%.⁶
- **Increases Stability:** Children and youth gain positive role models with whom they can interact on a regular basis. Older adult volunteers help to provide children and youth with consistency through mentoring and in child care facilities that average a 25-35% turnover rate.⁷

BENEFITS OF INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAM FOR OLDER ADULTS

- **Enhances Socialization:** Older adults remain productive, useful, and contributing members of society. They increase interaction with children and youth and engage more with one another to prevent isolation in later years.
- **Stimulates Learning:** Older adults learn new innovations and technologies from their younger counterparts.
- **Increases Emotional Support:** Intergenerational programs afford older adults an opportunity to participate in a meaningful activity. This decreases loneliness, boredom, and depression while increasing self-esteem. Older volunteers report more enriched lives, a rejuvenated sense of purpose, and increased coping skills for their personal struggles.⁸
- **Improves Health:** Helping contributes to the maintenance of good health, and can diminish the effect of psychological and physical diseases and disorders.

KNOW THE FACTS...

common misconceptions about intergenerational programs.

Myths

Instant Intergenerational Magic: No preparation is required for young and old to have successful interactions

Older adults are not interested in volunteering

Children admire people in the media most (athletes, movie stars, rappers and rock stars)

Children that grow up in single parent or foster homes are doomed

Facts

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

47.5% of Americans over age 55 currently volunteer and 83% see volunteering and community service playing a role in retirement¹⁰

80% of children named their parents and 19% named their grandparents as the people that they admired most¹¹

Connectedness to another adult, such as a mentor, is highly effective in helping youth¹²

- ¹ National Council on the Aging
- ² Larkin, E. & Newman, S. (1997). Intergenerational Studies: A Multi-Disciplinary Field. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* (28), p. 5-16.
- ³ Freedman, M. (1999). *Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America*. New York: Public Affairs
- ⁴ Public/Private Ventures (2000). *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*. New York: Public/Private Ventures
- ⁵ Strom, R. & Strom, S. (1999). *Establishing School Volunteer Programs. In Intergenerational Programs: Understanding What We Have Created*. Binghamton: The Hayworth Press
- ⁶ Kuehne, V. (ed.)
- ⁶ Public/Private Ventures (2000). *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*. New York: Public/Private Ventures
- ⁷ Larkin, E. (1999). The Intergenerational Response to Childcare and After-School Care. *Journal of the American Society on Aging* (22), 4, p. 33-36.
- ⁸ Rogers, A. & Taylor, A. (1997). Intergenerational Mentoring: A Viable Strategy for Meeting the Needs of Vulnerable Youth. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* (28), p. 127-140.
- ⁹ Luks, A. & Payne, P. (1991). *The Healing Power of Doing Good: The Health and Spiritual Benefits of Helping Others*. New York: Fawcett Columbine
- ¹⁰ Hart, P.D. (1999). *The New Face of Retirement: Older Americans, Civic Engagement, and the Longevity Revolution*. San Francisco: Civic Ventures
- ¹¹ Nickelodeon (1999). Inside kids: The World According to Kids (3),1.
- ¹² Public/Private Ventures (2000). *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*. New York: Public/Private Ventures



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The GU web site at www.gu.org contains additional information about intergenerational programs.

Generations United • GU is the national membership organization focused solely on promoting intergenerational strategies, programs, and policies. GU represents more than 100 national, state, and local organizations representing more than 70 million Americans. It is the only national organization advocating for the mutual well-being of children, youth, and older adults. GU serves as a resource for educating policymakers and the public about the economic, social, and personal imperatives of intergenerational cooperation. GU provides a forum for those working with children, youth, and older adults to explore areas of common ground while celebrating the richness of each generation.

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