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Bridging the Gap: Intergenerational Programs

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*Said the little boy, "Sometimes I drop my spoon,"
Said the old man, "I do too!"
The little boy whispered, "I wet my pants."
"I do that too," laughed the old man.
Said the little boy, "I often cry."
The old man nodded, "So do I."
"But worst of all," said the little boy,
"It seems grown-ups don't pay attention to me."
And he felt the warmth of the wrinkled old hand.
"I know what you mean," said the old man.*

-- Shel Silverstein

Meaningful contact between older adults and young people in the United States has become increasingly uncommon. Only in rare instances do grandparents live with their children and grandchildren under the same roof — or even in the same town.

Because there is so little interaction between the generations, young people often don't understand the needs and abilities of older adults, and older adults often forget the positive emotional benefits of being around young children.

Intergenerational programs allow older people to do valuable work in human service fields that face huge labor shortages. And they give old and young alike the chance to experience meaningful, caring relationships.

In an effort to bring old and young together, many child care facilities and senior citizen housing centers have developed intergenerational programs.

Many more will follow if Congress passes the bill recently introduced into the U.S. Senate calling for the establishment of "Grand Care" programs. These programs would recruit and train older adults to serve as child care providers.

Intergenerational programs can take many forms. Examples include child care centers established in senior center housing, child care centers with older adults on staff, intergenerational care centers, older adults who take children into their homes as home-based providers, and "phone friend" connections to name a few. Whether in a formal or informal setting, bringing the generations together benefits everyone.

Intergenerational programs allow children to:

- Learn first-hand about the skills and physical capabilities of older persons;
- Learn that not all older people are alike;
- See positive role models of aging adults;
- Feel more secure about being home alone when paired with an older adult as a phone friend or neighborhood partner;
- Learn how to handle situations and emotions they face today by listening to an older adult talk about past experiences;

- Learn skills that would be lost if not passed down from generation to generation (carpentry, storytelling, quilting, etc.).

Intergenerational programs allow older adults to:

- Meet people with common interests;
- Develop new child rearing skills to use with their own grandchildren;
- Achieve a sense of fulfillment by passing on life experiences and skills to others;
- Earn extra income or make a valuable volunteer contribution.

National issues that affect both older adults and children

Approximately 25 percent of the American population is 50 years of age or older, and this percentage is increasing. Older adults represent every economic level. Although 85 percent of those over age 65 have adequate incomes, poverty is a fact of life for many elderly.

Many elders are concerned about their communities and take action as shown by the high percentages of people over 50 years of age who vote and volunteer.

Many older adults were born near the turn of the century, and the changes in society (technology, gender roles, work environments, etc.) have been far-reaching and rapid.

Values may be different and ways of living day to day have altered due to economic or societal demands.

We are a mobile society. Many older adults do not live close to their adult children or grandchildren.

Older adults as child care providers

There are several possible ways to plan intergenerational programs. With each model, funds are necessary to manage, organize and administer the program. Some of the options include:

- Developing after-school child care in schools, senior centers or other group sites for children who would otherwise be home alone. (It might be necessary to organize transportation for the older adults.)
- Recruiting older adults to care for children in their homes or the homes of the older adults.
- Organizing a group of older adults to be "phone friends" for children who are home alone.

Planning intergenerational programs

Intergenerational experiences can be arranged in formal settings such as child care facilities or informally between parents, grandparents and children.

For these arrangements to work, the people involved must all be committed to the basic need for intergenerational programs.

There are various programs with an intergenerational focus across the nation. Experience shows that a great deal of recruitment and encouragement with older adults is necessary.

Some project leaders indicate that older adults are not as comfortable with infants and school-age children as they are with older preschoolers, particularly at first.

Older adults will need training and supervision. They may prefer to ease into a new setting by working part-time or as substitutes.

Don't assume that just because someone has raised a family, she or he has an interest in being with children, or has the skills to care for and teach individual or groups of children.

Older adult employees should receive the same compensation and benefits as younger workers. Payment for work, scheduling flexibility, and opportunities for advancement should be equitable.

Planning for intergenerational opportunities should be a two-way process considering the needs and emotions of all participants.

Consistency is important to older adults and to children. Children become confused, and trust waivers when too many adults come into and then leave their lives.

If a child has a relationship with an older person who becomes ill, he or she cannot just disappear from the child's life without comment. Discuss the situation with the child, and give the child an opportunity to express his or her feelings about it.

Demography

The first step in planning an intergenerational program is to analyze local demographics. Use a map of your area to see where older adults live, work and socialize in the community. What are the primary age breakdowns? What transportation is available to older adults? What current support systems are available.

Community support

In the planning process, be sure to involve elder care and child care providers, older adults, service organizations and agencies. Gaining community support is critical. To gain that support, you may have to explain the benefits of intergenerational programs to the child care professionals, service agencies, community leaders and parents involved.

Begin by breaking down the stereotypical notions of older people. Myths may include:

- Older people are unable to accept changes in routine.
- Older people are insecure about going back to work and about working with children.
- Older people are willing to do any child care related task (in other words, an older person would be happy to just stand around and watch the kids play as opposed to actively working with the children).

Some of these outmoded notions might be replaced with facts such as these:

- Child care is a new phenomena for this generation of adults.
- Older workers are generally on time, not deterred by weather, and eager to work.
- Older workers generally have a strong work ethic.

The hiring process

One option is to start older adults at the same wage as a teacher's aide, interview them for positions, require the presentation of character references, and require a criminal records check.

Pre-service training is generally planned prior to hiring in order to screen for those who need more information before making a commitment to this type of work.

After an initial recruitment and orientation, a second group of "grand workers" can then train a new group.

The training should include:

- An overview of the developmental stages of the children in the program;

- Outline of a typical day;
- Situations that could arise and how to handle them;
- Philosophies or strategies for discipline;
- Regulations, staffing patterns, on-site observation (at least one-half of a day);
- Discussion of on-site observations;
- Specifics on quality child care;
- Procedures in the next step toward employment.

You can recruit older adults by distributing fliers, placing ads in the newspaper — particularly the senior section, hanging announcements on doors, speaking to various community groups and through "word of mouth."

In your recruitment materials, explain that there will be training. Stress the importance and value of the work in addition to the need. In publicity, use photographs of older adults involved with various ages and races of children in activities.

Tips for success

Make the program environment as comfortable as possible; consider the needs of both children and adults. Draw upon community resources when available — start small and build. Recognition of successful efforts is important. Plan ways to recognize volunteers and paid staff who contribute time and effort!

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Support groups

- GAP: Grandparents as Parents, 2801 Atlantic Avenue, Long Beach, Calif. 90801
213-595-3151
- Generations United, National Council on Aging
202-479-6604
- Intergenerational Activities Program Training video, Intergenerational Program Resources, Broome County Child Development Council, Inc., Binghamton, N.Y.

For further information on grandparents raising grandchildren

- AARP Grandparent Information Center, Social Outreach and Support, 601 E. Street, NW, Washington, D.C.
20049
202-434-2296
- Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, PO Box 104, Colleyville, Texas 76034
817-577-0435

- Second Time Around Parents, Family and Community Services of Delaware County, 100 W. Front Street, Media, Pa. 19063
215-566-7540

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