



Why We Need Intergenerational Programs

Written by Andrea Fonte Weaver, Founder & Executive Director of Bridges Together Inc.

One of the biggest issues for the 21st century is the “greying” of our world. By 2050, in most countries including the United States, there will be more adults over the age of 65 than children under the age of 15. Societies have not previously been confronted with such great demographic change. Some challenges are easily foreseen, others not. In any case, it is likely that such change will have serious implications for many facets of our lives. We are not prepared for this change.

We live in a world in which a proverbial “perfect storm” is developing. This storm is degrading precious formal and informal opportunities for multiple generations to have meaningful relationships with one another.

Elements of the “storm” include changes in demographics, family systems, mobility, economic issues and work patterns, technology, and the way we use our “free time.” The impact of these changes includes feelings of isolation, limited understanding of others’ needs, lack of trust and confidence with others.

One important outcome is that, despite increasing needs, fewer people are choosing careers involving older adults in both the social and for-profit world. The irony is that as our society ages, we need even more professionals to plan, support, and work with our older population. After World War II, Americans rallied to create a child/youth-friendly society with schools and playgrounds, pediatricians and child-focused products for purchase. We need to do the same for these Baby Boomers who are now transitioning as “older adults.” We are at the point where 10,000 Americans turn 65 every day. Diminishing interactions with children and youth means they are less able to share their experience, skills, and collective wisdom. This is a huge loss, not only for short-term social interactions, but arguably for cultural continuity itself.

Additionally, children are less able to learn from their elders. They do not benefit from the role models that older adults can be, especially in terms of the children envisioning themselves later on their own life journeys. Studies show that children who do not have regular interactions with older adults fear growing older. Study after study shows that our attitudes about aging affect our health and other outcome later in life. We can then deduce that if children do not interact with older adults, they fear getting older and this will negatively impact their own quality and span of life.

We suggest that strategic intergenerational programs need to be part of the solution. Strong intergenerational programs provide opportunities for adults and children in skipped-generations to engage with one another through shared experiences. These programs are built upon an understanding

of human development, multiple intelligences and socio-emotional development theories. Importantly, they also integrate best practices of educational pedagogies, volunteer management and intergenerational programming.

Effective intergenerational programs reap many benefits for all involved, including the “middle generation” who are often leading the programs. Highlights of intergenerational programs include:

Empowering children to:

- Aspire to be healthful, active older adults
- Begin to explore career opportunities, especially relating to work with older adults
- Cultivate respect, interest and compassion for older people

Providing older adults with:

- Dedicated opportunities to share their wisdom, experience, and talents
- Experiences with children who bring so much joy, life, hope and acceptance

While some communities choose to design their own programs, they may save time, effort and resources by purchasing a published curriculum or hiring an intergenerational specialist to assist them. Bridges Together Inc. is a nonprofit dedicated to intergenerational programming. The organization provides consulting services and also has award-winning curricula available for purchase. All of these components can be customized to fit individual client/community needs and priorities. To find out more, go to www.BridgesTogether.org.

As we collectively consider the challenges and opportunities that children, families, and communities face, we must recognize the growing, very basic void that we now have without rich intergenerational relationships. We can then commit to creating intergenerational opportunities, including the approaches of Bridges Together, as one vehicle for addressing this key societal issue.