



Intergenerational Programs: What They Are and Why We Need Them

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By 2050, adults over the age of 65 will outnumber children under the age of 15. Currently, 10,000 Americans turn 65 each day; they can expect to live to be 85. These realities provoke critical questions: Who will design solutions to support these Baby Boomers? Who will care for them? How will relationships flourish in families and in the workplace?

Overview

Traditionally, many of us learned to respect and cherish elders within extended families and communities. Far from “feel-good,” these relationships transferred experience, tradition and wisdom. Today, however, for many reasons, there is a growing chasm between children and older adults. This has left the young without the motivation to reach out to older adults, and, subsequently, the old often are isolated. Few organizations are addressing this growing social problem.

The solution must include creating intergenerational (IG) programs that bring the old and young together for meaningful exchange. Rather than being “nice to have,” these programs are necessary. When done well, they benefit all participants. People of all ages are intellectually stimulated and re-examine what “growing old” means. Stereotypes are broken down. Compassionate friendships across generations are cultivated. Families and communities are strengthened. Most importantly, children discover that elders are valuable, interesting, knowledgeable and fun. Fond memories are imprinted on young hearts and minds, leading to lifelong personal and professional commitments to older adults. All of this is crucial given emerging demographic changes.

Bridges Together’s mission is to educate, empower and connect generations in order to transform lives today and tomorrow. The organization defines intergenerational programs as:

Intergenerational programs (IG) provide strategic opportunities for skipped generations to come together and engage in activities that support the whole-person development of all participants including the older adults, children and the staff. The activities are based on a flexible structure that allows participants to share and guide. They are often varied, incorporating the multiple intelligence and contemporary educational practices. The gatherings are set in an environment that is welcoming and supportive of the participants. IG programs may be one-time events, or

occur over several weeks or months. Ideally, the programs are organized by members of an IG Leadership Team with representatives from the different organizations.

The Problem

We now live in siloed communities – often with age-segregation that is a result of a confluence of societal changes, as detailed below. Moreover, the problem is amplified by changing demographics.

Family systems: We now have a variety of nuclear families, with less than half of American children living in a traditional two-parent family with a mother and father. This leads to many complexities with grandparents. In fact, some are calling for divorce custody agreements to include arrangements for grandparents. Some children may have eight sets of grandparents – raising many challenges and potentially, benefits. More families than ever before have multiple generations alive – up to six. Caring for everyone has raised many pressures. Middle-aged women have gone from being called “the sandwich generation” to “the panini generation” – they are squished. For the first time in history, parents spend more years in relationships with their adult children than they did raising their children. What does that look like? Studies have found that parent/adult child relationships have a significant impact on grandparent/grandchild relationships. The average grandparent/grandchildren visit just once every three weeks, less frequently than previous generations. On the rise are grandparents raising grandchildren which is also leading to a new, unspoken epidemic of children who become primary caregivers for disabled adults.

Physical space: After World War II, people began moving out of the triple-deckers and into spacious neighborhoods. Houses went from having one living room where people gathered to dens, family rooms and even great rooms. Scheduled activities resulted in eating in shifts at the table – or worse yet, eating on the go. Front porches were traded for private decks in the backyard. The “suburban sprawl” led to traveling by car – not on foot – which led to not seeing neighbors. Our loved ones began spending time in age-segregated spaces such as infant rooms of child care centers and over-55 housing communities. Second homes and timeshares emerged – often leading to diminished time with extended families.

Economics: One of the biggest economic shifts occurred in the 1970s with more nationalized employers and people moving in droves for their careers. Many adults who were born in this decade or the following ones grew up without grandparents nearby and are less comfortable with older adults. We have more families with parents working outside the home and more children in afterschool programs – so even if grandparents want to see the children, they can’t. Our children are in more structured activities, even on Sundays – a day traditionally reserved for resting and visiting. The repeal of the Blue Law finds many people working and shopping – not visiting. Older adults are working longer, many are semi-retired. This is part of why emerging adults, people between the ages of 18 and 25, are having a more difficult time finding meaningful employment. Another economic shift has been to office jobs in places where children are not welcome; very different from previous generations where children were free to stop by and spend time with tradesmen, being inspired and mentored.

Technology: We have wonderful new technology to link and assist us. Social media does afford us the opportunity to stay connected but often at more superficial levels. Tweeting about an event is not the same as talking about it over a meal. Many of us are often connected 24/7/365 at the cost of not being fully present to the people in our lives. Recently, at a Bridges Together training, college students told

their professors that they will take out their smartphones to avoid talking. Our young people are used to communicating via electronics and often lack the skills previous generations cultivated – in communications and elsewhere. With the ability to ‘Google’ or ‘Ask SIRI,’ people no longer are turning to the elders for their wisdom and know-how. This is possibly the tip of the iceberg of a huge shift of older adults no longer being considered “elders” – the wisdom keepers – because, as a society, we are placing such a high value on what is new, especially technology. Technology is being used to keep us alive longer, but at what cost? We are just beginning to grapple with the quality of life versus the quantity of years.

Growing Fears: Our children fear how they will do on the myriad of standardized tests that consume so much learning time. Emerging adults fear how they will afford college, pay off college debt and if or how they will obtain gainful employment. Our middle-agers fear how they will continue to simultaneously support loved ones both older and younger, financially and socially. How they will afford their children’s education and plan for their own retirement – which is now projected to last 10-15 years or more. Older adults are fearing what the next decades will bring for them, how they will age, who will assist them, how they will afford care. These adults are often afraid of how their culture (Values, Traditions, Food, Language, Techniques and Rituals, Music and Art, Clothing, Knowledge, Greater Community, and Instruments and Tools) will continue in future generations, and it’s exaggerated with limited time to teach. This fear is called cultural continuity. In the 1980s, “stranger danger” came into focus, increasing fears of strangers – especially of older men, a prejudice which continues today. This is part of a larger phenomenon of ageism. We have raised awareness and have begun to combat racism, sexism and so many other “-isms,” but we have not touched “ageism” which is ironic because hopefully, all of us will grow old, regardless of our gender, the color of our skin or all else. Studies have shown that if children do not have regular contact with an older adult by the age of six, they will develop fears of aging.

Demographics: The approximately 10,000 Americans who are turning 65 every day can expect to live about another 20 years. They have gained 30 years of life expectancy on their parents’ generation, much to their surprise. This is giving rise to a new phenomenon called “emerging adulthood” – a period from 18 to 25 years of age. Some of these emerging adults are taking a year to volunteer or travel, before or after college. They are also squeezing in graduate school and postponing marriage. Girls who were born in the 1990s can expect to live to be more than 100 years of age – into three centuries. Perhaps most surprising, in 2025, adults over the age of 65 will outnumber children under the age of 13. People in their 50s, predominantly women, are choosing to go back to school and change careers. And what comes after “retirement”? Baby Boomers – change agents who brought about the Civil Rights Movement and feminism – are paving the way for what some are calling The Third Age. What are we doing to prepare for the changing demographics?

The Solution

Intergenerational relationships are a vaccination against ageism and a prescription for longevity. They begin to rebuild the fabric of our lives and communities, returning the benefits previous generations knew and treasured.

Strong intergenerational programs empower youth to:

- Aspire to be active, healthful older adults.
- Begin career exploration – especially working with or for older adults.

- Create seeds of compassion and respect for elders.
- Develop stronger communication skills.
- Experience being treasured by an older adult.

Strong intergenerational programs empower older adults to:

- Engage with children in organized activities.
- Foster cultural continuity – helping to ensure that their values, traditions and expertise will continue in future generations.
- Garner time to reflect on their lives and share their knowledge and life stories.
- Help support a meaningful, active, rewarding, healthful lifestyle.

We must put on an intergenerational lens and cultivate a mindset that seeks opportunities to engage multiple generations – especially those on the bookends, our youngest and oldest. In doing so, problems are mitigated and experiences become richer.

We can review the categories above with an intergenerational lens:

Families: Grandparents and grand-friends can be invited into classrooms, strengthening family ties. Teachers can be encouraged and taught to give homework that requires children to interview a grandparent or elder in their circle of love. Studies have found that children who know their families' stories are more resilient and children whose grandparents are very involved with them are more successful in school. Some organizations are establishing a formal adopt-a-grandparent program where families are united with an elder. Structured intergenerational programs can foster relationships that continue beyond the meetings – often involving other members of the family and continuing for many years.

Physical space: The options are limitless. Some communities are designing and building housing or service agencies for people of different ages – like a preschool in an assisted living facility OR a community center that serves people across the lifespan. Others are creating avenues to engage people of different generations who frequent the building/organizations. Examples include: park & recreation attendees engaging with members of the senior center OR current students, professors and older alumni at a college OR teens and elder patrons at a library. Still others are creating opportunities to invite people of a different generation into their space. Assisted living having college students live there for free in exchange for volunteering OR a school cafeteria being used for adult cooking classes with the food being donated to a soup kitchen OR inviting community members into a school for a Community Read-Aloud Day.

Economics: Training is being provided on collaborating in the workplace with people in different generations. Older adults receive a stipend for volunteering, supplementing their incomes. Young people can be mentored by older workers. Some organizations are creating formal programs where youth assist elders for a fair wage or as volunteers building their job experience. When providing professional development trainings for professionals in aging services, the majority report that they had an older person who had a great impact on their young lives.

Technology: Skype and FaceTime are being used to facilitate long distance relationships in families and the workplaces. Reverse mentoring happens when young people teach older ones about how to use technology effectively.

Fears turned to hopes: We live in a society where positive representations of aging in mass media are lacking. However, participation in intergenerational programs not only debunks stereotypes of older adults, it also promotes healthy mindsets about aging. Studies show that intergenerational programs reduce children's fear of aging. One study showed that the Bridges: Growing Together program had a legacy effect – that several years later, high school students who had participated in elementary school, still held more positive attitudes about older adults. Many young people, staff and older adults who participate in intergenerational programs report that they have improved attitudes about “growing old.” Because research shows that our beliefs about aging impact our health and longevity, intergenerational opportunities are in everyone's best interest. Intergenerational connections provide a surefire way of improving lives today and tomorrow.

Because of all of these societal changes as well as the impact and promise of intergenerational programs, Bridges Together is committed to educating professionals on the urgency of establishing effective intergenerational programs and providing tools to do so: turn-key Bridges program curricula as well as comprehensive professional development opportunities. Over the past decades, we have cultivated the art and science of bringing generations together, enriching families, engaging communities and educating professionals. In doing so, we strengthen the fabric of our society, ensuring support for millions of elders and children today and tomorrow.