



Intergenerational Programs: The Missing Link in Today's Aging Initiatives

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Executive Summary:

In 2025, people over 65 years of age will outnumber youth under the age of 13. This fact, combined with other changing population demographics, is prompting a series of global and national initiatives to prepare for and respond to an aging society. Communities and organizations are becoming more “age-friendly”, professionals are looking for ways to reframe aging and raise awareness, schools are inviting older adults into the classrooms, and employers are introducing initiatives to improve multigenerational interactions.

Even with the recognition of the longevity dividend, serious efforts are needed to create intentional, intergenerational engagement. While age-friendly initiatives offer actionable solutions that can be implemented, they do not change the culture of ageism, and therefore are limited in their reach. And although innovative efforts to address and reframe aging are underway, these only target the attitudes of adults. The roots of ageism can be seen in children as young as three years of age, suggesting that earlier intervention is required. Current approaches do not adequately address how ageism and age segregation have played important roles in today's older adults being socially isolated, which often results in diminished physical and cognitive well-being. Finally, there are glaring gaps in the education of young people about the longevity dividend and how they can benefit from it, personally and professionally.

Intergenerational programs provide intentional opportunities for any skipped, non-adjacent generations to engage in activities that support the well-being of all involved.

Strong, organized, and purposeful intergenerational programming addresses all of these issues. Research tells us that intergenerational programs are a vaccination against ageism and a prescription for longevity.

The aging network is uniquely positioned to make intergenerational engagement a priority. When professionals in the longevity field unite generations in strong programs, they:

- Create opportunities for older adults to engage with young people. Intergenerational programs foster purpose and meaning, which can result in improved well-being and friendships, curbing isolation across the life span.

- Reverse ageism by exposing young people to positive stories about long, vibrant lives, which has a ripple effect on families, organizations, and communities.
- Inspire young people about the possibility of entering careers with older adults. After having experienced a rich relationship with someone 65+, youth are more likely to collaborate with and advocate for older adults in their own lives. Intergenerational programs also support young people's academic development by extending classroom learning, as well as socio-emotional development, especially with face-to-face communication skills.
- Empower older adults to become advocates and champions for younger people, improving their lives and experiences while stopping ageism against them.

Intergenerational efforts build and strengthen a culture in which people of all ages are welcomed and supported, helping to move a community forward from being age-friendly to truly age-integrated.

This report offers professionals in aging concrete steps they can take to support intergenerational approaches:

- **Fostering intergenerationally focused leadership** in your community. For example, convening a leadership team or task force that draws from constituencies of diverse ages strengthens all programming.
- **Providing opportunities** for casual and formal intergenerational encounters – from starting a public campaign encouraging people to get to know their neighbors to offering formal programming on a regular basis.
- **Establishing policies, procedures, and practices** that support intergenerational relationships – from having a mandatory line item for intergenerational training and/or programming to including “intergenerational programs” as a focus alongside existing nutrition and transportation programs.
- **Committing to share space and resources** – from opening up your foyer for chamber group practices to building a school with a lifelong learning center targeting adults 65+.
- **Cultivating an atmosphere of age-inclusion** beginning with helping people to identify their commonalities, and including “intergenerational engagement” as a core value in programming.

A comprehensive, multifaceted approach is needed to intergenerational work.

Professionals in the longevity field must create the infrastructure. Through intergenerational pathways and opportunities, positive aging truly becomes a life-long journey and age-integrated communities are fostered – places where growing up and growing old is both supported and celebrated.

The Promise of the Longevity Dividend

American population demographics are changing dramatically. Each day, 10,000 more Americans reach the age of 65 (Census, 2018). On average, they can expect to live about 20 more years. This phenomenon of healthy “bonus years” is called “The Longevity Dividend” (Olshansky, 2013). Longer lives for many people, thanks to advances in healthcare and well-being, are changing the make-up of our society. By 2025, there will be more people over the age of 65 than youth under the age of 13. This nation rallied to support Baby Boomers when they arrived after World War II. But as Baby Boomers have grown older, that support has languished, due in part to ageism and age segregation. Growing old and aging has developed a decidedly negative narrative which looks fearfully at the downsides and very little at the opportunities.

Ageism is “the ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and practices of individuals against persons or groups of a different age group” (Anti-Ageism Task Force in 2006). Frequently, beliefs underlying ageism are based on inaccurate information or overgeneralizing an individual trait to entire groups of people who are “young” or “old”. Ageism creates costs for individuals and society as a whole. Ageist discriminatory practices have impacted housing, education, employment, and services of all kinds (Butler, 1989; Butler, 2005; AGE Platform, 2009). And, perhaps even more troublingly, both older adults and adolescents internalize socio-cultural ageism and use the negative stereotype assigned to define themselves (Zebrowitz, L. A., & Montepare, 2000), which often results in health and longevity deficits (Levy & Banaji, 2002).

Age segregation refers to separating or segregating of people by age group. “Age segregation has increased over the last century. In the U.S., this societal process of peer grouping is prevalent in age cohorts in nursery school through college age and for older adults” (Freedman & Stamp, 2018). Growing age segregation is attributable to many factors from changes in how we use space (e.g., the growth of suburbs and 55+ communities) to changes in our social networks, economic changes, attitudes, use of technology, and the media (See North, 2012; Baer, 2015; Bodner et al, 2015, 15; Coughlin, 2018).

Research tells us that ageism and age segregation are debilitating and costly. And the impacts of internalized ageism are especially pernicious. For example, holding a negative attitude toward our own aging is “a risk factor for cognitive disorder in old age.” (Siebert et al, 2018). Ageism leads to diminished exercise and fitness and reduced effective health care delivery (Minichiello et al, 2000). Perceived isolation can negatively affect cognitive abilities and internalized ageism increases risk for memory loss and mental health declines (Cacioppo and Hawkey, 2009). Moreover, social isolation, which affects older and young people alike, has negative health impacts comparable to the effect of smoking 15 cigarettes per day (Levy et al, 2002). These are the pathways through which ageism and age segregation threaten to squander the longevity dividend.

North & Fiske warn in their paper “An Inconvenienced Youth? Ageism and its Potential Intergenerational Roots” that we are at a crossroads and relationships between the generations may lead to positive interdependence or increased tension.

In order to reap the benefits of the longevity dividend, global and national organizations are leading initiatives to support older adults and change the aging narrative. At the 2015 White House Conference on Aging, there was a call for “a culture change to

overcome stereotypes of aging and shift the perception of aging from a time of disability and disease into one of promise and possibility, the need for the public to transform its view of older adults as a drain on the economy to recognize them, instead, as a rich resource for tackling some of the country's most challenging societal problems" (WHCOA, 2015).

There is a growing recognition that intergenerational (IG) approaches are an effective pathway to achieving such a transformation of societal views. "Stronger, consistent relationships between old and young may form mutually respectful relationships that enhance the portrayal of older people as helpful societal allies" (North & Fiske, 2012). Moreover, by engaging members of a community across the age spectrum in a common purpose, barriers between individuals (and even within individuals) come down (Knight et al., 2014; Pettigrew, 2009; Pettigrew et al, 2011, 276; Drury, 2016; Thompson and Weaver, 2015).

The remainder of this paper discusses the details, mechanics, and evidence base supporting IG approaches, with particular emphasis on impacts of interest to the aging network. We then discuss some of the most familiar efforts to shift the conversation on aging - the age-friendly movement and reframing aging - and identify specific ways IG approaches can fill gaps left by these efforts. Finally, we describe some of the obstacles to greater dissemination and implementation of IG approaches, with an eye to identifying specific steps that would support IG practitioners and programming.

Intergenerational Approaches Can Help to Maximize the Longevity Dividend

Intergenerational programs provide intentional opportunities for any skipped/non-adjacent generations to engage in activities that support the well-being of all involved, including staff. They may take place in families, centers, or communities. They may focus on primarily supporting:

- youth (e.g. reading and tutoring programs like Experience Corps)
- older people (e.g. friendly visiting programs like Alzheimer Buddies)
- a third party (e.g. older adults and youth making bagged lunches for families in transition)
- or mutuality (e.g. the Bridges Together program curriculum where students and adults 60+ explore their family histories and then create projects together, exploring aging as a lifelong journey)

Regardless of who the "targeted beneficiary" is, it is important that the developmental goals of all participants are recognized (Weaver, 2015).

There is a continuum of intergenerational engagement. While often in the field we talk about intergenerational programming, the more appropriate focus is intergenerational engagement – recognizing that informal connections, especially in extended families are critical. Still, when we think about organized programming, there is a gamut that includes (Weaver, 2016):

- Learning about others – e.g., reading about people in the other age group or having a superintendent give a talk at a senior center.
- Caring for others – e.g., Scouts creating cards to be delivered with Meals-On-Wheels.
- One-time events – e.g., yard clean-ups or holiday parties.
- Short-term programs – e.g., a poetry group or athletic program.
- Long-term programs (often meet for the academic year or longer) – e.g., Alzheimer’s Buddies that pair up medical students with people who suffer from memory loss.

Intergenerational engagement has been shown to deliver benefits across the age spectrum, and along multiple dimensions of health and well-being.

A number of studies have documented how intergenerational engagement supports the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional well-being of older people. For example, increased activity and exercise through IG program participation has shown to help maintain cognitive health as well as physical fitness for older adults (Gomez-Pinilla, Hillman, 2013). Similarly, intergenerational programs improved cognitive performance in older adults, and prosocial behavior and communion goals in adolescents including a decrease in negative ageism in both the younger and older participants and therefore better health outcomes for both populations (Kessler & Staudinger, 2007). A 2014 study of the Intergenerational Reading Club and Intergenerational Storytime program found that they fostered “social interaction, cognitive stimulation, and quality of life for elder residents, some of whom are affected by dementia” (George & Wagler, 2014). Intergenerational programs promote social connectedness and socio-emotional health. Research indicates IG as a key health promoter among older people by decreasing the risk of social isolation and loneliness and engendering a greater sense of meaningfulness as well as increasing or maintaining their sense of coherence (Muryama et al, 2015). Research on grandparenting reinforces these findings - not only does engagement of skipped generations strengthen family bonds; it contributes to grandparents’ health. Having grandchildren to love and support allows grandparents to exercise their natural generativity which in turn, supports and improves grandparents’ health outcomes and sense of purpose (Hakoyama & Malone-Beach, 2013).

Research also suggests that intergenerational engagement reverses ageism and fosters positive ageism. Grandparents involvement with grandchildren can help the youngsters develop positive attitudes about aging and older adults. (North & Fiske, 2012; Christian, Turner, Larkin & Cotler 2014). A review of non-familial intergenerational interaction showed that IG interaction often promotes attitude change toward “the other”, social connectedness, service activities for younger adults, and older adults feeling purpose and valued (Knight et al, 2014). Similarly, contact between generations is shown to be “a preventative measure against ageism in young children and a solution for reversing ageism in young people who are afflicted. [Additional] studies have shown that reduced prejudice against one outgroup can even generalize to other outgroups that were not involved in the original contact” (Pettigrew, 2009, Pettigrew et al, 2011,

276). In essence, well-designed IG programs may allow participants to carry the reduction in prejudice from a positive outgroup contact and apply it to other interactions with outgroup individuals. A variety of intergroup prejudice types have been analyzed and Pettigrew and colleagues found that these prejudices were reduced by contact, “from subtle to blatant prejudices, and implicit association as well as direct measures” (2011).

Not all intergenerational programming is the same. It is important to note that the quality of engagement and quantity of encounters can affect the outcomes of the intergenerational programs. Often times, when intergenerational programs do not reduce young people’s fears of older adults and aging, it is often because the older participants confirmed prior stereotypes (North & Fiske 2012; Christian, Turner, Larkin & Cotler 2014). “Research suggests that there is the potential to develop close interpersonal relationships over time... where acquaintances empathize with one another, to disclose information of a personal nature to one another, to work on communication accommodation so that interactions are comfortable and enjoyable and to focus on what makes one another unique, will all help to generate positive, successful interactions” (Christian, Turner, Larkin & Cotler, 2014).

When we refer to ageism, it is most often to the ageism based on negative bias and grounded in fear. Conversely, there is positive ageism which connotes certain positive characteristics, privileges or opportunities to a particular group and it can be transmitted positively. IG programs can transform participating youth and older adults into positive ageism carriers who can transmit immunity to ageism to others (Drury, 2016). The shift to positive ageism in one relationship is shown to lead to positive changes in other negative biases.

Finally, research tells us that intergenerational contacts can give young people a more positive vision about aging and the longevity dividend. Having positive age stereotypes rather than negative age stereotypes in young adulthood predicts better health outcomes for young adults, such as age of first cardiovascular events (Levy, et al, 2009). Older individuals with more positive self-perceptions of aging, measured up to 23 years earlier, lived 7.5 years longer than those with less positive self-perceptions of aging (Levy et al, 2002). “Thinking positively about aging extends one’s life more than the longevity gained from low blood pressure or low cholesterol or by maintaining a healthy weight, abstaining from smoking and exercising regularly” (Kasl, 2002). The same has been found in Europe and Asia. Some studies have found that attitudes about aging are a predictor of health (Levy, 2009).

Intergenerational programs can engender a positive attitude in younger participants about the aging of others, which can continue after the program ends – a legacy effect – even for years (Thompson & Weaver, 2015, Aday et al, 1996). One unexpected benefit for young people with peers who have had intergenerational contact is that they (the friends) experience a mitigating effect in ageism as well (Pettigrew et al, 2011).

Intergenerational programs increase generational intelligence - “an ability to reflect and act, which draws on one’s understanding of one’s own and others’ life-course, family, social history, placed within a contemporary social climate” (Biggs et al., 2011). In another study, positive views of people in other age groups were more prevalent in participants with relationships with people outside of their generation. Without exposure

to other generations, often their grandchildren or grandparents, “there was greater reliance on assumptions and recognizable stereotypes” (Dow et al, 2016). “For young people who tend to be greater peer-segregated by nature in addition to societal effects, it opens the door for a greater appreciation of the lives and well-being of older adults” (Penick et al, 2014).

Given that there is a well-founded and growing, evidence base on the effectiveness of IG; it is perhaps surprising that we do not observe wider adoption. One reason may be that the field suffers from “pigeon-holing” - the notion that IG is limited to a single program or narrow approach. Another set of reasons may have to do with resource constraints and/or institutional rigidities. Whatever the causes, it is clear that applying a broader “lens” to our view of IG would result in tangible benefits. We turn now to two examples – the age-friendly movement and the Frameworks initiative – to explore how a more robust IG application could improve outcomes.

Age-Friendly Movement – An Opportunity to Spread Intergenerational Benefits to All Domains

Established by The World Health Organization, the Age-Friendly initiative outlines eight “domains” of “Livability Communities”: outdoor spaces, transportation, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and engagement, communication and information, community and health services. The initiative calls on leaders in each of these domains to enhance the quality of life of older adults and promote health, economic growth, and happiness as well as provide support for all of its members. The Age-Friendly movement has made valuable, tangible contributions in communities across the nation, and world in areas such as health, housing, and transportation. However, “intergenerational” is relegated to a single domain. In reality, though, “intergenerational” is a cross-cutting approach with which each domain can be supported and the needs of multiple members can be met. Broadening the role for intergenerational engagement in the Livable Communities framework, allows for a truly age-integrated community to develop. Those in the aging network are uniquely positioned to foster these possibilities. Some real-life examples of how this can be achieved include:

- **Outdoor spaces:** Start an IG community garden. Bring older people and young people from the area together, start growing fruits and vegetables, take the opportunity to develop social skills, cook together to support nutritional needs and/or share the produce with food pantries.
- **Transportation:** Hire, train, and pay young adults to provide transportation for older adults, including assistance with transitioning from door to door, like the organization named “Papa” is doing in Florida.
- **Housing:** Help older homeowners and tenants to provide lower rent for college and graduate students in exchange for assistance around the house, e.g. like the organization named Nesterly is doing in Boston.
- **Social participation:** Host an IG party or dinner at a community or cultural center. Invite people of all ages to come enjoy different activities and games.

Move around and dance. Have a diverse playlist with music from all decades and different parts of the world.

- **Respect and social inclusion:** Start an intergenerational program that purposefully unites adults 65+ and students. e.g. BRIDGES Program Curricula.
- **Civic participation & engagement:** Create volunteer and/or paid opportunities for older adults to work at schools and community organizations – assuring that there is proper training and ongoing support. e.g. Encore’s Gen2Gen program.
- **Communication & Information:** Unite older adults and young people to register people to vote and hold informational sessions on upcoming ballots.
- **Community & Health Services:** Invite vocational tech, community college, and medical school students to provide free check-ups to older adults in their housing or at the senior center. Services often include blood pressure or blood sugar checks as well as podiatry clinics. i.e. Ohio State University - School of Social Work.

By broadening the view captured by our “intergenerational lens,” we can strengthen community connections, enhancing quality of life across the age spectrum.

Reframing Aging – Start at the Roots

Eight national organizations sponsored the Frameworks Institute to conduct important research on ways to reframe the overwhelmingly negative narratives on aging that dominate our media and public discourse. A toolkit was created with tips on language and strategies. AARP is leading a “reframe aging” campaign and Dr. Bill Thomas is working to “disrupt and change the aging story”. And while all of these efforts are urgently needed, it is also true that all of these efforts are geared towards adults. The uncomfortable reality is this: research shows that children as young as age three have already internalized negative images of older adults (Montepare & Zebrowitz, 2002).

Despite the need for early intervention to prevent ageism, there are no intentional, youth-facing efforts or funding to address the problem of ageism before it takes root. Studies have found that some intergenerational programs do positively change young people’s attitudes about aging and older adults, and more research is needed to build a stronger evidence base for effective practices (Thompson and Weaver, 2015).

Looking back through history, major strides have been made through youth-facing interventions – think of vaccinating children, racial integration, anti-smoking campaigns, importance of recycling. The children become carriers – bringing information home to influence family members, and then grow-up to be adults putting the information into practice. The aging network can deploy this proven strategy to truly reframe aging in a way that resonates most strongly with individual communities and cultures. The most efficient and effective way to effect change is through the schools, where all young people can benefit – rather than through after-school or community-based programs where students opt-in and only selected subsets of a community participate.

IG Programs Can Educate and Empower Youth About Longevity

Efforts must be made to raise young people with positive images of aging so that there will not be a need to reframe aging. Young people are not being taught about the longevity dividend – the impact that will be had on every facet of our world, nor are they learning about the career opportunities that will develop in our future longevity economy. In fact, “In 2005, the U.S. Congress completely eliminated funding for geriatrics education and training. The programs had been funded at \$31.5 million 2005” (Anti-Aging Task Force, 2005). Students are not developing the soft skills of communicating effectively and collaborating with older people – skills which will be critical to success in the coming decades. Additionally, they are not being given the knowledge and opportunity to cultivate positive attitudes about their own aging – which can affect their health outcomes and length of years. The most effective way to bring this knowledge to youth is through careful intergenerational programming that engages older people and youth in exploring aging as a lifelong journey, for example, the Bridges Together Program Curricula (Weaver, 2015). External evaluation found that upon completion of the six-weeks Bridges Together program, 77% of elementary school students showed an improvement in their attitudes about aging (Gonzales, 2017). Additionally, there was a legacy effect that showed the positivity continued into high school (Thompson & Weaver, 2015). In a different study of undergraduate students who learned about “elderly people,” students who had direct interactions with older adults experienced more positive changes in attitudes than those who just studied or watched movies about older adults (Christian, Turner, Larkin & Cotler 2014).

Obstacles to Greater Adoption of IG

Over the past six years, Bridges Together (BT) has spoken with hundreds of intergenerational “champions” who call the organization saying they *definitely* want to start a program. The champions may be staff at senior centers, senior housing or intergenerational centers, teachers, principals or professors. BT explains that in order to have long term success, it is vital that they 1) establish an IG Leadership Team made up of colleagues who represent both the adults and young participants, 2) the teams should invest in formal training and follow-up coaching and 3) secure funding.

Following initial contact, approximately 10% of the champions were able to form a team over the next 12 months, *even when funding was available*. The main reason is that intergenerational engagement is not a priority. Some partners say they are too busy. Even in age-friendly communities, there are a list of priorities but intergenerational work is often relegated to the bottom, rather than being seen as a multi-purpose approach that can be adapted to meet many needs. Many traditional senior centers proclaim that the older crowd who come “don’t want to be around children.” In reality, councils on aging and senior centers are charged with caring for *all* of the adults 65+ in the community – and some of these folks definitely want to be with children. Also, some grandparents want to bring their grandchildren to the centers, but report that they don’t feel welcome. (This is another example of ageism at work.)

Even when all of the partners overcome these obstacles and are ready to proceed, securing funding for training and/or programming is often another challenge. Despite their effectiveness, intergenerational approaches are not always well-known. They do not fit nicely into funding categories like health needs for older adults, family support or arts and culture. Although a case can be made for any of these categories, funders often place a priority on traditional programming.

But more needs to be done to support intergenerational programming and practitioners, who often remain very isolated and under-resourced. In order to reap the societal benefits intergenerational approaches can offer, practitioners need a stronger community of practice. They need professional networks where they can learn from their peers, share their experiences or access formal, professional development.

Call to Action

While there are so many benefits that come from strong intergenerational programming, their promise can only be realized if committed champions, with support from public, private, and philanthropic sectors, make it happen. For the intergenerational specialists and champions, it can often feel like an uphill battle in a desert – until the moment when the young and old actually get together to celebrate at the oasis. The aging field has the most to benefit by investing in intergenerational efforts. The lives of elders today will be improved. Some of the problems of tomorrow will be prevented. A new generation of people will be raised up with positive attitudes about aging and comfort with older adults and they will be empowered to be change-agents on “the longevity frontier”. We also must broaden our scope of intergenerational relationships to include young(er) adults – even in their 30s and 40s – engaging with people 75+ (grandparents age).

It is in this hopeful spirit that we offer a “call to action” for aging professionals to consider:

- Including intergenerational engagement and approaches as a key component of all foci and efforts including leadership development programs, training, and activity programs.
- Assessing and promoting age diversity in the same way that racial or gender diversity is treated.
- Itemizing funding for intergenerational training and programming.
- Assuring that all professional networks have a clearly delineated time and space for intergenerational specialists to gather, sharing best practices and supporting one another.
- Collaborating with educators to institute intergenerational programming and a longevity competency. As our kindergarten through grade 12 school systems teach math and reading at age-appropriate levels, they should also teach about aging as a lifelong journey. Intergenerational engagement would be woven through the curricula at all levels. There is a broad base of evidence to support school districts in the decision for gerontology inclusion and integrate mutually beneficial programs like Bridges (Thompson, Weaver 2016). “The efficacy of IG programming is supported by an expanding body of research showing an intergenerational program’s promising effects and legacy. Utilizing direct and extended contact with a shared experience or purpose seem to effect greater and more long-lasting effects” (Drury et al, 2016).

Conclusion

For the benefit of today's older adults and the future of aging in America, it is imperative that we make intergenerational solutions a priority. We must actively unite professionals in the aging field already in this work and provide tools and training on the art and science of intergenerational engagement to develop emerging leaders. By supporting, enhancing, and expanding existing efforts, more older adults benefit and more professionals are trained. Not only will this break barriers that exist from stereotypes and societal attitudes, but it will give us an intergenerational lens with which we can create more multifaceted solutions that benefit people of all ages, assisting everyone to grow up and grow old well.

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