



Cooperative Extension



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Ideas for Intergenerational Living

*a series of articles devoted to promoting cooperation
and exchange between the generations*

Article 1 (11/00):

Gift-giving Ideas to Link the Generations

As we approach yet another holiday season, people of all ages will be going out in droves to buy gifts for their loved ones. It is time to begin our personal holy quests to find *special somethings* for those *special someones*.

In the midst of all the excitement, however, we barely notice that a dilemma has crept into the world of gift-giving; we have increasingly less time and live farther apart. This has a profound impact on all facets of our social lives, not just choosing gifts. Social scientists note that, even under the same roof, family members are spending less time together. This raises concerns about family cohesion, particularly between the young and old.

At highest risk are young people in dire need of guidance and nurturing. The prospect of “going it alone” is difficult for many elders as well; undesired social isolation is often associated with physical and psychological stress and decline.

“Intergenerational studies” literature provides many useful clues for how to reconnect the generations. One principle emphasizes activities that tie into what people—no matter what their age—have in common, such as eating, talking, singing, dancing, and craftmaking. This principle also suggests that activities that accentuate shared membership in family and community work well.

So the question now becomes, “What kinds of gifts most readily lead to quality time spent between older and younger family members (or friends)? If we view a gift item as an opportunity to enter into the rhymes and rhythms of a loved one’s life experiences, the quest for the perfect gift becomes a search for ways to share time and build relationships. The gift is seen less as a product and more as a vehicle for bringing people together across geographical and generational distances.

(over)

Drawing from this perspective, here are some gift ideas that older adults and young people can give each other, as well as gifts they can develop together for others.

Gifts from Old to Young:

- a family recipe.
- an heirloom (as reflection of shared family heritage).
- a quilt made with material or design that has family significance. (Patricia Polacco in the children's book "The Keeping Quilt" tells the story of a quilt made from material drawn from the clothing of four generations of family members.)
- hand down a hobby.
- ingredients for a joint baking/cooking session. (Note: This gift is not for the fainthearted; upon gift delivery, you might be confronted with that baffled, disappointed, "Huh, what's the big idea" type of look!)
- a model (at a level of difficulty which will stretch the recipient's problem solving abilities).
- an incomplete sewing, knitting, or crocheting project. The parties will depend upon each other to complete segments of the overall item.
- seeds for a garden to work in together. Become "plant buddies."
- a puzzle you can do together.
- a family album.

Gifts from Young to Old:

- a package of supplies to make a book about family history or identity. This might include newspaper clippings, photos, and stories (written together).
- an oral history/biographical booklet drawn from an interview conducted with the adult.
- a computer game. (This is ideal for the computer-shy adult, but make sure to be around to help with the installation and review of the instructions.)

Joint Giving/Co-producing:

- conduct a presentation, sing a song, or play instruments together at a nursing home, a children's ward at a hospital, or as part of a community event.
- cook and deliver a meal to a soup kitchen or homeless shelter during a holiday event.
- join a community service project. You might help rebuild a park, deliver meals to the homebound, or paint over graffiti.

To conclude, gift-giving does not need to be an empty ritual or an inconvenience that reminds us of how busy we are. The process can be quite wonderful, meaningful, and enriching for both parties. The essence of the great gift is that it helps us locate the "we," not the "me." Let's use this gift-giving season as a time to journey beyond our private worlds and feel — and be — closer to our loved ones.

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