



Cooperative Extension



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**Ideas for Intergenerational Living**

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

Article 3 (1/01):

## Talking about Work Across Generations

Over the past 30 years, the young and the elderly have begun to live -- and play -- in increasingly different worlds. This separation between the generations has been linked to the increase in negative stereotypes toward the aging. At the same time, younger people, who are in need of adult guidance and relationships, often find little opportunity for meaningful exchanges with senior adults.

Against this backdrop, there is growing support for the view that in order to strengthen our families and our communities, we need to nurture opportunities for people to come together across generational lines to share views and experiences and provide support for one another. We see a host of programs and activities in schools, community organizations, religious institutions and other settings that help young and elderly people get to know each other.

Fortunately, people of all ages like to talk. Issues related to the world of work -- an area for which young and old often hold divergent views -- can be counted on to generate lively discussion and debate.

Teens today are growing up with different opportunities and ideas about work than their parents and grandparents. Robert Eisenberger's "Blue Monday: The Loss of the Work Ethic in America" provides a historical account of the "Protestant work ethic" (some prefer the phrase "personal work ethic" to accommodate various faiths) and how it was an integral part of America's pioneer past. Many argue this value system is still at the core of the American psyche. As a society, we "officially" value such qualities as diligence, hard work, pride of accomplishment and a willingness to withstand privations and overcome hardships. Yet, current snapshots taken of American attitudes toward work reveal very mixed images and perceptions.

Young adults are less likely to refer to the "personal work ethic" than to themes of disillusionment and disconnection. In Studs Terkel's "Working: People Talk about What They  
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Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do," young adults speak of their sense of dissatisfaction with work and perceptions of work as being alienating. For example, a 28-year-old health care writer laments the demeaning nature of the world of work and the tendency of many older adults to define themselves by their jobs. She states, "But nobody pays you for being you, so I'm at the Institution -- for the moment."

The United States is not the only country in which this generational rift appears. Japanese youth entering the work force often are referred to unaffectionately as "grasshoppers," a reference to their trend-oriented, play-loving, individualistic nature and tendency to hop from one job to another. This marks a dramatic shift in work ethic from the values and beliefs of their parents and grandparents who were proud to display extreme levels of commitment, loyalty, sacrifice and hard work on behalf of their employers. Youth in Japan still view work as important, but they are more interested in self-exploration and travel and less likely to accept the ideal of life-long commitment to one company.

Differences in work-related attitudes held by different generations can be viewed as symptomatic of larger societal changes. Particularly in rapidly changing societies, the young and the elderly speak different "languages," dress differently, eat differently and hold different ideas about such issues as sexuality, gender roles, marriage, leisure and technology.

I believe the key to bridging these perceptual differences is dialogue. It's through intergenerational dialogue that young people and older adults can gain access to each other's experiences, hopes and concerns.

When developing such programs, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking solely in terms of the values and knowledge that can be transmitted from old to young. But it's crucial that we allow information to flow both ways. Young people have something to contribute in terms of expanding elders' knowledge and world views; they need opportunities to express themselves.

This notion of open, two-way communication coincides with what has been learned from studies of mentoring programs like Big Brothers/Big Sisters. The best mentors turn out to be the ones who are the most patient listeners; the worst have ready-made prescriptions about how they are going to influence their young "mentees." In other words, adults must listen to be heard.

A truly healthy society must be built upon a sense of respect for the perceptions and experiences of all of its citizens. It may not always be easy, but the joys of joining together and celebrating our differences as well as our similarities far outweigh the difficulties. Since work is a topic of interest to people in all stages of their life, it is an ideal discussion channel for promoting intergenerational understanding and acceptance.

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