



Cooperative Extension



Matthew Kaplan, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Intergenerational Programs and Aging
Department of Ag & Extension Education
(814) 863-7871

Ideas for Intergenerational Living

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

Article 4 (3/00):

Out Of The Audience And Onto The Playing Field: Preventing School Violence

In recent years, we've seen a steady flow of highly publicized tragedies involving disenfranchised young people. On March 5, the nation learned that a 15-year-old boy took out a gun, killed two students and injured 13 others at Santana High School near San Diego. Just two days later, an eighth-grade girl at a Roman Catholic school in Williamsport, Pennsylvania shot and wounded another girl during a lunchtime dispute. Probably the most infamous event took place on April 20 1999, when two teenagers from Columbine High School in Colorado killed 12 other students and a teacher and wounded about two dozen others before committing suicide. In the aftermath of such episodes, the question, "Can this happen here?" resonates in communities throughout the country.

We've also seen problems at the other end of the age spectrum. A particularly disturbing occurrence that received limited media attention took place in Worcester, Mass., in 1993. A 73-year-old recluse -- found dead in her home -- was estimated to have died four years earlier. Postal carriers kept delivering her mail through a slot in the door. One resident, assuming her neighbor was in a nursing home, hired a grandson to mow the lawn because the property had become such an eyesore.

According to Webster's New World Dictionary, "anxiety" is "a state of being uneasy, apprehensive or worried about what may happen; concern about a possible future event." Probably nothing is more anxiety-provoking than a community tragedy; we are reminded of our inability to predict or prevent disasters. What compounds this anxiety is the lack of answers. Social scientists and laypersons alike struggle to make sense of such tragedies, with no shortage of explanations. Fingers point towards the media, changing family dynamics, chronic social problems, the breakdown in traditional values and fragmented human service systems.

At the time of the Columbine incident, I was a psychology professor in Hawaii. My students expected me to share valuable insights, if not answers. But I didn't know what to tell them. What finally lifted the cloud over my head were the words of Helen Matthews, a senior adult who shares local history and cultural arts with children in a nearby elementary school. Helen said she

(over)

found inspiration and a sense of power from her work with local children. This was something she could do, within her realm of influence, to make a difference in young people's lives.

Thanks to Helen's insight, I now understand such tragic events as a collapse in community, a breakdown in caring. When large numbers of young people live without positive adult role models, and older adults in need of care are invisible to those on whom they count for support, disaster cannot be far away. When one generation flounders, everyone's quality of life is compromised.

For the 15-year-old boy responsible for the recent shooting at Santana High School, who was apparently picked on incessantly by other students, a senior mentor or advocate could have helped him realize he had alternative courses of action.

I advocate an all-out campaign to strengthen intergenerational bonds within families and communities. In family life, this means nurturing opportunities to involve all family members in such activities as storytelling and folklore, crafts, song, play and travel. Where family members are not available, let's build programs in schools, parks, community centers, places of worship and other public institutions that invite people of all ages to tell their stories, share their experiences and provide and receive care and support. Whatever the program and setting, we need to find effective ways to bring the young and the elderly together so that they can become more invested in each other's lives. In the process, they can learn that others care for them.

By engaging youth and providing them with legitimate venues to voice their concerns, seniors like Helen Matthews help deter school violence. They diminish the likelihood that youth will feel a need to resort to destructive modes of expression. I also have witnessed youth who -- after establishing positive relationships with residents of nursing homes -- realize that what they do matters and that they can contribute meaningfully to other peoples' lives.

The generations are interdependent. People of all ages count on one another for care, time, knowledge and services. The more invested we become in acts of caring and the harder we work to enrich the lives of others, the more protected we become against the problems and sense of isolation that are plaguing our communities.

In other words, the best way to reduce the likelihood of reading a headline about a horror in your community is to step out of the audience and onto the playing field.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

The Pennsylvania State University is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. The Pennsylvania State University does not discriminate against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Direct all inquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policy to the Affirmative Action Director, The Pennsylvania State University, 201 Willard Building, University Park PA 16802-2801; Tel. (814) 865-4700/V; (814) 863-1150/TTY.