



Cooperative Extension



Matthew Kaplan, Ph.D.

State Extension Specialist
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 7 (7/01):

LINKING LIVES THROUGH BREAKING BREAD

Everyone cares about food. Our health -- our very survival -- hinges on what we know about nutrition, food safety and food preparation. Yet the importance of food goes well beyond physical nourishment. Cooking and eating are social activities that bring people together despite differences in community standing, cultural background and age.

Food is at the heart of "community." Just visit any soup kitchen or homeless shelter during a holiday event. The volunteers who chip in to help cook and serve meals nourish a sense of community -- for themselves and their neighbors. Think too of the elaborate planning that goes into the meal served at a wedding reception, or the sanctity of grandma's Sunday dinners. For many of us, special occasions mean special foods that taste even better when shared with family and friends.

Food is also a vital part of cultural experience. Any journey into cultural heritage -- one's own or those of others -- is likely to leave vivid memories of smells and tastes. The well-organized cultural food fair is an example of how food can be used to create a sense of cultural appreciation. And why not start young? Early childhood centers such as Penn State's Bennett Family Center draw on the cultural diversity of its families by hosting potluck dinners with foods from many different countries.

"Jams and Jellies with Kids," a program offered by Lancaster County Cooperative Extension, uses food as a tool to teach children about cultural traditions. "Lancaster is very traditional and has a strong heritage of food preservation," says extension agent Nancy Wiker, who conducts the hands-on canning workshop. "The program enhances this tradition and builds on the county's strong emphasis on family. Families are looking for activities that children and adults can do together. They go home with a jar of jam and a shared memory."

(over)

Food can also be used to promote understanding and sharing between unrelated young people and older adults. York County extension agent Marcia Weber describes "Kids in the Kitchen," a cooking and nutrition program held at a local recreation center. Though the program began as a children-only cooking class, it evolved to include senior adults when Ms. Weber noticed that a senior lunch program was taking place in the center at the same time. Weber and center staff came up with a plan -- to have the children cook for the seniors, serve them, and then sit down for a shared meal.

Ms. Weber sees this as leading to additional food-related intergenerational activities. For instance, the children and seniors could share recipes, cook and -- of course -- eat together. And naturally, drawing upon her nutrition education knowledge, Ms. Weber would weave in lessons on nutrition and food safety.

Food is a powerful social medium. Through the simple act of cooking together, young and old participants are likely to learn that they have much in common and much to talk about. Research on other intergenerational programs indicates that participants are often pleasantly surprised as they learn of each other's creativity, level of caring, motivation and intelligence.

Several proverbs about food can be drawn upon to encourage people to re-think their views about other age groups. One example is the Portuguese saying, "The old pan is the one that makes good food." Another saying comes from China: "Old ginger tastes spiciest." Such sayings remind younger generations that there are many positive characteristics associated with old age. And, through opportunities to "break bread" with young people, older adults learn firsthand that young people have valuable insights to share.

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. It is the policy of the University to maintain an academic and work environment free of discrimination, including harassment. The Pennsylvania State University prohibits discrimination and harassment against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Discrimination or harassment against faculty, staff, or students will not be tolerated at The Pennsylvania State University. 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.