



The Building Blocks of Intergenerational Programs

– some things to keep in mind for program planning,
implementation and evaluation –

PLANNING/ GETTING STARTED: Project situations vary. Sometimes everything starts with a concept or an idea, sometimes with organizational partners who are committed to the idea of intergenerational collaboration or a specific intergenerational model.

Clarify Goals & Objectives: What are you trying to accomplish? What needs are you trying to address? What quality of life enhancements are you seeking to achieve? What is the level of “depth” in intergenerational interaction that is sought? (For example, if the goal is to promote intimacy and relationship formation, this is better addressed by an ongoing program rather than a special events approach.) [Sometimes it is necessary to revise goals and objectives to accommodate the additional input of project participants and additional institutional partners.]

Line up Institutional Partners: Who are the likely allies of the initiative? Clarify the partnership; a “Memorandum of Understanding” is a powerful document. Sometimes it helps to establish an advisory group which consists of a broader group of individuals and organizations -- each with an interest in some facet of the program (e.g., a local history organization, a senior center, a community board member, a fifth grade class, television station reporter, etc.).

Clarify roles and responsibilities of each participant and participating organization: This will help spread out the work, ensure that each task is done, and build a sense of broader and deeper sense of local ownership.

Recruit Participants:

-- Cast a wide net (use many recruitment methods): Flyers, presentations at senior centers, open houses, press releases, etc.

-- Try to get people involved in steps, starting with small commitments and experiences. Once people meet each other and get the chance to “break bread,” the notion of deeper levels of involvement in the project will seem more natural to the participants. For example, before attempting to sign people to a one-year curriculum, start with a special event.

Plan Activities:

-- Try to plan activities that meet a community need or otherwise address real needs or issues in people’s lives. In other words, activities need not be contrived or irrelevant to people’s day-to-day concerns.

-- Make sure to design developmentally appropriate activities: This includes taking into account competencies (e.g., readiness to create and explore) as well as limitations (such as in terms of mobility and cognitive functioning).

-- Make sure to design activities in a culturally appropriate manner. For example, don’t assume that participants will interact in a manner which reflects “equal status;” in some cultures, youth are expected to do more listening than speaking when communicating with their elders. Also, make sure not to violate cultural norms in terms of things like touch, humor, and dealing with illness and loss (including death).

-- Draw from the intergenerational studies literature (make sure to give credit) and mix and match models, but don't be constrained by working within the confines of existing program models.

Train staff: Participating staff members need to understand the goals of the program and be sensitive to the needs and expectations of the participants (young and old, professional and volunteer).

IMPLEMENTATION:

Train Participants: Work to help participants become more aware of how people in the other age group experience the world. [For example, to prepare youth for working with seniors who have physical problems, some training activities might include wrapping their fingers up with tape to simulate arthritis, smearing vaseline on their glasses to simulate vision problems, etc.]

Implementation of activities: Build in ongoing planning and reflection components for the participants as well as the staff. Regular pre-activity (planning/clarification) and post-activity (debriefing/activity evaluation) sessions with the participants can yield many benefits.

Closure/Recognition: Programs should have a sense of closure. Also, it is important to recognize the efforts of participants (e.g., via awards, certificates).

EVALUATION: Evaluation must not be an afterthought. At the point of establishing program objectives, spend some time and energy figuring out how to assess whether these objectives are attained.

Use Multiple Methods: Some examples: have participants keep personal journals to record their project-related experiences and perceptions, distribute pre- and post-project questionnaires designed to detect affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes in the participants, and obtain feedback from family members as another way to gauge project impact on the participants. For community service-type projects, take ongoing measurements of those aspects of community life which the project intends to influence such as the amount of litter on the streets, amount of community participation in local planning meetings, etc.

Be Creative in what you call "data:" E.g., have participants draw "mental maps," before and after their involvement in the program, as one "measurement" of program impact on their level of neighborhood awareness.

Evaluation should be ongoing.

FOLLOW-UP:

Provide Feedback (from evaluation results) to partners, participants, and other interested parties.

Provide more recognition for volunteers and professional partners. Recognize the role of project partners in all publicity.

Write funding proposals (if project is proven to be successful/valuable).

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