



## INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS:

### Some What's and Why's of Intergenerational Programming

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing body of literature which describes a trend in which young people (21 years of age and younger) and elderly people (60 years of age and older) are becoming increasingly separated in terms of living arrangements and recreational outlets. Despite the fact that elderly people are the fastest growing portion of the U.S. population, with over 31 million people having reached the age of 65 as of 1990, the special group status of senior adults for housing, health care, economic support and transportation has served to further isolate the nation's elderly from other age groups. Conversely, children and youth, who are in need of adult guidance and relationships, typically find little opportunity for meaningful exchanges with senior adults. This pattern of age segregation has been linked to the decline in life satisfaction among older persons and the increase in negative stereotypes toward the aged and aging among younger people.

Fortunately, under certain circumstances, there are efforts to programmatically bring children and youth together with older adults. "Intergenerational programming," as defined by the National Council on the Aging, involves those "activities or programs that increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between any two generations. It involves the sharing of skills, knowledge or experience between old and young." Depending on program design, intergenerational initiatives also function to promote educational objectives, arts and recreation interests, desired states of health and welfare, and religious and spiritual well-being. Furthermore, intergenerational programs have been found to diminish ageist stereotypes, strengthen communities, and lead to improved services for children, youth and older adults.

At a time of funding cutbacks, and increases in the number of working mothers and single-parent families, a greater commitment is needed for involving senior adult volunteers with children who are in need of extra attention, whether they experience language barriers, are having trouble with school or the law, or whether they simply need someone to listen to their problems without distractions. Lifetimes of experience and time to spare make older volunteers the perfect resource for these children. At the same time, the older persons also benefit from intergenerational engagement; serving as mentors, they are provided with invaluable opportunities to remain useful and vital and make a positive difference in their communities.

Although intergenerational programming is still considered an "emerging" field, professionals working with children, youth and older adults are learning about those program models that have been field-tested and found to be effective in various settings and with diverse populations. The excitement many people have for intergenerational programs has led to a proliferation of organizations and organizing activity on the local and national levels. There are also hundreds of handbooks and manuals describing how to implement various intergenerational program models. The creation of quality intergenerational programs is also stimulated through conferences, workshops, and structured training programs.

Penn State University, through its Cooperative Extension System, aims to develop and study new intergenerational program strategies for improving people's lives.

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