

Intergenerational Engagement: Research Summary

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For **West-End Intergenerational Network (WIN)**

Concordia University

April 2019

engAGE



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Intergenerational (IG) programs have been shown to benefit multiple generations across the lifespan. With attention to meaningful engagement and a holistic understanding of wellbeing, including social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and political domains, IG programs have proven to be mutually beneficial.

Why are intergenerational programs important?

- The aging population across North America is steadily growing and cuts to government services have resulted in challenges in the health, social services, and education sectors for people of all ages.
- Social isolation is prevalent across the lifespan in multiple generations. A lack of socialization and loneliness can exacerbate certain health conditions.
- Due to health challenges, discrimination, isolation and other factors, older adults may experience social exclusion.
- A lack of adequate digital literacy and digital access disproportionately affects older adults.

Intergenerational programs benefit youth by:

- **Contributing to empathy formation:** When young children interact with older adults, they learn empathy and put it into practice. They also learn about life cycle changes and the contributions older adults make to society (Devore, Winchell & Rowe, 2016); Femia et al.'s (2008) study demonstrates this for preschool children. Familiarizing and sensitizing children to the unique needs of older people can enrich early learning experiences focused on caring for others.
- **Improving social skills:** Children also enhance their social skills when interacting with people who are different from them, as older adults have years of such experience (Cohen-Mansfield & Jensen, 2017).
- **Helping to eliminate stereotypes:** Stereotypes commonly associated with older adults are often overcome when youth engage with older adults. This is essential to combating ageism (Cummings, Williams & Ellis, 2002).
- **Addressing behaviour issues:** According to Burgman and Mulvaney (2016), children with special needs or behavioural issues demonstrated enhanced positive responses in social settings. For instance, kindness, affection, generosity (via solicited help), patience were exhibited. Communication barriers and physical limitations did not affect this.
- **Enhancing personal insight:** Intergenerational engagement helps children to be in tune with their complex feelings and learn to overcome these by developing a bond with people they would otherwise not spend any time with (Chonody & Wang, 2013).
- **Providing a mentor:** Mentorship by mature, wise adults can be greatly beneficial to at-risk youth, especially for those who may have had limited exposure to positive role

models at home (Whitten et al., 2017). Wright et al. (1994) created entrepreneurial/professional mentorship program for at-risk teens to prepare them for the “real world”.

Intergenerational programs benefit older adults by:

- **Facilitating positive encounters** : For older adults living in retirement communities or care facilities, having ongoing contact with younger people can help break isolation and contribute to a sense of worth. Many older adults feel intimidated or out of date with the techno-savvy skills exhibited by children, but interacting with younger people can help mitigate this (Chonody & Wang, 2013).
- **Moderating the risk of dementia** : Intergenerational volunteering can be a viable psychosocial option to help mitigate the impact of the early onset of mild to moderate dementia. George and Singer (2011) showed that it can significantly reduced stress among older adults.
- **Enhancing emotional health and wellbeing**: Thoughtful planning and delivery of IG programming is associated with enhanced emotional wellbeing across generations (Knight et al, 2014).
- **Increasing self-worth**: Among seniors who engage in IG programs, enhanced self-worth can help them gain the confidence to be more active in civic matters, since there’s a discrepancy of elderly people’s voices and opinions, especially in online platforms (Doll & Bollender, 2010).
- **Putting their past professional and life experiences to good use**: By giving advice to inexperienced youth entering the job market or a new role (parenthood), older adults enhance feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Gamliel & Gabay, 2014).
- **Strengthening agency and autonomy**: Providing opportunities for meaningful and valued engagement contributed to valued social roles which are often ignored in older adults, especially those who live in assisted-living (Salari, 2002).

Recommendations when developing intergenerational programs:

- Consistency and variety, with a focus on skill development as opposed to outcome:
For instance, Epstein and Boisvert (2006) discovered that IG programs in which older adults and children met regularly in a shared space, and in which there was a variety of activities focused on process rather than product/outcome, were most successful.
- Quality of contact: The quality of interactions matter, as discovered by Drury, Hutchison and Abrams (2016). They argue that contact quality (long, meaningful time spent) and extended contact is positively associated with young people's attitudes towards older adults. Quality and extended contact also played a role in curbing intergroup anxiety and anxiety about aging experienced by youth.
- A focus on meaningful engagement: Older people and children are often underestimated and devalued. IG engagement can provide opportunities for mutual support between generations through engagement in meaningful activities (Cohen-Mansfield & Jensen, 2017). Children can be trained and supervised as volunteers. Older adults can contribute their retirement time by being involved in the lives of children, which provides considerable investment in child care, mentorship or tutoring, and support of foster children. One successful model is one that incorporates service learning and written reflections for school-aged children (Billig, 2002).
- Re-examination of aging: Scholars such as Sanchez, Kaplan and Bradley (2015) remind us that when we create IG programs, we need to shift our understanding of aging and realize that it is a multi-generational phenomenon where multiple generations are aging together. This applies to our relationship with technology, where they point out that a lot of youth are not as digitally-literate as we assume. While some older adults struggle with technology, many are quite actively involved. IG programs that explore digital literacy and co-learning among generations can benefit multiple generations.
- Holistic programming: IG programs can optimize opportunities for health, social participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. This doesn't just involve physical activity but also political, social, spiritual and community-based engagement (Dellman-Jenkins, 1997).
- Mindfulness of limitations: It's also important to adapt activities based on the limitations of each group - if you're dealing with a group of older adults who have mobility issues, then find creative ways to organize activities that emphasize their strengths e.g., storytelling or creative arts. Personal storytelling is something that Chonody and Wang (2013) have found to allow older adults to reminisce and share their wisdom across generations.

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