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The Role of Senior Centers in Promoting Intergenerational Play

Julia O'Hanlon, Policy Scientist
Emily Thomas, Public Administration Fellow



Photo Source: University of Southern California
Leonard Davis School of Gerontology

Overview

Intergenerational play occurs when senior citizens and youth connect with one another through fun, interactive activities. These mutually beneficial activities can be structured as games with rules or a planned play program. They also can occur through free play—putting two generations in a room together with crafts, books, and toys, and allowing them to choose activities. Both formal and informal play offers mutual benefits for both populations, including learning opportunities and fun.

This brief discusses the benefits of intergenerational play for senior citizens and youth and highlights model programs being employed across the United States. It also presents opportunities for integrating intergenerational play into programs and activities offered in senior centers. In conclusion, this brief provides guidance to senior center staff and boards on best practices for implementing a successful intergenerational play program.

| General Significance

Senior Demographics

The nation's population of adults 65 and older (65+) is growing rapidly. In the United States, the number of persons aged 65+ reached 40.3 million in 2010. As the Baby Boomers, those born 1946–1964, continue to age, the population is projected to reach 83.7 million in 2050.¹ Not only is this population growing, they are also living longer. As of 2010, persons who reach age 65 have a greater life expectancy of an additional 18–19 years compared to previous life expectancy rates.²

Healthy aging can be defined as “the development and maintenance of optimal physical, mental (cognitive and emotional), spiritual, and social well-being and function in older adults.”³ The growth in the number and proportion of older adults creates an urgent need to protect and promote healthy aging through safe and supportive communities, and programs that address the total spectrum of health.³

As the senior population grows, it is important to create new opportunities for individuals to engage in intergenerational activities. Children are the future. Strong bonds between older and younger populations will positively impact generations to come. Research has shown how interactions with

youth can foster positive emotions and coping, strengthen social bonds, and increase personal growth and development.⁴ Children provide a form of companionship to seniors. When seniors interact and play with children, they are less at risk for social isolation, which improves overall quality of life and life satisfaction and allows them to learn new skills.⁵ Play also helps seniors recall memories from their own childhood and replay nurturing roles.⁶

| Benefits & Program Models

This policy brief focuses on children 12 or younger (12≤) and adults 65+. Intergenerational activity can positively impact communities, the social and physical health of older adults, and the future of our children. Though the two generations have years of experience separating them, they share similar cognitive, social, emotional, and physical benefits when they play together. Interaction between generations allows for expressing of feelings, exercising flexibility in thinking (creativity, imagination, etc.), and building self-esteem. Intergenerational play also promotes physical health by stimulating blood flow to the brain, exercising small and large muscles, and practicing motor skills.⁶ Playing together has unique benefits specific to each generation as well.

Tips for Intergenerational Toys

Toys that are familiar to both the young and the old are effective ways to get the two generations to interact. For example, a well-loved doll is an effective intergenerational toy because a child is often captivated by the fact that they are playing with a toy that was previously played with by the older adult.

Other effective intergenerational toys are blocks. Blocks encourage the use of motor skills, imagination and creativity, and they are great for collaborating with others. Book-related dramatic play is when older adults help children comprehend books and react to the stories and their characters. Through this type of play, “older adults become the storytellers, teachers, and historians.”⁶



Photo Source: The Seattle Times

Despite years of experience separating them, they share similar cognitive, social, emotional, and physical benefits when they play together. Interaction between generations allows for expressing of feelings, exercising flexibility in thinking, and building self-esteem.

Youth, 12≤, can teach seniors new technologies and innovations that can enhance their socialization.⁷ Seniors, 65+, connected with youth perform better on memory tests than those who do not.⁴ Along with their social and mental health, intergenerational activity improves the physical health of older adults. Those who spend time with children burn 20 percent more calories and experience fewer falls than the older adults who do not.⁴

When children regularly interact with seniors they are exposed to issues beyond their own, which can alter their negative assumptions about aging and the elderly. Children generally have deep affection for their grandparents, but do not want to grow old themselves and often associate aging with death.⁸ When young and old play together, children gain role models and have a more positive outlook on getting older.

Despite the known benefits of intergenerational activity to children 12≤, there are opportunities for other age groups, such as high-school-aged youth, to play and learn from the older generation.

Model Programs

LIFE Program – Ames, Iowa

LIFE stands for Living well through Intergenerational Fitness and Exercise and was started as part of Iowa State University's Extension and Outreach Program. The LIFE program introduces older adults to "exergaming," which is a concept that combines technology, physical activity, and play. This popular program brings in high school youth as Wii trainers to assist older adults in a fun, relaxed environment.⁹

Intergenerational Raised Bed Gardening Series – Lancaster, Massachusetts

The National Council on Aging named this program its 2014 senior center program of excellence award winner for nutrition, fitness, and health promotion. The Lancaster Senior Center, with the help of construction companies and a gardening organization, created a community garden for people to grow and take home their own locally grown vegetables. Seniors are assigned

a garden bed and paired with a younger gardener. It allows the seniors and the youth to socialize in a fun, educational activity.¹⁰

Along with special programs, certain areas have created joint centers for the young and old. These shared facilities allow for more regularly scheduled intergenerational programming.

Intergenerational Facility Models

Intergenerational Learning Center – Seattle, Washington

Providence Mount St. Vincent in Seattle, Washington, is not only a nursing home, but five days a week it is also a licensed nonprofit childcare center and preschool. Six times a week, teachers take the children to visit and play with the elders on the residential floors for 20 to 60 minutes. Sharing the same facility allows the two generations to participate together in a daily schedule as well as spontaneous engagement.¹¹

My Second Home – Mt. Kisco & White Plains, New York

This facility's comprehensive Intergenerational Adult Day Program brings together seniors (50 and over) with physical and/or cognitive impairment and children from an adjacent daycare center.

Some of the program highlights include making art projects, dancing, gardening, storytelling, and eating breakfast together. To break down age barriers, this facility provides a combination of both structured and informal interactions.¹²

The art of developing strong relationships depends on the amount of time spent together. This is one reason why one-time events may not be as successful.⁵ Having a shared space and schedule during which senior citizens and youth can interact regularly provides longer-term benefits. While intergenerational programs and facilities might someday become the norm, senior centers currently have effective program models that could be easily adapted for intergenerational activities. Making use of programs and spaces currently available is a good first step to fostering positive intergenerational interactions.

Senior Centers: A Good Place to Play and Stay Healthy!

Senior centers are seen as an important resource and hub for their communities. Programs offered by senior centers across the United States have important health benefits to older adults. Adding or expanding intergenerational activity within senior center programs can increase the health benefits

Technology as the New Way to Play

Today, older adults are seeing the benefits of online social gaming. Online games seniors are playing with the children are casual online social games, such as Candy Crush, Clash of Clans, and Trivia Crack. Games played by older adults are relatively easy to understand, accessible, and free.

Older adults often face social isolation when they are unable to leave their house; they become more depressed and have a lower quality of life. With online gaming, they do not have to feel physically limited from going out and interacting with their grandchildren/youth because they can connect in the virtual world. Older adults also use technology to stay physically active through gaming consoles such as the Wii.⁷

Intergenerational Social and Recreational Activities

Traditional: Board Games, Singing, Dancing, Card Games, Puzzles

Contemporary: Wii Bowling, Computerized Board Games

Intergenerational Educational Enrichment Activities

Traditional: Pen Pal Programs, Art Classes, Story Time/Book Club

Contemporary: Cooking Demonstrations, Digital Storytelling, Community Gardening

for both seniors and the younger generation. Two program areas in particular have the opportunity to become more intergenerational: 1) social and recreational and 2) educational enrichment.

Social and recreational programs often seen in senior centers are fun, informal activities such as bingo, card games, puzzles, quilting, and arts and crafts. Educational enrichment activities, on the other hand, are meant to provide knowledge on a specific topic through a structured program or class. Some activities include instructor-led computer, language, religion, and fine art classes. Not only do these program areas provide fun, playful activities, they are essential in improving the overall well-being of older adults.

Social activities that get seniors moving are a great way to improve their physical health. Informal walking is one social and recreational activity that can enhance the immune system and improve flexibility; this type of consistent physical activity can enrich their quality of life. Participating in these daily social and intellectual activities is the most effective way to maintain or improve mental health because it increases brain stimulation.¹³ Social games, such as puzzles and cards, can prevent memory loss because they can be challenging and require problem-solving skills. Also, many older adults find certain activities, such as quilting and gardening, great ways to reduce stress because of the calm atmosphere and repetition involved. Staying mentally and physically active is a crucial part of healthy aging. Promoting healthy aging involves

targeting prevention and wellness efforts, managing chronic conditions, optimizing physical and mental health, and facilitating social engagement.¹⁴ Incorporating youth into social and intellectual activities increases health benefits and enhances the joy of play for older adults, all while learning new skills.

New skill development is an important benefit for young children as well. Intergenerational activity not only facilitates learning, but it encourages kids and motivates learning. Research shows that children are 52 percent less likely to skip school because of the interactions with their older adult role models.⁶ Additionally, children who allow adults to be involved in their play are often more creative. They are better equipped to grasp abstract symbolic representation and conceptual understanding.⁴ Integrating youth into regularly scheduled senior center activities is a great opportunity for intergenerational play.

Summary

When the young and old connect through play, it should be a positive experience for both generations. Intergenerational activity should match the interests of each age group and the individuals involved, allowing them to socialize while learning and having fun. To implement a successful intergenerational program, senior center and boards should look to form strong partnerships within their communities. Nearby schools and/or daycare facilities are a great place to begin.

Educational Program Highlight

I Teach You, You Teach Me, Farmers Branch, Texas

In 2012, Farmers Branch Senior Center was the Educational Award Winner for National Council on Aging's Program of Excellence Awards. The "I Teach You, You Teach Me" program brought together senior citizens and youth for weekly leisure activities in the summer. Teens taught the seniors how to use cell phones, computers, etc., while the teens learned line dancing, sewing, cards, and more.

Guide to Creating Successful Intergenerational Opportunities

- Identify local schools/daycare facilities that might be willing to engage in interactive activities and/or events and consider how activities might benefit the organization and their students.
- Identify a need (within a center, school, or community) that could be met by having youth in the center.
 - Learn about other tools, resources, and national best practices.
 - Talk with other senior center staff members who have successfully implemented intergenerational activities.
- Work with the school/daycare facilities for scheduling (i.e., when students come in and at what time during the week).
 - Contact year-round facilities or a school during the year and summer facility for the off months.
 - Form a routine with regularly scheduled programs (weekly, etc.).
- Clarify roles and responsibilities of the school/daycare facilities and the senior center for a meaningful experience on both sides.¹⁵
- Educate senior center staff and participants before the program begins to address stereotypes, and acknowledge cultural gaps, expectations, goals, etc.⁵
- Ask participants to help evaluate/reflect on the program after interaction sessions and make necessary changes if needed. For example, pre- and post-surveys during a six-week intergenerational computer class.¹⁵

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**Institute for
Public Administration**

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School of Public Policy & Administration
College of Arts & Sciences
University of Delaware

180 Graham Hall University of Delaware Newark, DE 19716-7380
phone: 302-831-8971 e-mail: ipa@udel.edu fax: 302-831-3488
www.ipa.udel.edu

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