

**Intergenerational Relationships in North America**

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Intergenerational relationships refer to the connections that exist between individuals or groups who are located at different points across the life cycle. It can include patterns of interaction between members in different generations of a family, like those between grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. Or intergenerational relationships can refer to interactions between older and younger members of a larger society, including those unrelated. In this paper, I will outline several factors impacting intergenerational relationships (with special emphasis on relationships with older adults), outline several types of intergenerational programs, delineate the benefits of promoting intergenerational interaction, provide some examples of effective intergenerational programs, and offer resources for developing quality intergenerational programming.

#### Factors Impacting Intergenerational Relationships

Many factors impact the viability and strength of intergenerational relationships. For one, family size and composition impact the potential for familial intergenerational interaction. For instance, many couples from Canada and the United States delay marriage and childbearing, creating smaller families of fewer children more closely spaced together. Couples produce fewer children due to more time spent pursuing education and career opportunities especially for women, as well as a shift toward urbanization, and higher costs of living in general. These fertility changes, in conjunction with an increase in life expectancy, increase the prevalence of three, four and five generations of family members alive at the same time. These *beanpole families* (Bengtson, 2001; Bengtson, Rosenthal, Burton, 1990), comprised of more generations but fewer members in each generation, increase the opportunity for intergenerational interaction within families.

Living arrangements of older adults, impacted by income, health status and availability of caregivers (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2020), affect intergenerational relationships, as well. In 2020 in the United States, about 27% of older adults residing in the community lived alone, representing about 20% of older men and 33% of older women. With advancing age, the proportion of those living alone increases (e.g., 42% of women 75+ live alone) (AOA, 2021). Canada, too, experienced an all-time high of one-person households, 28.2% of all households in 2016; these single-person households surpassed couples with children to become the most common type of household (Statistics Canada, 2017). In Canada, a larger number of seniors live alone than any other age group. Among Canadians 65+, about 33% of older women reside alone, while 17.5% of older men do so (Statistics Canada, 2017). In contrast, older Mexicans within cities are more likely to live in their own homes with adult children and later generations co-residing on the same property (Ward et al., 2015). This household extension or “doubling up” permits extended families to pool resources while coping with poverty (Angel et al., 2017). Co-residence or living with both grandchildren and adult children was more common than living in “skipped generation” households in Mexico. Grandparents were more likely to live with grandchildren if they were older, female, and had lower educational attainment. More older women vs. men living in three-generational households were more likely to do so without a partner (37%) than with a partner (17%) (Reynolds & Torres, 2022). However, older Mexican parents are more likely to live alone when their adult children migrate vs. when they stay in Mexico (Kanaiaupuni, 2000). In the U.S., however, about 35% of grandparents co-residing with their grandchildren live in “skipped generation” households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Thus, living arrangements affect the accessibility of intergenerational relationships and the likelihood of social isolation.

In general, however, much of North America is age-segregated where daily lives and non-family networks tend to be “age homogeneous” (Encore.org, 2022; Generations United/Eisner Foundation, 2017; Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005, p. 343). Children go to daycare and school with other children their age. Older adults often engage in age-based classes and activities, clubs, or meal groups. Health care and religious assemblies often organize services and programs by age. Academics can even be segregated in the conferences they attend or the professional journals in which they publish, with some devoted to gerontology and later life and others devoted to children and youth (Hagestad & Uhlenberg). Different generations tend to live “separate and parallel lives” (Campbell et al., 2023). In short, outside of the family, personal networks and social arenas are often age segregated making it challenging to develop meaningful intergenerational relationships.

A decline in trust and neighborliness also impacts intergenerational contact. Over the last 50 years, people residing in the United States are about half as likely to spend social time with neighbors, contributing to lower levels of trust in fellow members of society (O’Rourke, 2023). According to a 2018 Pew survey, rural residents (40%) are more likely to know most or all of their neighbors as compared to suburban residents (28%) or urban residents (24%), though they are no more likely to interact with them (Davis & Parker, 2019). Even for those who know at least some of their neighbors, social gatherings or parties among neighbors are somewhat rare (Davis & Parker, 2019). O’Rourke (para. 14) suggests that U.S. residents’ ‘bridging networks’ are “in crisis.” Lower levels of generalized social trust make it more challenging to build connections across divides, those divides including generations.

Finally, the COVID 19 pandemic negatively impacted intergenerational relationships. Since older adults were deemed quite vulnerable to the coronavirus, governments implemented social distancing, confinement, and “shelter in place” measures in response to the danger. These measures exacerbated social isolation and loneliness (Glass & Lawlor, 2022; Ruiz-Callado et al., 2023), and posed further challenges to maintaining intergenerational cultural practices, rituals, and traditions among all ages (Warf, 2020).

### **Intergenerational Programs**

Intergenerational programs are “programs, policies, and practices that increase cooperation, interaction, and exchange between people of different generations, allowing them to share their talents and resources, and support each other in relationships that benefit both the individuals and their community” (Generations United, n.d.a). Such programs foster “ongoing, mutually beneficial, planned activities, designed to achieve specified program goals and promote greater understanding and respect between generations” (Generations United, 2021a). Intergenerational programming varies depending upon the populations involved, program objectives, context, and resources available.

### **Types of Intergenerational Programs**

There are four types of intergenerational program models (Newman, 2003). The most common model type is those where older adults provide service to children, youth, and families in the community. Examples might include older adults as mentors or tutors within the school system or retired professionals who advise younger professionals in their field. These sorts of programs foster a sense of *generativity* (Erikson, 1980) in older adults and benefit recipients in meaningful ways, as well. A second most popular model includes those where children and youth serve older adults. Examples include children visiting older adults in long-term care settings where they share music or craft activities on a

regular basis. The third intergenerational model is when multiple generations (children, youth, older adults) join forces in serving their communities. For instance, people of all ages can collaborate on a community clean up event or a theatrical performance. The fourth model occurs when children, youth and older adults interact due to sharing physical space or building. The most common occurrence of this model is when nursing homes or adult day services co-reside with preschools or early childhood childcare programs, sharing space and some activities or programming. Advantages of shared sites include eliminating transportation barriers of bringing one group to the other on a regular basis, greater ability to attain staff-to-client ratios, community building, and cost efficiencies related to housekeeping, marketing, dining, and building maintenance (Jarrott & Lee, 2023). Such programs also enhance the well-being of both young and old participants (Butts & Jarrott, 2021).

### **Benefits of Intergenerational Programs**

Research indicates that older adults consistently benefit from intergenerational programs in the following ways. Older adults experience less social isolation and loneliness, improved mood and self-esteem, enhanced sense of purpose, greater skills and knowledge, and improvements in cognitive, physical, and mental health. They also receive hands-on assistance, make new friends, increase their comfort with younger generations, enhance their sense of generativity or investment in the well-being of future generations, and increased sense of connectedness and community (Generations United/Eisner Foundation, 2017; Generations United, 2021a, 2021b; Gruenewald et al., 2016; Steward et al., 2023).

Young participants also benefit from intergenerational programs. Children increase their knowledge, gain confidence in themselves, and enhance their social skills. They also receive emotional support, improve school performance and attendance, learn to make better choices that guide them toward success, learn about the past, enjoy making new friends, and improve attitudes toward aging (Generations United/Eisner Foundation, 2017; Generations United, 2021a, 2021b; Steward et al., 2023).

Communities, too, benefit from intergenerational initiatives. Outcomes research notes enhanced community cohesion and inclusivity, increases in civic engagement and volunteerism, revitalization and beautification of public places, cost savings, reduction in parental and caregiver stress, and reductions in ageism and negative stereotypes (Generations United/Eisner Foundation, 2017; Generations United, 2021a, 2021b; Steward et al., 2023).

### **Sample Intergenerational Programs**

#### ***Canada***

A music-based intergenerational program, in Ontario, Canada, matched children in three elementary schools with older adults in three long-term care communities. The objectives of the four-week program included a desire to enhance relationships between older adults and children, promote happiness and wellbeing, nurture empathy in children toward older adults, and improve older adults' perceptions of children through engaging in music. Benefits were realized related to formation of intergenerational relationships, enhanced psychosocial status, and improved cognitive functioning (Clements-Cortes, 2019).

Another program, Canada HomeShare, brings together older adults and students in a co-housing initiative to reduce social isolation among its older residents and provide affordable housing for its younger residents. Piloted in Toronto, but expanding across the country, the program aims to provide

safe and affordable housing to students in desired locations. At the same time, students provide assistance around the home and additional monthly income for older adults to empower them to continue to live independently in their communities. Each of the sites also provide social work and social service supports to help older adults thrive while aging in place (McDonald & Mirza, 2021).

### ***Mexico***

Reading aloud can forge greater solidarity between generations. Aldana et al. (2012) described an ambitious intergenerational reading program called Mexico Nosotros entre libros, which was piloted in some of the poorest schools in Mexico City. Volunteers came to the schools each day to read aloud books available because of a large book purchase program between 2000-2006. Retired people, grandparents, parents (60%), university students and former teachers volunteered their time, reading 25-35 books to children over the school year. The program successfully increased literacy rates, with teachers noting significant gains in 79% of the children. A good number (38%) of the children also reported more active reading at home, as well.

Mexico also participates in Global Intergenerational Week. During 2023, several events promote intergenerational awareness and activities. For example, university students at Universidad Iberoamericana and older adults will meet on 6 to 8 occasions during which each participant will learn a new skill like knitting, using a cell phone and the like. They also build intergenerational ties through Mexican board games and similar activities.

### ***United States***

The Family Listening/Circle Program is designed for elementary children in three tribal communities in New Mexico to “strengthen resiliency and increase protective factors, such as cultural identity, language, anger management, and communication to hinder alcohol and substance abuse initiation” (Rae et al., 2023, p. 3). Employing an empowerment-based, culturally focused curriculum, children, parents, and elders also engage in community visioning, identify community challenges, and plan and organize community action projects to address community challenges. The program documented effectiveness in building individual self-confidence, enhancing skills in group decision-making, and helping generations share in learning their history, cultural norms, and values, and improving their communities.

Dance for Health was created as an intergenerational program to increase physical activity in a largely African American community in West Philadelphia. The program was an outgrowth of community-based participatory research, including surveys and focus groups, to ensure that it was responsive to “priorities, needs, strengths and barriers of children and families in West Philadelphia” (Schroeder et al., 2017, p. 30). Respondents preferred an activity that was accessible, situated in a safe location, free, enjoyable, and involved parents and children. Dance for Health was offered four weeks in the spring and four weeks in the fall and was led by trained dance instructors from the community over several years. Sessions primarily included two hours of line dancing. Evaluative research of the program over a five-year period included 521 participants (372 adults between 21 to 79 years of age and 149 children between 2 and 21) and revealed that while BMI and weight did not change, 50.6% of the children and 80.5% of the adults reached target heart rates during the dance sessions. Both children and adults rated the program very highly relative to enjoyment, including the intergenerational aspect of the program (Schroeder et al., 2017).

One particularly culturally responsive intergenerational program is Grandpas United, founded in 2018 and located in White Plains, New York. Grandpas United is a mentorship initiative designed to share the extensive professional and personal experiences of grandfathers with youth between the ages of 8 and 21 (Brandi, 2021). The grandpas work closely with local schools and youth courts, representing all racial and ethnic backgrounds and serving children and youth who are equally as diverse, most of whom do not have fathers or grandfathers in their own families (Clark, 2021). In addition to one-on-one mentoring, group activities include “Grandpas Go to School,” “Grandpas Go to Camp,” “Coffee with Grandpas,” and “Grandpas Got Talent” (Brandi, 2021). To reach more deeply into the Hispanic community, Grandpas created its first bilingual (English and Spanish) program targeting new fathers called Jump Start for Dads (Generations United, n.d. c).

In response to an ongoing demand for childcare and an emerging need for elder care services, intergenerational day centers provide day care services in one location. The city of Austin, Texas involved community members and other stakeholders in researching, planning, and building its intergenerational day care center. Planners also sought input regarding site selection, architectural design features of the space, and desired programming. Input suggested three categories of intergenerational programming: art-making, food-related activities, and shared outdoor activities, as well as health and wellness supports. A final 10,000 square foot space design included opportunities for intergenerational and monogenerational activities, as well as planned and spontaneous interactions between older adults and the children. Outdoor spaces were designed to promote visual (e.g., observation windows allowing viewing of children playing), visual and auditory (e.g., outdoor fitness area for adults adjacent to children’s playground), and shared interaction spaces (Norouzi & Angel, 2023).

I initiated an Elder Service Partner Program as part of the Sociology of Aging course at Messiah University. Each college student in the class is paired with an Elder Service Partner (ESP) with whom they engage in service for the entire semester. Elder Service Partners are individuals 65 years of age or older who have already made a service commitment to their community. Students join them in volunteering in places like food pantries, fraternity service organizations (e.g., Lion’s Club), nonprofit organizations (e.g., Recycle Bicycle, SCORE, Habitat for Humanity), churches and synagogues, and retirement communities. The students also interview their ESPs about their life and write a chapter of their life story which is presented to their ESP at a celebratory reception at the end of the semester. Evaluative assessments document numerous benefits for both students and their Elder Service Partners (Hamon & Guistwite, 2013; Hamon & Way, 2001).

### **Resources for Developing and Assessing High Quality Programs**

Generations United and the Eisner Foundation are greatly invested in “high quality and innovative programs that unite multiple generations for the enrichment of our communities” (eisnerfoundation.org). In fact, Generations United offers two levels of recognition for outstanding intergenerational programs: Programs of Merit (“excel beyond the minimum standard of effectiveness”) and Programs of Distinction (“meet higher standard of innovation, leadership, and/or best practices and develop greater confidence in program sustainability and capacity to achieve targeted outcomes”) (Generations United, n.d.a). A list of current Programs of Distinction and Programs of Merit, as well as the application for the awards are available on their website.

Research offers guidelines for creating exceptional intergenerational programs. Engaging in an iterative practice-research collaboration with Project TRIP (Transforming Relationships through

Intergenerational Programs), Jarrott and colleagues (2019) created a theory-research-practice framework which highlighted 11 best practices for intergenerational programs that were taught to practitioners involved with the Project. The best practices included: Adult and staff members collaborate on IG programming; Participants make decisions about IG programming; Participants are prepared for and reflect on IG activities; IG program participation is voluntary; Activities reflect participants' interests and backgrounds; Activities are age- and role-appropriate; Activities support mechanisms of friendship; The physical environment promotes interaction; The social environment promotes interaction; Adaptive equipment is used as appropriate; and Facilitators document and communicate about IG programming (Jarrott et al., 2019, pp. 491-498). Individuals or groups planning to create intergenerational programs would do well to incorporate these considerations.

After conducting a scoping review of evidence-based outcomes of intergenerational programs available in peer-reviewed journal articles, Jarrott and colleagues (2021) also identified 13 practices empirically associated with impact in intergenerational programming. Incorporating mechanisms of friendship (e.g., self-disclosure, consistent contact) was most prevalent. Other best practices include selecting or modifying the environment to foster engagement; supplying training to staff or participants; promoting empathy; fostering intergenerational cooperation through shared goals and mutual support; offering meaningful and developmentally appropriate roles like mentoring and decision-making; paying attention to time, scheduling and frequency of contact; designing activities for flexibility and modification; ensuring authority figures or stakeholders validate the intergenerational contact; incorporating technology to promote engagement; employing facilitators to promote interaction; offering novel experiences to alleviate pressure from meeting someone new; communicating equal status of participants and that each group has something to offer and gain from the experience (p. 288).

Evaluation and assessment are crucial for program success and improvement. An array of assessment techniques has been employed in evaluating outcomes of intergenerational programs including interviews, direct observations, attitudinal surveys, and cognitive assessments. However, Jarrott et al. (2008) noted the need to better understand the *process* of intergenerational interaction, as well. More specifically, they focused on the nature of intergenerational interactions as depicted in "the level of activity, the type of interpersonal interactions, the physical environment, facilitators' behaviors, or the activity's age appropriateness" (p. 435). Their resultant Intergenerational Observation Scale identified eight categories of behavior to measure interactional engagement and affect during intergenerational programming: interactive intergenerational, parallel intergenerational, interactive peer, parallel peer, staff, watching, solitary, and unoccupied (p. 438).

A very comprehensive intergenerational evaluation toolkit is available to assist in planning an intergenerational evaluation and measuring the impact of intergenerational programs (Generations United, 2019). It includes a range of reliable and valid measures that can demonstrate impact including instruments like Children's Attitudes Toward Elders Scale, Elder-Child Interaction Analysis (ECIA), Loyola Generativity Scale, Empathy Scale, Self-Efficacy Scale, Brief Sense of Community Scale, etc. Jarrott and colleagues (2022) also created an evaluation tool, The Best Practices Checklist, to assess the extent to which intergenerational programs employ helpful strategies to foster successful intergenerational interactions. Sample items from the fourteen-item checklist include: Facilitators discussed the activity in relation to participant interests or experiences to encourage IG interaction; Ratio of older adults to child participants was equal or near equal; Materials were paired; Adaptations to equipment were made; Staff avoided over-facilitation; and The IG programming session was documented (e.g., photos were taken, or

evaluation forms completed (p. 764). The Best Practices Checklist is useful for assessing adherence to key components of successful intergenerational programming, particularly when used in conjunction with participant-level outcome measures (Jarrott et al., 2022).

#### Recommendations

Encourage local governments, community groups, fraternal organizations, schools, retirement communities, and places of worship to adopt “age integration [as] a core value” (Generations United/Eisner Foundation, 2017, p. 20).

Promote intergenerational initiatives in local communities. Identify community needs and consider ways in which people of all ages might unite to meet the challenge (Generations United/Eisner Foundation, 2017).

Foster neighborliness and a greater sense of community by developing meaningful community rituals and traditions that people of all ages can enjoy together.

People of all ages are interested in working across generations to help others and share what they know and learn from others. Support greater opportunities for cogeneration, uniting older and younger generations in solving problems and bridging divides (Encore, 2022).

Facilitate partnerships between intergenerational program practitioners and researchers/evaluators to measure participant outcomes and program effectiveness (Jarrott & Lee, 2023).

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