

Intergenerational Solutions Are Not Just Nice, but Necessary

Numerous programs demonstrate that bringing older and younger people together benefits both groups and society at large.



As America ages, we must change how we see older adults and their ability to engage intergenerationally with their younger peers. The future of aging can only be enhanced if we recognize that our success and the national interest depend on connecting generations for good.

True intergenerational programs are, as Nancy Henkin of Temple University says, “not nice, but necessary.” When implemented

correctly and intentionally, intergenerational programs can provide a multiplier effect in which both children, especially those from low-income families and communities, and older adults benefit, and transformative, measurable results can be created for society as a whole.

The benefits of intergenerational programs can flow both ways. There are countless examples of younger people assisting older

adults in areas like access to technology or working on behalf of seniors to address social or economic isolation. But here we’ll focus on intergenerational programs that engage older adults as resources to address the challenges faced by youth.

Consider Ebenezer Ridges Day Care Center in Burnsville, Minn. This nondescript establishment is recognized locally as the preeminent program for toddlers and

has a waiting list that befits its status, despite a small nonprofit budget. To what does Ridges attribute its success? The center became special when it decided to move inside an assisted-living facility. Now, the kids have daily access to surrogate grandparents to teach and support them.

There’s AARP Experience Corps, which sought to create a program to improve the reading skills of children from impoverished neighborhoods. To do so, it decided to mobilize older people as tutors in the schools. Students working with Experience Corps members have shown 60 percent gains in critical literacy skills compared to those without access to these older volunteers, and the boost in their reading skills is equivalent to placing them in classrooms with 40 percent fewer students, according to researchers from Washington University in St. Louis.

And then there’s Bridge Meadows, a housing community in Portland, Ore., for families adopting children out of foster care. There, the child welfare specialists believed that the best way to increase the odds of success for these vulnerable families was to bring in seniors to live in the community. The seniors agree to help these new families, tutoring the kids, doing housework and serving as respite care for often-overwhelmed parents. The long-term success rates for these families exceed other traditional foster care support service models, and other states are eager to replicate the Bridge Meadows model.

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In the case of these organizations, and countless others, the success rates outpace those of their similarly intentioned and funded peers. The difference is that those more modestly performing organizations have yet to embrace the idea of using the resource of older adults to help achieve their ends. The intergenerational organizations subscribe to a Moneyball-like belief that the best way to achieve a societal goal in an underresourced environment is to find an underutilized and undervalued resource and use it to one’s advantage. Here, the underutilized resource is older citizens.

We have an opportunity and an obligation to use every resource at our disposal to fight society’s most intractable and relentless challenges. By utilizing the talents of older adults and investing in intergenerational solutions, we can make our world a better place. The data overwhelmingly shows that when we engage seniors and young people around a specific outcome measure, good things happen.

Laura Carstensen of Stanford University has shown that older people are uniquely skilled in creating close relationships, especially with children.

The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry has proven that children with an older adult in their lives are less likely to have behavioral or psychiatric problems. Children learn better from older adults. This may be our kids’ best chance—to learn from a caring older adult who not only has “been there and done that,” but has a biological and instinctive need to give the next generation the best opportunity to succeed.

Finally, when we engage seniors and kids together—not merely to hearken back to an era that was not quite as intergenerational as we like to pretend but because it’s the proven way to get things done—we can demonstrate that our aging population is a resource to be utilized. Our society should enlist older adults for the common good, and especially the advancement of our children. Ignoring our seniors is the equivalent of waiting for a natural resource to mature, mining it for a time, then throwing the resource away before it can provide its full benefit.

The future of aging can be bright if we find ways to bring our oldest and youngest citizens together for the betterment of our communities. It’s not just a nice idea. It’s necessary.