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Linking Young and Old Through Intergenerational Programs

Historically, the family with its extended network of generations and relations was responsible for the various nurturing, educational, and economic functions required to maintain and support all of its members. Over the course of the last century, however, America has become highly segregated by age, and family functions have been assumed by a range of more or less age-specific institutions. Children attend age-segregated schools; adults work in environments almost exclusive of children under 16 and adults over 65; elderly people often live in age-segregated housing; and both children and older persons are cared for in age-segregated facilities (day or long-term).

As a result, the old fear the young, the young don't understand their elders, and society suffers in some instances from tensions between the generations. On a pragmatic level, resources for both young and old have become increasingly limited. For the past decade, older Americans, families, children, and youth have all suffered from severe cutbacks in essential health and social programs.

Intergenerational Programming, thus has become an increasingly popular way of bringing younger and older persons together through mutually beneficial exchange. These programs have proven particularly effective because they meet numerous needs of young, old, families and communities and are almost always cost effective, often requiring the sharing of limited resources.

A Resource for Cooperation and Understanding: Defining Intergenerational Programs

The term intergenerational programming refers to activities or programs that increase cooperation, interaction, and exchange between any two generations. Most often, the focus of programming is on youth below the age of 25 and older persons beyond 60 years of age. However, these efforts are also concerned with the middle or "sandwich" generation. Faced with caring for dependent children as well as aging parents, this group often finds solutions to problems through involvement in tri-generational experiences.

a coalition of over 100 national organizations on intergenerational issues and programs

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	Executive Director Child Welfare League of America	President National Council on the Aging	Executive Director American Association of Retired Persons	President Children's Defense Fund
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Basically, intergenerational programs fall into three types of mutually beneficial programs: (1) those in which youth provide services to older persons, such as friendly visiting programs in nursing homes by children, or a student-sponsored home/help chore service; (2) those in which active older persons provide services to youths, such as foster grandparent programs and volunteer tutoring programs for school children, and (3) those in which both older and younger people work cooperatively as peers in an activity, such as an oral history project or chorus; or in a community project such as rehabilitating houses, recycling or crime prevention.

What Types of Programs Exist?

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of intergenerational programs have been initiated in the past decade. Some are aimed at providing fun and friendship, and others toward complex educational or service components. Settings for such programs are as varied as the populations they serve: intergenerational programs can be found in child care centers, elementary and secondary schools, youth shelters, colleges and universities, senior citizen residences, hospitals, nursing homes, foster care homes and churches. Programs have been successful in both home and professional environments, serving needs of all age groups, and addressing a wide range of problems.

What it Takes to Start Such A Program

Good intergenerational programs do not just happen. They require planning, training, oversight and consistent follow-through. It is important to start small with a good idea, test the program components during a pilot phase, then build on successes. Simply grouping younger and older people together will not make an intergenerational program work. But the involvement of trained personnel from the start will often improve chances for success and program longevity. Intergenerational program planning is not problem-free. It requires commitment, cooperation, and sometimes money to make it work. The problems that can arise are usually surmountable with creative thinking: the benefits of doing intergenerational programs far outweigh any barriers that may be encountered.