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Teens and Older Adults:

by Paulette H. Riley

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America's teenagers and older adults are two seemingly diverse populations, yet they have many things in common. They share a need to make positive contributions to their society, they need to be wanted and appreciated for their knowledge, skills and enthusiasm, and both groups are active contributors to the volunteer community. Now Camp Fire, the national youth organization, is involving both of these groups in an innovative project that may have implications for other service providers.

Usually when teenagers and older adults are brought together as volunteers, the teens serve the older adults, or the older adults help the young people. Camp Fire's "Intergenerational Program Delivery System Project" has been recruiting and training teenagers and older adults to work together as teams to conduct educational programs for younger children in kindergarten through the third grade. This demonstration project exemplifies the next generation of intergenerational pro-

grams—programs in which youths and older adults are partners in service to a younger generation. The 16-month demonstration project, which will be completed in December, is funded by the Administration on Aging and the Office of Program Development, OHDS.

The project's overall objectives are to put into action a human service delivery system based upon volunteer intergenerational instructor teams and to develop written and visual materials documenting the crucial elements of such a system which can subsequently be used by a variety of human service programs and agencies. The project is being tested by Camp Fire councils at five sites: St. Paul Council, St. Paul, Minn.; Greater Dayton Area Council, Dayton, Ohio; Rochester-Monroe County Council, Rochester, N.Y.; Seattle-King County Council, Seattle, Wash.; and Rio Hondo Council, Downey, Calif.

Following recruitment, the teens and elders participate in a 6-hour "team-building" training program designed to

help them become acquainted and comfortable with each other, gain an understanding of each other's roles in life and how these change over the lifespan, and learn to work together. The teams then spend four to six hours learning techniques for teaching the Camp Fire self-reliance course that they will present to the children—either "I'm Safe and Sure" or "I Can Do It."* After completing these training sessions, the teams conduct the courses once a week over a 6- or 8-week period for children in schools, after-school and recreation programs, community centers, summer camps and at other sites.

*Information on the self-reliance courses and other curriculum materials available from Camp Fire, together with further information on the intergenerational program, may be obtained from Dr. Karen Bartz, Director of Research and Development, Camp Fire, Inc., 4601 Madison Ave., Kansas City, Mo. 64112.

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Project implementation has had its successes and its problems. Recruitment of older volunteers has proven difficult in all of the projects, and local plans have had to be revised and adapted to attract older adults. Since many teenagers are already involved in Camp Fire, we have not encountered as many problems in recruiting youths. Other service providers who deal with older adults, however, may experience more difficulties in recruiting teenagers.

Once the volunteers are in place, the resulting partnership has been well worth the effort. From the Seattle-King County Council older volunteers, we've received such comments as "This project has redeemed my faith in teenagers" and "I haven't had so much fun in years." In Downey, an older volunteer told us, "I loved working with the children and my teen partner was sharp."

Both teenagers and older volunteers agree that their intergenerational relationship is valuable, and most say that they would have liked more time to really get to know each other better. When asked to comment about their experience, however, older volunteers in the Seattle project seemed to be more interested in discussing the quality of their interaction with the young children and what the children are learning from the course than in the quality of their team relationship.

Our experiences suggest several key variables that influence the feasibility of this project's unique intergenerational approach. Following are some that must be considered in planning any intergenerational program.

● **Time.** Our particular program asks for an extensive commitment: about six hours for teambuilding training, four to six hours to prepare to teach the self-reliance course, and one hour for six or eight weeks to conduct the course. Others planning intergenerational programs may need to look at projects that require less of a time commitment. Our volunteers seem to think that three or four weeks of teaching



A youngster completes a safety checklist.

would be better, and that the time for training could be shorter.

● **Transportation.** In some cases, neither the teens nor older adults can drive themselves to the program site, which is often a school. Of course, we have attempted to schedule courses in areas easily accessible to both teens and older people, but even this has not solved all of our transportation problems. In general, where teens are during most of the day, older adults are not—and neither are in close proximity to children!

● **Scheduling.** The problem of three different age groups with three different lifestyles affects the scheduling of training sessions and the self-reliance courses. Young children can most easily be reached during the school day—when teenagers are also in class. If scheduled for after school, transportation is a problem and teenagers' activities interfere. If scheduled in the evening, transportation is still a

problem, and many older adults are hesitant to be out at night.

● **Teambuilding.** Our program depends upon building a working team of older adults and teenagers. In addition to overcoming the aforementioned obstacles, it has been difficult to find large blocks of time when both older people and teenagers are available. However, we believe that it is necessary to provide this special training, and it will continue to be a key component of the project.

Other variables apply more specifically to Camp Fire's plan to bring together teenagers and older persons as partners to teach young children. One of these relates to inhibitions about working with a stranger. Our projects have encountered more than a few cases of individuals, both teenagers and older adults, who would volunteer only if they could work with a friend. Perhaps it is impractical to expect that persons living in a homogeneous society could step out of the safety of their peer group

and personal environments to work closely with a stranger of another generation. Our goal, however, is to help this to happen, and we are still searching for the right combination of recruitment approaches and volunteer benefits to overcome this hesitancy.

Depending on their age perspective, some older adults, and some teens, also do not want to work with young children. Perhaps we should have paid more attention to research findings that indicate most older adult volunteers prefer working with their own peer group. The most obvious group for our program, retired teachers, has not materialized—several retired teachers have told us, "I've worked enough with children. I want a change."



Rochester team members discuss lesson plans.

final problem relates to the teaching aspect of the project. Many of the teens and older persons do not see

themselves as qualified to "teach," and we have learned to avoid using that terminology when recruiting. Rather,

project coordinators have begun describing the volunteers' responsibilities as storytelling or leading a group.

"I'm Safe and Sure" is the theme of the St. Paul program.



All of the councils have found that one-to-one recruitment is most effective. Even the Seattle-King County Council, which has been able to recruit and train the largest number of intergenerational teams, was able to get a firm commitment from only seven older adults after making presentations to more than 1,500 older persons. Most important, the experience has strengthened our awareness of the fact that volunteers are not made at age 65 just because, theoretically, people have more "free time" after retirement. Some of the councils have found volunteers among Camp Fire alumni—persons who learned to value service to others as a child or young adult.

Camp Fire staff members have begun to document the learning experiences and the revisions necessary to make this delivery system workable for other service agencies. We continue to have faith in the contributions that this project can make to all three groups involved, and we continue to explore the variables that influence the potential of such programs. We welcome hearing the ideas and experiences of others who can help us improve our recruitment efforts. ■