Courageously Connecting
the Ages

A vast array of intergenerational programs can benefit communities and individuals. No matter what form the gathering takes, when people with differences commingle, the benefits accrue to all participants.

By Donna Butts
A vast array of intergenerational programs can benefit communities and individuals. No matter what form the gathering takes, when people with differences commingle, the benefits accrue to all participants. BY DONNA BUTTS
Within the walls of a rather nondescript former community center in a high-poverty neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio, some magic happens every day when young children and older adults at Champion Intergenerational Enrichment and Education Center get together, often in the multipurpose room that bridges the childcare and older adult areas of the building.

Students from The Ohio State University also play a role. At Champion, the young, old and those in-between prove that intergenerational connections rock.

Champion is an intergenerational shared site, which involves one or more organizations delivering services to unrelated younger people and older adults at the same location.

A shared site — which can be a building, campus, or neighboring buildings — is one type of intergenerational program. Others include older adults serving children and youth, youth serving older adults, and old and young serving together.

Demographics are also fueling this opportunity. By 2043, one in five U.S. residents will be age sixty-five or older. Additionally, the generation of millennials — 75.5 million — exceeded the 74.1 million baby boomers in 2016 (All in Together, 2018).
Millennials will comprise more than one of three adult Americans by 2020, and 75 percent of the workforce by 2025 (All in Together, 2018). At the same time, the United States is more racially and ethnically diverse.

By 2042, more than half of the nation will be people of color. There is also a growing racial generation gap. Today, more than half of Americans under the age of five are people of color, compared to less than one in five Americans over 65.7 (All in Together, 2018).

Intergenerational advocates believe that we can only be successful in the face of our complex future if generational diversity is regarded as a national asset and fully leveraged.

Socializing with one’s peer group is fine, but we need to mix it up because as we age, it’s too easy to focus on the three p’s — pain, pills and passing — or what hurts, what medication a person is taking, and who died.

Blending age groups can lead to a more stimulating conversation. Marilyn Haskel, a 72-year-old resident of Collington, an affiliate of the Kendal Corporation, recounted how two graduate music students who also lived at the continuing care retirement community in Mitchellville, MD, invited their friends over for what turned into impromptu concerts on the grounds (All in Together, 2018).

She told the New York Times: “It was delightful for me to sit down and have conversations about their careers and what they’re planning” (Halpert, 2018).

A recent survey conducted for Generations United and The Eisner Foundation found 92 percent of Americans believe intergenerational activities can help reduce loneliness across all ages (All in Together, 2018).

Retired aerospace engineer Eli Botkin, 92, knows this first-hand. He teaches math to middle schoolers at the Rashi School, a private school just steps from his home at NewBridge on the Charles, a residential community for older adults in Dedham, a Boston suburb.

His school routine includes an hour every Thursday in Cindy Carter’s seventh grade math class, and every Tuesday explaining mathematical principles to her eighth graders. Occasionally, he helps out with sixth grade math.

“I guess what’s keeping me going is the exercise of the body and the mind,” he said. “...I spend a lot of time at the computer preparing lectures and PowerPoints for the classes. It’s a major part of my retirement.”

When done well, intergenerational programs can benefit everyone involved.

Take ONEgeneration in Van Nuys, CA, for instance. It’s a model intergenerational shared site that serves a multicultural population where preschoolers learn Mandarin and Spanish, teachers speak twelve languages among them, and the adults enrolled in the day program hail from twenty-four countries.

What’s clear about shared intergenerational sites, like ONEgeneration, is that it’s an inclusive principle that bridges many of the typical divides.

The benefits for youth who interact with older adults through intergenerational programs include developing social networks, positive attitudes toward aging, and a commitment to community service. Older adults who participate in intergenerational programs report improved physical health and well-being, expanded learning and skills, and appreciation for the help of youth volunteers.

While most shared sites have paired housing and services for older adults with child care for infants through preschool, the potential of programs is only limited by the different services offered.

The public has an opinion about where these should be located. According to the Harris Poll/Generations United survey, nearly two-thirds of Americans think that senior centers (64 percent) and school/universities (62 percent) should be creating opportunities for children/youth and older adults to interact (All in Together, 2018).

Here are important key elements found in the best of these intergenerational programs:

- Reciprocal and Respectful Relationships. Each generation has so much to give when they have the opportunity. The older adults at the Los
Angeles LGBT Center, whose new site opens in early 2019, know how to cook. They have favorite recipes which they can share with the youth. In return, the youth can teach seniors how to become computer and cell phone literate.

- **Dose and Duration.** Intergenerational connections are sometimes called magic, but the reality is magic takes work, attention, and practice. The intergenerational magic at Champion — which includes young and old enjoying a tasty meal on Fridays or engaging in art therapy twice a week — didn't happen overnight. The process, from the time discussions began to doors opening, took more than seven years. The cornerstone of the project was the commitment of the university and community partners to move into a former community center with the intention of building a unique collaboration through shared programs and services.

- **Learning Something New Together.** Research on successful aging shows mental stimulation, new challenges, and physical activity help us thrive. The Rashi School eighth grader Teddy Sunshine was inspired by Eli Botkins to study astrophysics and will be attending a three-week summer program in New York. As for the retired aerospace engineer, his time spent in the classroom helped him think creatively about things to teach related to the teachers' lesson plans.

- **It’s Fun!**

Here are a few ideas:

- **Challenge local leaders to be champions and prioritize intergenerational use of built and outdoor spaces.** Creative use of these resources can maximize intergenerational contact, save dollars, and strengthen community ties across all ages.

- **Lobby your local government to make age integration a core value.** San Diego has led the way. Now, local governments nationwide should create programs, facilities, and policies that unite the young and the old.

- **Urge local foundations to support intergenerational programs.** Funders should invest in projects that transcend, rather than reinforce, age barriers.

- **If you’re over age fifty, connect with Generation to Generation at [https://generationtogeneration.org.](https://generationtogeneration.org)

- **Urge residents of retirement communities to mobilize on behalf of local kids.** What problems are kids near you facing, and how could you step in to help?

Hal Garman, 81, of Gaithersburg, MD, teamed up with some neighbors in his retirement community to help young people. They partnered with a nonprofit that serves immigrant and Muslim youth to launch a series of “Courageous Conversations” between elders who faced discrimination in the past and kids who are facing it now (I Need You, You Need Me, 2017).

Before the Conversations, Zahra Riaz, a young Muslim who wears a hijab, would’ve reacted differently to insults. “Whenever somebody would call me a terrorist…I would say something demeaning as well,” she recalled. Now, “I just ignore them” (I Need You, You Need Me, 2017).

Let’s take a cue from Hal and be courageous enough to connect the ages. *CSA*

---

**REFERENCES**


**RESOURCES**

Intergenerational Programs and Services: [https://www.gu.org/explore-our-topics/intergenerational-programs-spaces/](https://www.gu.org/explore-our-topics/intergenerational-programs-spaces/)

The Champion Intergenerational Enrichment and Education Center: [https://u.osu.edu/dsocsw/2016/02/24/the-champion-intergenerational-enrichment-and-education-center/](https://u.osu.edu/dsocsw/2016/02/24/the-champion-intergenerational-enrichment-and-education-center/)

One Generation: [http://www.onegeneration.org](http://www.onegeneration.org)