

Intergenerational Collaboration: Why Isn't There More of It?

by Robyn I. Stone Aug 24, 2013

Who do we call first when we're faced with a serious personal challenge like an illness, a job loss or a financial setback? I'm willing to venture a guess.

When bad news hits, we instinctively reach out to family members -- to our adult children, if we're over a certain age, and to our parents, if we're younger.

Research backs up this guess. For example, AARP found that during 2009, about 61.6 million family members answered the call to provide care to relatives experiencing limitations in daily activities.

At the other end of the spectrum, AARP also reports that 4.9 million children under age 18 currently live in grandparent-headed households.

These statistics, and the articles featured in the August 2013 issue of *Applied Research Update*, illustrate the tremendous benefits that come from intergenerational collaboration. But the articles you'll read this month also raise an important question:

What don't we do more of it?

Why, for example, don't we encourage the young and the old to work together to help resolve the big challenges facing our society—including economic security, employment, housing affordability, and general life satisfaction? How many great things could we accomplish by cooperating with one another, instead of competing with one another for scarce resources?

I recently had an opportunity to discuss these big questions with experts and scholars from a variety of fields.

Some of the strategies we've proposed are included in a blog that I wrote this week for the *Huffington Post*. I hope you'll read the blog and consider how you can reach out to younger generations for help in addressing the challenges associated with our rapidly aging population.

Inspiring Examples of Intergenerational Collaboration

This issue of *Applied Research Update* also includes profiles of 2 intergenerational programs that I think you will find inspiring:

- The Marvin, a LeadingAge member in Norwalk, CT, houses 52 older adults and educates 40 preschoolers—all under one roof. A deliberate effort to blend programming for both age groups keeps residents young while helping youngsters and their parents get more comfortable with aging. And, of course, there's lots of fun along the way.
- Ibasha is an international organization working to create "socially integrated and sustainable communities that value their elders." I serve on this organization's board of directors, which is why I'm excited to share news about its latest project. On June 13, 2013, Ibasha opened a café in a region of Japan that was hit hard by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Older people designed and operate the Ibasha Café for younger people in their community. I'm confident that this unique experiment will illustrate the good things that can happen when communities foster intergenerational connections and create opportunities for older adults to make meaningful contributions.

The Marvin: How Intergenerational Programming Enriches Lives of Young and Old

by GERALYN MAGAN Aug 24, 2013

What do you get when you mix senior housing and a childcare center?

Twenty years ago, an ambitious plan to offer services to both children and older adults "under one roof" helped win architect Bruce R. Becker a shot at redeveloping the then-abandoned Marvin School in Norwalk, CT.

Today, the daily presence of 40 preschoolers and 52 older adults in that same building is enriching the lives of both generations.

The appropriately named Under One Roof organization was created to manage the mixed-use development that Becker first proposed to the City of Norwalk in response to its Request for Proposals to adapt the closed school building for another use.

Today, the nonprofit organization and LeadingAge member continues to oversee the operations of a senior housing development called The Marvin as well as a Children's Center operated by Bright Horizons Family Solutions.

The state of Connecticut's School Readiness and Child Day Care Grant Program funds the center.

Planning Meaningful Intergenerational Interaction

Under One Roof Executive Director Mary R. Windt and her staff work hard to take what she calls a "planful" approach to blending the housing and childcare programs at 60 Gregory Blvd.

That blending doesn't happen by itself, Windt maintains. Housing and childcare staff must work together on a daily basis to plan intergenerational activities.

And, those activities must involve regular and meaningful interaction between residents and the 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds who attend school in the building each weekday.

For example:

- Each Thursday at 10 a.m., both staffs plan an intergenerational learning activity that is held either in the lounge of the housing community or in the childcare center.
- Once a week, the children bring their lunches to the housing community's dining room, where they sip juice boxes while talking to their older "grand-friends."
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- At least once a month, the 2 programs sponsor a fun activity like a party, sing-along or fitness session featuring the Nintendo Wii or a popular exercise video. Sometimes, parents and siblings join in the fun.
- A number of residents volunteer at the childcare center on a regular basis. “Miss Betty,” the housing community's oldest resident, was a regular and much-loved childcare volunteer until a broken hip slowed her down at age 98.

Attracting a Variety of Younger Age Groups

Despite the presence of 40 preschoolers on site, Windt has intentionally encouraged older children and teens to come to The Marvin for fun and fellowship with residents. Local high school students regularly work with residents on service projects or listen to their life stories.

In addition, Windt has built a 14-year-old relationship with Marvin School, the new elementary school that replaced the old building where older adults now live.

Residents initially served as reading buddies to 1st and 4th-grade students at the new school. In recent years, the housing community and school have collaborated on an ongoing program that helps old and young explore age-related stereotypes.

At the beginning of the "Who Says I'm Old?" program, both generations share their preconceived notions about older people “who all smell funny” or younger people who are “generally rude and noisy,” says Windt. The multi-week program includes various exercises to dispel those notions.

The program culminates with a fair where older adults help youngsters experience firsthand what it's like to have arthritis or vision problems or to use a walker or wheelchair while carrying groceries or a plate of food.

"Some residents love kids of all ages," says Windt. "Some like the 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds in our childcare. Some like the high-school kids. And some just want to work with the 1st and 4th graders. So having all the programs here has been such a benefit."

Intergenerational Benefits: Health and Wellness

Under one Roof regards its intergenerational programs as a component of the comprehensive Housing Plus Services package that The Marvin offers to its residents.

"Intergenerational programs are part of our health and wellness program because they help keep our residents young and active," says Windt. “They give the seniors a purpose and a sense of being loved.”

Younger people in the program also reap important benefits, including the reassuring sense there's no need to be afraid of walkers, wheelchairs or the people who use them. That increased comfort with aging often rubs off on their parents, says Windt.

"I have a relatively new board member whose teenage sons came over here when they were in 4th grade," she says. "Her knowledge of us as an organization came from knowing that her sons really liked coming here. So I think we are reaching out to the community when we reach out to its children."

Tips: Don't Worry about the Money

The Marvin's intergenerational programming has evolved over the years. In the process, Windt and her staff have learned valuable lessons about how to make an intergenerational program successful. Her advice:

- Don't let lack of money stop you. "We do it without funds," says Windt about the program. "Some say that you need a dedicated staff person whose only job is to lead intergenerational activities. That's nice if you can afford it but we can't afford that. So our resident service coordinator acts as the team leader who makes sure our programs happen."
- Make sure all staff members are on board. "It took lots of time and staff leadership to help teachers understand that intergenerational activities were an enhancement, not an extra burden," says Windt. "The childcare director has to be committed to ensuring that this program happens and so does the resident services coordinator and myself and the board."
- Be proactive about planning. "Many senior communities say they have intergenerational programs because a Brownie Troop comes in and sings, or because they have a childcare program for staff," says Windt. "But unless it is a deliberate, planned program and it is ongoing, then it is really not intergenerational."

How will you know if your intergenerational program is real? It's all about relationships, says Windt.

"It's not about entertainment and it doesn't have to be fancy," says Windt. "It's really about sitting and interacting on a regular basis. If you're not building relationships, your program is really not making the impact that it could."