

BENEFITS OF INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTIONS

by Susan V. Bosak Legacy Project <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/intergenbenefits.html>

"Connections between generations are essential for the mental health and stability of a nation."

Margaret Mead

In those at either end of the life course – the young and the old – you find striking similarities. We live in a society that values adulthood, and in turn doing – productivity and ongoing activity. The young and the old share a different rhythm. It's one that focuses not only on doing, but on the power of being. It's the simplicity of playing with blocks or tending to flowers. The young and the old are most closely connected with the essence of living. They can exist in a moment that's the grand sum of past, present, and future. Rather than time being the enemy – rushing time or stressing to fit as much into time as possible – time becomes a comfortable companion, a circle rather than a line.

Benefits of Intergenerational Connections

We divide up our communities and our activities by age – young people in schools, older people in retirement communities or facilities. We talk a lot about all the ways we need to help older people. But, perhaps, the old can help us. It's the experience of life in a multigenerational, interdependent, richly complex community that, more than anything else, teaches us how to be human.

Better Community

If we can improve the standing of older adults in society, and nurture what they can bring through intergenerational connections, then we can achieve a better community with a better quality of life for all ages.

Historically, young and old connected naturally. Older people taught the young how to be and how to become. Close daily contact between the young and old was a matter of survival. Being with, watching after, and assisting in the care of young children, while demanding in many ways, does not require the full vigor of youth. The physical limitations that can come with getting older actually cement the relationship between old and young. An elder capable of working the land or building a house or strenuous cleaning would have less inclination to spend hours doting on grandchildren, telling them stories, and instructing them in the ways of their people. The physiological changes that accompany old age, which contemporary society looks upon with great disdain, can actually be useful preconditions for valuable intergenerational connections.

There is a back-and-forth reciprocity between all generations. Adults provide support to elders, most often to address health or physical limitations. Elders, in turn, assist adults through experience, emotional support, and participating in the care of children. Elders can help socialize children, teach them empathy and character, and give them an unconditional form of love they can't find elsewhere. Children, in turn, can be an endless source of joy for elders, share affection and play, and provide assistance with many simple tasks. Children can participate in the work of adults, and provide enjoyment and love. Adults, in turn, provide food, shelter, clothing, and nurturance to children. And so a strong, healthy, intergenerational web of community goes.

Many older adults today are better educated, healthier, and more able than elders of past generations. They can clearly be a tremendous resource. But what about the oldest, frailest of the old? They can be our greatest teachers. They can certainly instruct us with words and stories of times past, and share a lifetime of accumulated wisdom. But what they truly help us learn about is the world and ourselves as they teach us with their very selves, their being. Elders can also teach us about the end of life, which informs the whole of our lives.

I've seen it in my work with families, my community workshops, and in all the research: relationships between young and old make us feel connected. They make us feel connected not only to each other, but to something bigger, to the past and to the future, to the flow of life. This connection leads to tangible benefits for all generations.

Benefits to Older Adults

The benefits to older adults of a close connection with the young include:

Elders often feel a sense of "joyful freedom." As a grandparent, for example, they don't feel the pressure they felt as a parent. You get all the benefits and joys of parenthood without many of the drawbacks.

A relationship with a grandchild or young friend gives older adults a "second chance." Many people have regrets in their later years about time they didn't spend with their own children, or mistakes they made as a parent. A new grandchild or young friend is a fresh start.

Active, involved older adults with close intergenerational connections consistently report much less depression, better physical health, and higher degrees of life satisfaction. They tend to be happier with their present life and more hopeful for the future.

Young and old can fulfill the role of student and teacher for each other, and it's not always the older person who does the teaching. Children like to feel needed, and they can teach elders lots of things – like how to find some pretty cool stuff on the Internet! Children can also help older people, particularly those facing health challenges or other losses, see the world anew again, through a child's eyes.

Elders have an opportunity to leave a powerful legacy, to make a difference. They can send a message into the future through a grandchild or young friend. Relationships across generations can fulfill our desire for immortality.

Benefits to Children

Research shows children need four to six involved, caring adults in their lives to fully develop emotionally and socially. The problem today is that children often get too much peer socialization, too much mediated contact through computers and texting, and not enough one-on-one, personal time with mature adults.

The benefits to children of a close, long-term connection with older adults include:

Through grandparents, children have a better sense of who they are and where they've come from. They have roots, a history, and a sense of continuity and perspective.

Intergenerational bonds need not be traditional or biological. Older adult mentors can make a significant difference in a child's life. The involvement of a reliable, caring adult helps children develop life skills, and builds self-esteem and confidence. One study showed that when a child is mentored by an adult, they are: 46% less likely to begin using illegal drugs; 27% less likely to begin using alcohol; 52% less likely to skip school.

In general, children develop higher self-esteem, better emotional and social skills (including an ability to withstand peer pressure), and can even have better grades in school.

Children feel special. Especially with grandparents, children are "spoiled" a little. Research tells us that, in moderation, this can be a good thing. Children know that being with their grandparents is special. They don't expect the rest of the world to treat them the way their grandparents do, so it's really not "spoiling." They experience an unconditional type of love that's not easily found elsewhere.

Children can get undivided time and attention from an older adult that tired, busy parents often can't give them.

An older adult can give children someone safe to talk with and confide in. While children may want to be different from their parents, they often don't mind being like their grandparents or other older adults. This gives elders a lot of power and ability to influence a troubled or confused child.

Through sharing in an older adult's interests, skills, and hobbies, children are introduced to new activities and ideas. Through their life experience, older adults can often bring with them a tremendous amount of patience. Knowledge, skills, and attitudes children pick up from elders tend to stick with them through life more than those picked up from other sources.

By getting to know "real, live old people" children look beyond the ageist stereotypes. They become more comfortable with aging – which is really something we all do from the moment we're born. Children are also encouraged to look toward the whole of their lives. They have many models for adulthood, but far fewer for older adulthood. When they can see the whole of their lives, they are more motivated and see greater relevance between what they're learning in school and their future. Research shows that "planful competence" – the ability to understand the life course and work toward goals – is key to student success in school and in life.

Benefits to Young Parents

The benefits to parents when the "grand generation" is a part of their lives and their children's lives are also clear.

Today's parents are often stressed and overwhelmed. A loving, supportive grandparent or other older adult can give them someone to talk with – someone who's "been there" but now, with the benefit of hindsight, can help put issues into perspective.

It's also comforting for parents to know that there are other adults who love their children and are looking out for them. Grandparents take some of the pressure off parents.

Finally, there is the tangible support of reasonable physical or financial help when it's needed. Grandparents can be a safety net in the highwire act we call the modern family.

Many people say their relationship with their parents improves when children enter the picture. For example, an overly strict parent suddenly becomes a "softie" as a grandparent. Adult children see their parents in a new light, and this can help heal relationships.

Beyond Just Programs

The richest forms of human development are most available to those willing and able to interweave their needs and potential with the needs and potential of others, especially those younger or older.

The success of isolated intergenerational projects and programs across the country clearly demonstrates the significant benefits of intergenerational contact to both children and adults.

The challenge now lies in going beyond a project or program here or there to making a larger commitment to intergenerational connections so that they become a part of daily life and the social fabric.