Play in the United States of America: Intergenerational Play

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Introduction

The world is changing and soon there will be more elderly adults than children (Vespa, 2019). The global demographic transformation shows there is a need for programmes to serve and support both age groups. As a result, there are currently many efforts under way to bring together children, youth, and older adults. The movement connecting generations and creating intergenerational programming has increased and there are a variety of different programme models. Depending on programme needs, dimensions, and availability of the intergenerational groups and programme goals, the designs of the programmes can vary. This chapter

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will selectively review the research and introduce intergenerational play, programming, and a pilot project.

Within the literature, the term intergenerational is defined as a purposeful and regular exchange and learning between children and older generations (Bostrom et al., 2015). Intergenerational programmes provide beneficial opportunities for older adults and children to interact. Play experience between the generations benefits children's overall development and well-being while simultaneously engaging older adults with opportunities to interact, reflect on life, socialise, exercise, learn, share, and lead. Devore, Winchell, and Rowe (2016) describe how organised programmes can bring the two generations together. Community intergenerational programmes have been developed to encourage interactions of diverse individuals, dispel stereotypes, promote values and traditions, encourage volunteering, promote community identities and values, and promote tolerance.

Humans, by nature, live life within generations. More parents are working full-time now than they did in the past, while also being the primary caregivers for multiple generations (Feldman, 2021). According to Cohen-Mansfield and Jensen (2015), older adults and children involved in intergenerational programmes thrive due to shared purpose. Seniors engaged in intergenerational relationships and programmes experience better emotional, physical, and mental health. Likewise, interacting with older adults enables children to develop communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and social skills (Dellmann-Jenkins et al., 1991). The benefits of play are well-documented in research. However, intergenerational play and organised programmes are still an emerging area of research.

Research data shows that intergenerational engagement has positive results despite differentiation in programme goals. Agate, Agate, Liechty, and Cochran (2018) found a positive correlation between play experiences and the development of older adults and children. While differences in beliefs, interests, opinions, and life actions naturally exist between generations, lack of interaction between generations can cause misunderstandings and increase stereotypes.

Upon participation in these programmes, children are provided the opportunity to learn patience and empathy and adults are given the opportunity to combat feelings of loneliness. The societal benefits of

these types of intergenerational programmes have shown positive impacts that warrant more research. The most compelling research demonstrates the health benefits for participating seniors and an incline of higher education performance from involved children or youth (Giraudeau & Bailly, 2019; Kinnevy & Morrow-Howell, 2000).

Current Aging Society

Researchers are proposing that by the year 2030, the United States will have more Americans entering their seventh, eighth, and ninth decades of life than ever before (Wacker & Roberto, 2019). This is because "between 2011 and 2030, about 10,000 baby boomers will turn 65 each day" (Cohn & Taylor, 2014, p. 3). Additional research shows that by 2030, there will be approximately 74 million people over the age of 65, which is more than twice the estimated total for that age in 2000 (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2016). There are many people aging at the same time, and this group of baby boomers are well-known for advocating for themselves. This might be because they are better educated and more well-off financially than previous generations. They also live in nice homes and enjoy the services and programmes that were put in place for their parents and grandparents. They also differ from prior generations in that they tend to marry later, have fewer children, and more divorces (Wacker & Roberto, 2019). Ryan, Smith, Antonucci, and Jackson write, "Compared with their parents' generation, boomers are less likely to have a spouse to rely on and will have fewer adult children to serve as caregivers" (as cited in Wacker & Roberto, 2019, p. 4). Additionally, families are more openly being diverse with divorce, remarriage, lesbian and gay families, and bisexual and transgender families. This may impact families' participation in intergenerational family activities that were seen as tradition in previous generations. It seems that church and community events are occurring more in age silos, rather than continuing to share events in an intergenerational way as was reasonably common in the past (Cortellesi & Kernan, 2016). Another difference between generations is that families are now mainly employed in the urban areas instead of working on family farms that were

traditionally passed down from the previous generation. Many families move every few years to follow employment opportunities, taking them away from extended family events. Thus, families do not have the opportunities to engage in intergenerational activities like they did in the past (Kamei et al., 2011). For this reason and the others mentioned previously (increased empathy, decreased misunderstandings, etc.), it is important to create programmes that connect different generations.

Benefits of Intergenerational Programmes

Researchers have recognised the potential of using play to facilitate connections and learning. Play is recognised as a universal phenomenon that occurs throughout the life span (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Research supports intergenerational play and programmes that unite age groups (Devore et al., 2016). These shared play experiences provide benefits to all participants. Park (2015) states:

> There were positive trends in mental health and social aspects of the outcomes such as positive changes in attitudes towards older people shown as better mutual understanding decreased stereotyping of older people, and more respect for them. Better psychological outcomes were found, including reduced anxiety and an improved sense of self-worth. (p. 1)

Emerging research that examines the play between older adults and children shows an overall increase in well-being for all parties involved (Mosor et al., 2014). Older adults who work with children and youth have improved health and report better physical and mental health than their counterparts (Park, 2014, 2015). An additional study found involvement in intergenerational programming can minimise negative behaviours. Tierney, Grossman, and Resch (2000) found that youth were 52% less likely to drop out of school when involved with an intergenerational programme.

Skrpoeta, Colvin, and Sladen (2014) found intergenerational play groups were successful in developing a sense of connectedness and that the groups were successful in developing the opportunity to participate in

society and a sense of connectedness. Their study also found an increase in self-esteem as the older generation felt like they were contributing to society (Skrpoeta et al., 2014). Another study surveyed seniors in several programmes and the results indicated increased feelings of well-being and life satisfaction from their involvement with the children (Seefeldt, 2008).

Research has shown the benefits of intergenerational connections for older adults, even those with extreme mental impairments such as dementia (Su, 2017). Lee and Malone (2007) found that adults with severe cognitive impairments seem to participate in parallel type play (Parten, 1932) while still reporting high levels of positive engagement. Older adults with dementia and other cognitive impairments experienced more positive benefits during interaction with children than they did during non-generational activities (Lee & Malone, 2007; Su, 2017). There has been emerging research showing that playing with digital gaming systems provides meaningful interactions and collaborative play (Piirainen-Marsh, 2010; Zhang & Kaufman, 2016). Researchers have found that playing digital games with youth may increase the cognitive and memory skills of older adults (Zhang & Kaufman, 2016). The relationship that develops as a result of intergenerational play is beneficial to all. Children learn many skills from working with older adults. In turn, older adults learn about innovations and technology by playing with youth and children.

Hatton-Yeo and Ohsako (2000) suggest every intergenerational programme should be purposeful in planning and organising play. The physical layout needs to accommodate both age groups and the design must accommodate the use of assistive devices (Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000). Researchers have also reported the need to have sufficient training for staff (Gualano et al., 2017). Epstein and Boisvert (2006) found that open-ended, process-oriented activities were more productive and promoted active engagement within intergenerational play. Activities need to be geared to all participants who are interested. Their research found that flexible activities lead children and adults to explore different possibilities when thinking of how to accomplish their tasks. Flexibility also gives both generations a higher chance of building relationships during the process of discovery.

Play reaches its full potential when children are engaged and have opportunities of choice (Ceglowski, 1997). Being able to make choices in play is important not only to engage children, but also to engage older adults who may have limited abilities. Choice of activities with how to participate and what they may participate in/with can be less intimidating than being forced into an activity. This approach to intergenerational programmes supports contemporary ideas of play which emphasise the importance of the process and incorporating flexibility that allows play to develop in its own course (Pellegrini, 2009). Also, Morita and Kobayashi (2013) found that more social-oriented, intergenerational programmes versus more performance-based, intergenerational programmes allow older adults to play more roles and allow for more conversations with their playmates.

Intergenerational Play

Play is important for all ages. Davis, Larkin, and Grave (2002) write, "Intergenerational play provides rich and stimulating opportunities for older adults and children to enjoy each other's company and learn from one another" (p. 1). Play acts as a way to bring generations together, and there are benefits for all who are involved. Scholars have found that children's play is different in intergenerational programmes. Adult interactions in play can facilitate and enhance the experience and sometimes children help older adults in their play. Adults can observe, scaffold, or fully participate with a child involved in play. Much is learned through shared activities between the young and older adults. Quality play experiences are created and nurtured when adults are involved in the process (Rymanowicz, 2018). New skill development for children can also occur with these interactions. Intergenerational Play (2019) states:

> Play is particularly beneficial for children when it's undirected, but children can also gain a lot when adults take an active role in play.
>
> Children's play changes when it is intergenerational, and research shows that children display higher levels of language and problem-solving skills when they have lots of contact with adults. (para. 2)

Environment and interactions create a unique type of play experience. Larkin, Kaplan, and Rushton (2010) explain that in order for play to be beneficial, the environment must be set up to facilitate interactions and play that engage both age groups. Interactions between the groups are exceptionally playful and relationships such as friendships can develop (Larkin et al., 2010). The benefits for children include higher language skills and problem-solving skills (Intergenerational Play, 2019). Furthermore, research by Dellmann-Jenkins, Lambert, and Fruit (1991) concluded that the three- and four-year old children who participated in a nine-month intergenerational programme were more willing to share, help, and cooperate with older adults than those without the same type of experience. Interactions during play give older adults an opportunity to nurture younger people, remember and relive some of their experiences, and possibly give meaning to their lives they may not have felt in a while.

Thus, intergenerational play programmes should be considered invaluable to society because of their benefits for all generations. Intergenerational programmes appear to be a win-win for all participants. The cross-generational experiences provide rich relationships for the children with a person who is amenable, supportive, and not a disciplinarian. Many adults see these types of programmes as a way to give back and they often feel they receive more in return from the children. Children and youth involved in play with older adults develop a healthy interaction between generations. Sharing in the context of intergenerational programming can be a valuable way to break down generational barriers and reconnect with different age groups. According to Vincenti (2004), "Age diversity not only provides opportunities for values, knowledge, and insights, that only experience can bring, to be transmitted from the old to the young, but it provides opportunities for the young to contribute new insights and world views" (p. 2).

Diversity in Types of Play Programmes

The phrase 'one size does not fit all' is true for intergenerational programming. Having a strong "understanding of developmentally appropriate practice and support for both children and elders" (Holmes, 2009, p. 114) should be the foundational factor in planning intergenerational programmes. Secondly, there needs to be a meeting to decide goals and objectives for the programme, so all participants are of the same understanding. Effective training is essential, as it impacts adult and child participants alike.

Additionally, cognitive levels of the older adults and children need to be considered at each step of the planning. Safety of both groups (children and older adults) needs to be discussed. Factors in planning an intergenerational programme should include deciding who the participants will be. For example, some questions to ask are: (a) Will they be older adults who live in the community or who live in a residential facility? and (b) What cognitive function level (high or low) is the programme built to support? Cognitive function of the youth is also an important factor. Age and income guidelines and socio-economic status can impact availability for all generations to be involved in programming,

There are many decisions to be made in planning. What is the purpose of the programme? Is the goal of the programme for participants to develop a bond between generations or is it a way to relieve boredom in their lives? The duration of the programme will be impacted by this decision. How long will the programme last? Session lengths can be in a range from 15 to 50 minutes and sometimes for as long as 120 minutes (Su, 2017). Meeting frequency needs to be considered: monthly, bi-monthly, or weekly? Or, maybe it is possible to choose special times based on holidays or other opportunities.

What type of content should occur between the generations? For example, intergenerational programmes may include various activities such as singing, reading, and/or games (Williams et al., 2012; Isaki & Harmon, 2015; Morita & Kobayashi, 2013). There are many other content areas to consider as well, such as drama, dance, art, puppetry, and exercise. Some programmes are designed for the elders to serve the young,

while others are designed for the youth to serve the older adults. Some are designed to have a mutually beneficial relationship. A programme-needs assessment could be a valuable tool in helping identify what ages, talents, and content might be desired. The options are only limited by imagination.

Different Models

There are different models for different types of intergenerational programmes that depend on population, space, goals, and leadership. Each programme has a specific structure. The types of programmes include shared-site, children visiting residential care facilities, older adults visiting children, pull-out programmes, and community intergenerational programmes. This section briefly explains components of each.

In a shared-site, an organization provides services to both older and younger generations housed in the same facility. Resources such as employees and space may be shared (Jarrott & Bruno, 2003). Childcare centres and senior living facilities (adult day or extended care) are typical examples of shared-sites. The space will require planning with a possible window where older adults could watch the children when they are not actively involved in activities. Outdoor areas must be user-friendly for both the needs of the children and the older adults. For example, there should be paths that accommodate wheel toys for children and walkers or wheelchairs for those who utilise them.

In a shared-site like a residential care facility, children or youth of any age could visit and explore different experiences with the residents. Some of the programmes could be as simple as running errands together. This could be an opportunity for great conversation. The wisdom of the older adults could be shared with the teens. Conversations could include topics like where to go to college and helping with career choices. Children from an elementary school or childcare centre could share time with assisted living or memory care residents living with dementia. Outcomes have been generally positive in several studies addressed by Galbraith, Larkin, Moorhouse, and Oomen (2015). Classroom teachers should attend any activities with children at all times. Also, staff from the

residential care facility should be present, because they are aware of the special needs of each resident.

Programmes in which older adults visit elementary-aged children or middle school-age children are usually more structured. Participants might read together, explore an art project, or even try a science experiment. Classroom teachers often decide what content will be used, but a volunteer could also arrange the events. When adults visit child programmes, concerns might include transportation issues for the older adults and conflicts with other life activities, making it difficult for them to attend every time. Weather has also been identified as a challenge area.

Pull-out programmes can be based in a variety of locations. A pull-out programme may occur anywhere where children/youth and older adults have a location where they can share time together. Hospitals often have a rocker programme for babies who need to be rocked, such as children who are living with HIV or another condition. Mentoring or tutoring could occur in many places. Even in a college setting, students could benefit from the wisdom of older adults. Research is limited in this area but has potential for growth.

Community intergenerational programming is a model designed to benefit the participants. It also serves a need that is not being met in the neighborhood or community. For example, participants may work together to plant a community garden, clean up a roadside area or public park, or serve a holiday meal to those in need. The anticipated outcome of intergenerational programmes is to create new and positive relationships. These programmes give meaning to life for both the young and the old. Programming allows for many options to grow and explore (Holmes, 2009; Kaplan & Larkin, 2004). Because these programmes are clearly important, our team decided to implement a project.

The Pilot: Generations Learning Together

The authors of this chapter started Generations Learning Together, which began as a pilot project and grew into a programme that is now in its fifth year and is being applied in a public school setting. This intergenerational programme began as an interdisciplinary group of faculty that planned a

programme to involve older adults, college students, and preschool children (3–4 years in age). Hence, the name of the programme was established. One of the goals was to have employees work with faculty from other departments and utilise their expertise. The faculty from different departments in Family Life Education (FLE) (gerontology, child development, marriage and family, nutrition, and kinesiology) came together to create the pilot programme.

The other goals of the programme were to (a) provide service-learning opportunities and creative experiences for student learning, (b) provide a programme that would benefit the community, and (c) provide research on intergenerational programming and relationships.

The Programme

Generations Learning Together (GLT) is a shared-site programme. This research emerged in a partnership between a university and a local church. This site provided the venue because this location had better accessibility for older adults than the university. The location of the church was a five-minute walk from the university, which was beneficial for students because it provided a service-learning opportunity for those without transportation. The church acted as a resource for preschool children to be involved in the intergenerational programme, since it already had an onsite childcare programme.

GLT met bi-weekly for one hour for a total of six or seven sessions per semester. During the first year, the team tried 90-minute sessions and found that the time was too long for older adults. The programme currently lasts 60 minutes, and additional time is used for students to set up and clean up the programme. The older adults were recruited through the church, newspaper announcements, word-of-mouth, and contact with several residential care facilities. The programme was funded by several grants and awards which were used to pay for student workers, materials, and supplies for the project. College students utilised concepts from their coursework and helped plan and facilitate the programme. Class assignments were used to help students design playful activities to appeal to all ages.

Play-Based Curriculum

The intergenerational programme was set up to begin and end with a large group "getting to know you" activity in which adults, students, and children try to learn about each other. This was done through music, movement, reading, games, and/or discussions. This structured time allowed for the groups to come together at a common area with a particular curriculum goal (Jarrott, 2011). We found this type of activity put groups at ease before integrating into a setting that required more individual communication and use of more complex skills.

After the large group activity, each participant selected a play activity where they liked to participate. Adults and children were encouraged to work together on projects and activities. These unstructured activities allowed for emergent discoveries and decision-making efforts for all involved. Activities were tailored to meet the needs of all the participants and to allow involvement based on the direction of play. Some activities were planned based on the interest or talent of an older adult participant. Activities offered in the programme included dramatic play, art, manipulatives, and gross motor activities. Activities were planned by students pursuing a range of academic degrees. Faculty members contributed ideas and insight to ensure that all activities were age-appropriate for all participants.

Lessons Learned

Participants were asked to complete surveys prior to their participation and after the programme had ended. Older adults and college students both indicated they had improved perceptions of each other as a result of their participation in the programme. Older adults shared that they loved the experience and have a greater appreciation of college students due to the programme. College students had positive attitudes about the older adults. Some older adults used wheelchairs or walkers for mobilisation purposes. Mobilisation equipment intimidated the college students at the start. However, students reflected that they were amazed at how fun,

playful, smart, and kind the older adults in the programme were. Children were interviewed by their classroom teachers before and after the programme. They indicated that their older friends were "a lot of fun to play with," "that some walked with sticks," and "they reminded them of their grandparents" (Bertram et al., 2018).

Throughout the programme the team learned a significant amount, but we found that flexibility was paramount. The older adults had inconsistent attendance due to doctor appointments, other commitments, weather challenges, and a wide range of other time demands. The team worked to encourage them to come and participate in the program and the team simultaneously ensured them that missing sessions due to commitments was understandable and expected. The reassurances of the team seemed to make the older adults feel better about participating in the programme. Attendance for the older adults' demographic ranged from four to sixteen per session. Classroom teachers attended each session with their students, and college students also engaged with the children. Classroom set up depended on selected activities for each session. Adult chairs and carpeted flooring were provided for each session. Alterations to the learning environment were made to accommodate both wheelchairs and walkers. Preschoolers helped adjust the positioning of tables and chairs to accommodate their older adult friends.

Bringing It All Together

The GLT project was met with such success that our team chose to expand. With the help of the Early Childhood Curriculum Coordinator from the local public schools, a pilot project was initiated at a large elementary school. Our team recruited four pre-kindergarten classes and worked with the public schools to gain permission from the public school system and through the university's Institutional Review Board. Older adults in the community were invited via newspaper, word-of-mouth, and through school and university contacts.

Due to public school scheduling, the intergenerational project was 30 minutes per session. Similar to the programme at the church, the team continued its practices with regard to environment set up, large group

introduction activities, and a selection of choices of playful activities afterwards. Our team was able to implement two sessions before all schools closed due to COVID-19. In these two sessions, all parties involved agreed that the programme was helpful and productive. The public schools have decided to pursue intergenerational programming and they will be expanding the intergenerational programme in the fall to other public-school sites. Due to the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020), more commonly known as COVID-19, the programme was not able to yield enough data to properly assess its efficacy. However, the team does have anecdotal observations about the positive effects of the sessions.

The team asserts that programme experience shows that play-promoting activities best engage all generations. One of the older adults shared that "seeing the children here is the highlight of my week". Another gentleman attended almost every session for four years and there is mutual affection between him and the children. When the team relayed that another programme was being implemented, he chose to attend that programme in addition to our original programme he was already attending. The programme has shown that play-based programmes are meaningful to all ages. One major goal of intergenerational programmes is to create new and positive relationships that enhance life's meaning.

Conclusion

In the United States, trending research shows that intergenerational activities and programmes promote unity. As research continues to yield positive results proving the benefits of intergenerational programming, it is the team's hope that programming will continue to expand. The agency Generations United supports, develops, and finds locations for new programmes and is devoted to the dissemination of information to support intergenerational programmes. The agency provides research, resources, and a database of programme locations. This agency has helped navigate the challenge of the lack of any system that disseminates information regarding effective programme models. As noted throughout the chapter, research has shown that intergenerational play is a vital component to

improving intergenerational relations and human well-being. Intergenerational play programmes yield positive societal results such as increasing tolerance, reducing ageism stereotypes, and improving communities as a society. Intergenerational programmes that support play should continue to be pursued by all of society to improve high level unity in communities, business, politics, government, and international relations.

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