

INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

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Abstract:

Play is universal. No matter who you are or where you live, play is a way to learn about yourself and the world around you. Shared play experiences are a good way to build mutually beneficial relationships among younger and older generations, and these interactions contribute to cognitive growth, improved social skills, physical development and emotional well-being. This article outlines why intergenerational play is important, provides informative background information on the topic of play, and suggests appropriate toys, materials, and games for bringing the generations together in positive play experiences.

Introduction

Intergenerational play provides rich and stimulating opportunities for older adults and children to enjoy each other's company and learn from one another. It also acts as a connecting force between these skipped generations. Playing with a child affords older adults the occasion to reminisce about their own childhood, while children can gain an enriched learning experience from interacting with positive role models. Together, they share a special time which only intergenerational play can bestow.

Much has been written about children and how they play. Of course, playing with toys naturally belongs in the domain of childhood. An infant's first play experiences are intergenerational by nature when adults smile at, tickle and talk to the baby in an effort to elicit a sustained pleasure response (<http://www.btha.co.uk/publications/ntc/intergen/html>, 4/19/2002). Grandparents are another source of play for young children. Unfortunately, for today's younger generation, the reality is that grandparents may not live close by, or may be separated from them by divorce. Blended families, both parents working outside the home, and fewer siblings to play with have all contributed to changing the way children today engage in play. It is probable that many older adults would eagerly play with children if offered the chance to do so, because the informal interaction allows them to build satisfying relationships in the here-and-now, and a vehicle for appreciating how the cycle of life continues.

Older adults and children involved in intergenerational programs today thrive on the benefits of cross-generational exchanges. Often, older adults state that they receive more than they give when involved in an intergenerational activity – this is a way to invest in the future, a time to make a difference. For adults who play with young people, there is an opportunity to replay successful nurturing roles, renew positive emotions, and reinforce meaning in their lives. The world of intergenerational play offers new, flexible, attentive play partners for children. Play, a basic activity of childhood, when combined with older adults in an intergenerational setting, opens a new gateway to intergenerational programming.

Benefits of Play for All Ages

One does not have to search far to realize there is a rich and growing body of literature that advocates the learning value of play experiences in all areas of development. In the area of literacy, for example, book-related dramatic play helps children to comprehend books and express their reactions to books (Rowe, 1998). In a 1998 study, multi-age enriched play settings were shown to provide more opportunities for interactions around literacy content (Christie & Stone, 1998). Other studies have indicated that shared enactment of stories increases children's engagement in play (Fein, Ardilla-Rey, & Groth, 2000), language strategies in play support other literacy strategies (Branscombe & Taylor, 2000), and combining a literacy-rich play context with active adult mediation improves children's ability to read environmental print (Neuman & Roskos, 1992;1993). There is much other supporting literature on topics ranging from teacher involvement in socio-dramatic play, to the relationship of play and culture. Older adults without any formal training can engage in these types of play experiences with children and be a positive role model, storyteller, teacher, or historian (Newman, Larkin, & Smith, 1999).

The focus on intergenerational play in this paper addresses the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive benefits derived for both age groups, and describes those toys which are conducive to positive intergenerational interactions. Comparing the role of play in the lives of young children and older adults clearly shows that play can provide a natural avenue toward improving cognitive, social, physical and emotional well-being for all ages. The chart below demonstrates the similarities among benefits for both children and older adults.

Table 1: Benefits of Play

Young Children

Cognitive	Social	Physical	Emotional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increase flexibility in thinking (imagination; symbolic representation) ▪ Make new connections of meaning ▪ Gain concrete experience with visual/spatial, & mathematical relationships ▪ Solve problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Express ideas and negotiate with peers (language development) ▪ Learn what is acceptable language and behavior in the culture ▪ Learn to share, compromise, respond to others ▪ Make friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Practice and consolidate small and gross motor skills ▪ Oxygenate & stimulate blood flow to the brain ▪ Gain concrete experience with relationships of weight, size, distance, etc. ▪ Increase control over tools and materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interact with others and learn to express feelings appropriately ▪ Work through emotionally charged experiences ▪ Experiment with new roles for self ▪ Learn to show empathy ▪ Build self esteem

Older Adults

Cognitive	Social	Physical	Emotional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exercise flexibility in thinking (imagination, creativity) ▪ Make new connections of meaning (critical thinking) ▪ Recognize surprises; alter ideas & habits (expectations are challenged) ▪ Solve problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Express ideas and articulate convincing arguments ▪ Share perspectives based on life experiences ▪ Learn to adapt and change ▪ Make new friends and keep the old 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exercise small and large muscles ▪ Oxygenate & stimulate blood flow to the brain ▪ Maintain a measure of control over the physical world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interact with others and express feelings (combat depression) ▪ Review life (integrity vs. despair) ▪ Imagine new roles for self (growth) ▪ Express empathy (give love or perish) ▪ Build self esteem

The playing child is an imaginative child (<http://sovernet/~gmws/9409/play.htm>, 6/23/02). Without imagination, a child is unable to grasp the abstract symbolic representation and conceptual understanding that is so necessary to cognitive development. Children who have never played or learned to play are less likely to develop the social and emotional skills that are critical throughout the life span. Children who have had adults involved in their play are more creative (<http://btha.co.uk/publications/ntc/intergen.html>, 4/19/2002). Thus, pairing younger generations with older adults in play situations that are active and interactive is likely to result in positive outcomes in all the domains of their development. But what of older adults who do not have access to children, who are isolated, single or widowed, or physically impaired? What can be done to bring these two vital generations together so they may be a resource for one another? Intergenerational programs are logical vehicles for addressing the needs of these age groups, where human interest, intellectual stimulation, and physical activity can be fostered through play interactions.

Intergenerational play creates a context for social interaction and learning for both younger and older generations. Time and patience, often in short supply in a family's daily routines, are not issues for the child and older adult in an intergenerational program setting.

For the child, it is a time to enjoy focused attention from an individual who is not a parent, a teacher, or a peer. Like a grandparent, the older adult is not in competition with the child, not a disciplinarian, and over time can become a trusted friend.

Intergenerational play offers opportunities that are ripe for learning together, for solving problems with the help of another perspective, and for laughter over shared mistakes or difficult challenges. That children learn through play is a given, but what

do older adults learn by playing with children? Older adults learn about the children of today. By participating in activities with a child, they experience the world of play from the child's perspective. They learn that even with the advent of television and computers, some things never change. The child, in turn, learns much about what it means to grow older. Older adults can demonstrate that they are still caring and capable human beings who happen to wear wrinkles. Young children can learn about aging over the life span, understand that everybody ages from the day they are born, and that they will age as well. The positive regard that each participant has for the other will reinforce the needed self-esteem that is essential to both young and old.

Intergenerational Toys and Games

What makes a toy an intergenerational toy? There is nothing very special about these toys, but they all have commonalities which make them a good choice for intergenerational interaction. A toy familiar to both young and old can initially spark an interest in playing together and open the door to a positive exchange. Children are fascinated to learn that an adult has previously played with, or liked, or owned a toy similar to one of theirs. A well-loved doll, passed down through a family, gains special meaning for a grandparent or parent, and especially for the new recipient - the child. Playing together with standard toys enjoyed by all generations provides another positive outcome, that of breaking down stereotypical feelings about each other as being very different. It is when the older generation and the younger generation interact side-by-side that children begin to develop a positive attitude toward the elderly and their own aging process (Guddemi, Jambor, Skrupskelis, 1996). Through the use of toys familiar to both generations, the element of fun in playing together can also lead to reminiscence by the older adult who might then be prompted to tell stories that pass along shared values and history to the younger participant.

Four toys have been chosen for discussion in this paper that represent good intergenerational toys because they have consistently engaged younger and older generations in satisfying play interactions. These toys are not new electronic marvels, but old familiar friends which appeal to the child in all of us. The four recommended toys are wooden blocks, a topsy-turvy doll, old and young puppet figures, and a bubble catcher.

Blocks

Blocks come in all shapes and sizes and materials such as wood, plastic or cardboard. No one knows when the first blocks appeared as a toy for children but the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) is credited with having promoted the use of alphabet blocks. Mentioned in his book *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, they were later to become known as Locke's blocks. Initially used to develop literacy skills in children, it was also fun to build things with them, and have since developed into one of our most creative and common household toys (McClary, A. 1997 pp 217, 18, 229).

During the nineteenth century the German schoolmaster Freiderich Froebel developed a block system consisting of "gifts," "occupations," and "games" which became a major part of the fledgling American kindergarten curriculum of the day (McClary, 1997). One particular family to whom Froebel's "gifts" had particular

meaning was that of Mrs. Anna Wright. She purchased a set and even took instruction on how to use them properly when teaching her son. In later life, the great American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, would remember those gifts as the inspiration for his particular style of architecture (McClary, 1997).

Later, in the mid-twentieth century, Caroline Pratt (Hirsch, 1974) developed the wooden unit blocks that have become standard equipment in today's early childhood classrooms. These blocks are mathematically proportioned, and they provide a foundation for architectural designs as well as dramatic play as the child symbolically reproduces the world around him. Playing with blocks provides a number of benefits including construction skills, gross motor skills and co-ordination. Blocks allow a child to feel a sense of power, for example, while creating a tall structure or destroying it safely. Blocks are physically easy to handle, and they present an opportunity for collaborating with others.

One type of block that is particularly easy for small or arthritic hands to handle, as well as being highly appropriate for intergenerational play, is the modular domino (Bloom, 1994). Similar in size to the black and white dotted dominoes, modular dominoes are bigger, thicker and heavier precisely cut hardwood blocks, measuring 2" x 1" x 1/2". Because of these attributes, they are more stackable and generally provide more stability than regular dominoes. A further advantage to these blocks is that they can be used on a table instead of the floor, which is a decided benefit for older adults.

Dolls

Dolls lend themselves to imaginary play and reminiscence. They evoke memories for older adults of a favourite doll or soft toy of long ago, and are a good choice for storytelling and recording oral histories. Exchanging such recollections as "When I Was Five" which both child and older adult can do together, allows for role-playing as the stories are told. Remembering the clothes you wore, the foods you ate, the games you played, all add to the learning process for both generations. A topsy-turvy doll, a female figure with two heads at opposite ends, one representing a young girl and the other depicting an older woman, can be an intergenerational conversation piece too. The clothes are different for each head, and by inverting the body of one, the dress falls over the head so that the other character appears.

One aspect of intergenerational programming which is so important is breaking down the stereotypes and ageism that both generations may feel toward each other. Very young children can have negative feelings toward the elderly with regard to appearance when they are not familiar with the natural occurrence of wrinkles, failing eyesight, and graying hair. Attitudes on the part of older adults may hold equally negative viewpoints toward children, regarding boisterous activity and noise levels as evidence of a lack of discipline in the young. Taking turns with an intergenerational doll to tell personal experiences is not only fun but can also provide a learning opportunity as well. Telling our own stories can bridge the generations and give meaning to the concept of change through the passage of time, for both the listener and the teller.

Puppets

Puppets have been a sophisticated means of artistic expression, communication and instruction for the last 2,000 years. Offering entertainment as well as education, puppets can be used both to teach and to persuade. Puppets have a way of engaging both the puppeteer and the audience. Puppets can entertain, inform, persuade and appeal to audiences in an interactive way. Increasingly, it is recognized that puppetry is a unique and innovative art form that reaches out to people of all ages. Puppets are part of the world's ancient history, and at the same time, they are also part of the world's modern imagination. (UNICEF, 6/22/02).

Puppets create a variety of learning possibilities for both old and young. Making puppets together provides time and space for children and older adults to become acquainted over a period of time as they decide on features, clothing, and other attributes of building their character. Personal feelings can be expressed when manipulating a puppet, which a child or adult might not otherwise feel comfortable discussing. The magic of puppets lies in the ability to play out issues which might be uncomfortable to express in person. Puppets can be made to say or ask things that might be unacceptable in other circumstances, and an interactive audience can provide reassuring responses.

There are many kinds of puppets such as finger puppets, hand puppets, and life-size rod puppets. Making puppets together is a worthwhile intergenerational activity that offers physical and intellectual challenges. Once completed, children can work with their older adult friends to create skits and plays that may take on an advocacy role. When old and young work together on a common cause, they can accomplish more than they would by working alone. Perhaps a much needed recreation centre in a community could become their shared project, giving an added dimension to learning through intergenerational activity. The outcomes of such projects reach beyond the issues being advocated, empowering the participants and helping them learn to work with members of other generations (Newman, et al, 1997).

Bubble Catcher

The bubble-catcher is a homemade toy created from a combination of items easily purchased and assembled that was designed by Intergenerational Specialist, Lindsay Davis. It consists of two, small aquarium dipping nets commonly available in pet stores, a pair of kitchen tongs, some plastic lacing and a glue gun. To make your own, begin by cutting off the looped metal handle on each dipping net with wire cutters. Lash the fishnets to the grasping end of the tongs with the plastic lacing, facing inward towards each other. Tie a few knots in the plastic lace and finish off with a drop of hot glue to secure the knots. To prevent injury to hands, cover the cut metal edge of the net's handle with glue.

The toy on which the bubble-catcher was patterned is used with children in a hospital setting for physical therapy, and can be used equally well with older adults. Bubble-catching develops eye/hand coordination as well as gross motor skills and is particularly good for those confined to a wheelchair. For intergenerational play, one

partner can blow soap bubbles while the other tries to catch them between the nets. In fact, it is not just the skipped generation participants that enjoy catching bubbles, but young adult staff members as well! At weddings, often bubbles are blown instead of throwing confetti or rice, and at the wedding reception an electric bubble machine may be provided to blow bubbles throughout the first dance taken by the bridal couple. Traditions for blowing bubbles are another story for the generations to share.

Playing with toys is a natural part of childhood, but the inclusion of older adults to join in the fun adds a new dimension to children's toys which has not previously been given serious consideration among intergenerational practitioners. Intergenerational toys such as these described here can be used to sustain purpose and meaning in intergenerational program content in the future. Toys are not just for the chronological time of childhood, but for the imaginative and creative side of us all that is to be nurtured throughout the life course (Bos, 1982). After all, as DeKoven states, "Playing well with children is in truth the only living connection we have with our childhood" (1996).

One person, one life;
one life, one childhood.
Only one earth.
There is but a single one of each.
One must take utmost care of
what is only one.

Ryuichi Haraga

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