



HEALTH AND AGING
POLICY FELLOWS

Evidence-Based and Promising Practices Promote Successful Intergenerational Service Delivery

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Executive Summary

Across 139 research studies and nine guides and reports, human service, education and research professionals offered research and pragmatic evidence of the power of intergenerational practice to connect youth from diverse populations (usually age 24 and younger) and older adults (usually 50 and older) to achieve varied goals, including a reduction in the high rates of social isolation and loneliness among youth and older adults.

More important than what young and older people do when they come together is *how* they come together. Preparation of staff and participants must precede programming, increasing confidence in what to expect and how to engage with each other. Designing programs based on participant input and interests increases likelihood that these participants will engage in the programs. Providing youth and older adults with appropriate, meaningful roles and opportunities to learn about each other supports relationship building and mutual benefit.

The best programs create intergenerational pairs or small groups that meet over an extended period. Choosing an environment and technologies that reflect participants' abilities facilitates equal group status among differently abled and experienced youth and older adults. Those not in the room also influence the success of intergenerational programs; stakeholders impact participant interest and availability of critical resources, such as time and space.

Attending to these evidence-based and promising practices, community-based providers of youth and older adult services can leverage the talents of their younger and older members to improve social connectedness and achieve an array of desired outcomes.

Purpose

The purpose of this synthesis was to conduct a high level review of literature (scholarly journal article reviews, reports and white papers) to identify evidence-based or promising community-based intergenerational (IG) programs and practices for: (a) practitioners to develop and implement community-based IG programs, linking outcomes to use of practice, (b) funders and executive level

offices to offer technical assistance on the adoption of evidence-based and promising IG practices, and (c) ACL and partners to identify programs that meet the criteria of using evidence-based and promising practices.

Method

The review of research literature involved eight systematic reviews (published 2015 to 2021) of research on non-familial IG programs published in English from 1989 to 2019. Systematic reviews use well-established methods to synthesize and evaluate current knowledge on a topic, including reconciling discrepant findings (Heyn et al., 2019). They offer powerful evidence to inform decisions. The eight reviews included 139 peer-reviewed journal articles with many studies represented across multiple reviews. The review authors typically emphasized program characteristics and outcomes with less attention to practices. Only three studies (Gerritzen et al., 2020; Jarrott et al., 2019; Jarrott et al., 2021) focused on practices. The synthesis section groups identified practices into themes.

The review of white papers and reports yielded nine documents available online that address IG planning and implementation or engagement of older adult volunteers. Published from 2010-2021, guides encompassed residential care settings and community-based services. Practices evidenced promise and refinement as they re-appeared in subsequent documents by the same authors or groups.

While published research tended to address practices related to the development of activity leaders and IG plans, white papers and reports more frequently addressed strategies for building infrastructure to support and sustain IG programs.

Synthesis

Considering first the features of the research studies analyzed in the systematic reviews, several themes emerged: (a) Most study samples are small, typically involving fewer than 50 youth and 50 older adults; (b) Increasingly, researchers measure program impact on younger and older participants, reflecting value for mutual benefit; (c) IG programs served a range of goals and objectives reflecting diverse needs and abilities of youth and older adults; (d) Content varied widely, and multiple reviews indicated that content (e.g., art or storytelling) and modality (e.g., in-person or remote) were less influential on outcomes than how the program was led; (e) Program duration varied from single sessions to ongoing programming with recommendations that meaningful change required more than a few hours of contact; (f) Persons responsible for leading IG programs generally lacked needed training, and misperceptions about participants, particularly older adults, negatively affected outcomes; (g) Authors noted considerable variability in research instruments, which created "an obstacle to making conclusions" (Martins et al., 2019, p. 106) and led authors to argue for standardized scales applicable across groups.

Researchers and practitioners alike linked promising and evidence-based strategies with IG program outcomes:

1. **Promoting mutuality** via meaningful age and ability-appropriate roles for participants, novel programming that places participants on equal footing, and inviting younger and older persons to inform and reflect on programming.
2. **Building relationships**, which is associated with cooperation and empathy and is achieved through interaction and repeated contact that allows “generations to experience both similarities and differences by learning not only about others but also about themselves” (Martins et al., 2019; p. 106-107).
3. **Preparing staff and participants** by addressing characteristics of different participant groups and methods to build intergenerational connections.
4. **Designing programming to reflect participant input**; even if a participant cannot clearly articulate their preferences, staff can use knowledge of participants to design programming that reflects participants’ interests, experiences, and backgrounds.
5. **Intentionally grouping participants** to create intergenerational pairs or small groups with a near equal number of youth and older adults.
6. **Stakeholder support** affects the tradition, resources, and outcomes associated with IG programs. It can come from participants, families, staff and administrators.
7. **Adopting appropriate technologies**, including adaptive equipment, can support contact (in-person and remote), enable IG mentoring and optimize participation by persons with varied abilities.

The practice categories identified in the literature review were duplicated in the white papers and reports. These resources offered promising practices for IG program development and operations. These included strategies for: assessing readiness to initiate IG programming, creating infrastructure (e.g., crafting IG mission statements and job descriptions with IG program duties), initiating inter-organization partnerships, and building participant recruitment plans. Garnering and maintaining stakeholder support from administrators, staff, participants, and family and community members was identified as paramount to success and sustainability.

Conclusion

Ranging across settings, practitioners and researchers report that strategies that build IG relationships and offer meaningful age and ability-appropriate roles for youth and older participants achieve goals. With the method of connecting participants highlighted as more important than what the groups do when they are together, these practices can be applied to shifting needs. Adopting these evidence-based and promising practices, community-based providers of youth and older adult services can leverage the talents of their younger and older members to improve connectedness and achieve an array of desired outcomes.

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