Intergenerational Engagement

COMMIT TO **Connect**

Introduction to Social Isolation and Loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness are increasingly recognized as critical and growing public health issues impacting the lives of millions of Americans. While social isolation and loneliness are related, they are different. Loneliness is defined as a subjective feeling of being alone or separated while social isolation is the lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly.[1]

In a May 2023 Surgeon General Advisory, United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy warned about the public health crisis that loneliness, isolation, and disconnection pose to the American public. Prevalence of social isolation and loneliness in the U.S. now surpasses smoking (13 percent), diabetes (15 percent), and obesity (42 percent).[2,3,4] These are significant issues for older adults and people with disabilities. Although individuals of all ages and backgrounds can be lonely and isolated, groups at higher risk include people with poor physical or mental health, people with disabilities, those experiencing financial insecurity, those who live alone, as well as single parents, older adults, and adolescents.[5]

Social engagement improves quality of life and people with strong connections experience better physical and mental health outcomes.[6] In addition, when people are socially engaged in their communities, they provide important contributions to their communities through sharing their knowledge, talent, skills, experience, and wisdom with others.

Intergenerational Programming for Social Engagement

Intergenerational relationships between young and older people have the potential to promote social connection. Generations United (**www.gu.org**), a leading national organization on intergenerational strategies in the U.S. and a partner of Commit to Connect, defines intergenerational programs as ones that "unite generations in ways that enrich participants' lives and help address vital social and community issues while building on the positive resources that young and old have to offer each other and to their communities."[7] To be intergenerational, programs need to "bring people of different generations together for ongoing, mutually beneficial, planned activities that are designed to achieve specified program goals [to] promote greater understanding and respect between generations."[8] Successful intergenerational programs center on "reciprocity, sustainability, intentionality, training, support, and viewing younger and older people as assets."[9]

Through either regular programming or informal encounters, intergenerational programs are an opportunity for individuals of varying ages to interact, gain social connection, and contribute to their communities.

Intergenerational Engagement Program Examples

Commit to Connect convened a community of practice focused on intergenerational engagement aimed

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at helping participants develop intergenerational programming and services that address social isolation and loneliness through discussion, exercises, and guest speakers. The following program examples highlight just some of the ways members are working to increase social engagement in their communities.

Program Name: Intergenerational-Settlement House Initiative (Intergen)

Organization Name: United Neighborhood Houses

Location: New York, New York

Website: www.unhny.org

Program Description: United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing 46 New York neighborhood settlement houses—neighborhood-based organizations that provide people of all ages with services based on community need, such as skills/job training, education, social services, health, arts, and civic engagement.[11] UNH is partnering with four settlement houses to deliver intergenerational programming, working to reduce barriers, and connect older adults and young people who live in the settlement houses. UNH found that many older participants are concerned about the well-being of youth and younger adults. Intergenerational programming at the settlement houses enables teams of older people to contribute to after school programs, high school career planning, and the civic engagement of young people in their community.

One site, Sunnyside Community Services, partnered with a local art museum to provide classes to younger and older people together. Another site, Queens Community House,

> *A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact together.*

hosts weekly eBasics mentoring sessions between older and younger participants. BronxWorks is using healthy eating to bring people together, having older adults and young people cook healthy meals. All of these programs aim to create spaces where bi-directional relationships can thrive.

Participant Testimonial: An older adult who attended a chess club at one of the sites shared that, "the youth bring a new energy to the center, and they are an absolute joy to be around."

Advice for Others: *"Start with a strong community engagement plan and find older and younger leaders who are willing to take charge and have staff step back. When these programs are led by youth, older adults, or a mix of the two, they go further and have a greater impact than ones driven by staff. Help community members who want to start something to come up with an elevator pitch to get their fellow community members interested. This work cannot happen if the leadership and staff of the sponsoring organization and the community—youth and older adults alike—are not buying in."*

—Katie Cardwell
Professional Development and Data Analysis Manager at United Neighborhood Houses

Program Name: Project Unmute

Organization Name: University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University

Location: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Website: www.centerartsinnovation.com/project-unmute.html

Program Description: Project Unmute is a digital intergenerational music program delivered by teenage

musicians for older adults with dementia to connect through artistic expression and discussion. Older adults provide a personalized list of their preferred songs; young musicians learn the older adults' favorite songs, perform for them, and create an interactive activity to do together. Although initially launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, Project Unmute continues to use Zoom because of participant's positive feedback and concerns about safety and access. Project Unmute found that utilizing technology allows music students from across the country to connect with an older generation and helps caregivers of those with dementia to access programming by simply turning on a phone, tablet, or computer.

Research is underway to understand the best activities to include in a digital music program which may lead to refinements in training and activities. In 2022, Project Unmute received a National Endowment for the Arts Research Grants in the Arts grant to continue studying the potential effects of Project Unmute.

Participant Testimonial: *"Oh my goodness! Dad loved it! I was shocked! He has had trouble even making eye contact with me for weeks. He's been so weak and so confused, yet he was attentive and happy for the entire hour! He even loved seeing the other [people with dementia] faces. It was so sweet – he talked about it all night."*

Advice for Others: "It is critical to take time to engage the stakeholders of your program. They are the key to its success! We also did several small "trial runs" of the music program and asked both the music facilitators and the older adults to share opinions so that we could refine it and make it better."

—**Jennifer Dorris**
University of Pittsburgh

Program Name: Senior Adults for Greater Education

Organization Name: Senior Adults for Greater Education (S.A.G.E.)

Location: Newtown, Pennsylvania

Website: www.beasage.org

Program Description: Senior Adults for Greater Education (S.A.G.E.) unites youth and older adults to leave a legacy for future generations through education. The program invites adults age 55 and older into local schools for tutoring, mentoring, and shared learning experiences. By integrating the sages of the community into the schools, older adults become an integral part of the educational community.

S.A.G.E. operates with the understanding that older adults have many life lessons to teach students and can serve as mentors. S.A.G.E. programs are designed to incorporate effective intergenerational exchange, develop students' positive attitudes towards older adults, and foster increased understanding between each group for one another.

Students acknowledge that they hold fewer stereotypes and biases towards older adults due to their participation in the program. Many students also note a growth in self-esteem as a benefit they derive from mentoring older adults through activities such as computer training classes.

Likewise, older adults experience a reduced sense of isolation and an increased sense of belonging in their communities because of their participation in S.A.G.E. They welcome the opportunity to share their knowledge with students and enjoy the bonds they create.

Volunteer Testimonial: *"The founder's realization that there are retired people in our community who are eminently qualified to work with students K-12, and who are eager to do so, was indeed inspired. As a result of her hard work and persistence, she has created a win-win-win situation for the Council Rock School District through the S.A.G.E. program. She has now extended this program to some other fortunate neighboring districts as well."*

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Tips for Building Strong Intergenerational Programming

Developing and sustaining beneficial partnerships are crucial. The following strategies offer a strong foundation for all types of intergenerational programming. These strategies come from discussions held as part of the Intergenerational Engagement Community of Practice discussions which included participation from intergenerational programming experts, service delivery experts, and researchers.

- **Engage partners early in the process:** Engaging partners during the development phase of the program can help partners deepen their understanding and working knowledge of the program that they are supporting. Partners may also be able to contribute historical knowledge that can help the new program avoid challenges that were identified previously.

- **Promote mutual benefits:** The term partnership implies that both parties will benefit from the agreement. Approach potential partners with an explanation of how their organization will benefit and how this partnership will result in a greater impact by working together.

- **Formalize agreements:** Clearly defining expectations in a Memorandum of Understanding or another formalized agreement helps avoid potential confusion or partnership pitfalls, especially around topics like the exchange of information and data, expectations for evaluation, and staff responsibilities.

- **Build relationships:** Partnerships are relationships and may require several meetings on an idea or topic before a new partner agrees to participation. Always evaluate the landscape of organizations and individuals in your community to determine if there may be new partnership potential.

- **Revisit expectations:** After a partnership is formed, it is necessary to frequently evaluate how the relationship is going and whether there are challenges that need to be addressed.

Advice for Others: "Look for enthusiastic partners. Start small. Ensure that all constituents understand the benefits of connecting the generations."

—**Beryl Katz**
Founder and Executive Director

Want to learn more?
Additional intergenerational program examples are available on the Generations United Intergenerational Program Database (www.gu.org/home/ig-program-database).

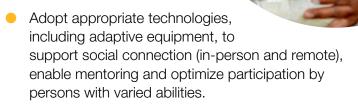## Strategies Linked to Positive Program Outcomes

Dr. Shannon Jarrott's *Evidence-Based and Promising Practices to Promote Successful Intergenerational Service Delivery* (www.committoconnect.org/intergenerational-engagement-literature-review) synthesizes findings from 139 research studies. This literature review identifies key practices linked to positive outcomes of intergenerational programs. The review concluded that incorporating these strategies is more important than the content or type (e.g., art or dance) of programming.[12] The key evidence-based and promising practices identified in the literature review are:

- Promote mutuality with meaningful age- and ability-appropriate roles, novel programming that is new to everyone, opportunities for participants to shape and reflect on programming.

- *Example:* When young and old people learned a new art form together—sculpture—neither group had an advantage over the other, which supported equality and shared discovery.

- Build relationships through interaction and repeated contact.

  - *Example:* Repeated contact, such as sharing stories or building familiarity, supports mechanisms of friendship. This is harder to achieve through one-time or annual events.

- Prepare staff and participants by addressing characteristics of different participant groups.

  - *Example:* All participants, especially persons with dementia, benefit from learning in advance what they will be invited to do during intergenerational programming. Preparation gives people confidence that they will have fun and be successful at it.

- Design responsive programming to reflect participants' interests, experiences and backgrounds.

  - *Example:* Adult day services participants were asked what skills they would like to share during intergenerational programming. As a result a former Navy chef helped plan and lead a series of cooking activities with the children.

- Group participants to create intergenerational pairs or small groups with a near equal number of youth and older adults.

  - *Example:* A Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) hosted its intergenerational program in a secondary space that fits an equal number of children and older adults. Adults' and children's chairs alternated in the space; children looked for a specific marker to pick where to sit, which prevented clustering of children, and limited intergenerational interaction.

- Gain stakeholder support, which informs the tradition, resources and outcomes associated of intergenerational programs.

- *Example:* A community center modified its mission statement to reflect its value for intergenerational approaches to delivering its services. Current and future administrators, staff, and participants use this statement to guide their work.

- Adopt appropriate technologies, including adaptive equipment, to support social connection (in-person and remote), enable mentoring and optimize participation by persons with varied abilities.

  - *Example:* Many intergenerational programs adopted Zoom, phone calls, and email to initiate or sustain intergenerational ties when COVID-19 physically separated people.

- Implement evaluation, which is a crucial piece to program development and implementation. Evaluating a program's effectiveness offers leverage when searching for funding opportunities, new partnerships, and sharing the great work your program is doing. The following are evaluation tools that are available for use:

  - U.S. Administration for Community Living White Paper Assessment of Social Isolation and Loneliness and Social Support in Older Adults (**www.acl.gov/sites/default/files/programs/2022-03/Concept%20Clarification%20and%20Assessment%20of%20Social%20Isolation%20and%20Social%20Support%20in%20Older%20Adults%20White%20Pape.pdf**)

  - Generations United Intergenerational Evaluation Toolkit (**www.gu.org/resources/intergenerational-evaluation-toolkit**)

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- Campaign to End Loneliness (UK) (www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Missing-Million-report-FINAL.pdf)

- LinkAGES Evaluation Series (www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsefxgaR9WM)

Connect and Learn on the Nationwide Network of Champions

To engage with others on this important topic, we invite professionals in this space to join the Commit to Connect Nationwide Network of Champions (www.committoconnect.org/network-champions). Commit to Connect Champions are passionate leaders and innovators at the local, state, and national level dedicated to ending social isolation and loneliness. Champions work together to increase awareness of social isolation and loneliness, connect people who are at risk of social isolation to social connection programs and technologies, and create more socially connected communities that are inclusive of all people including older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers. This network of peers supports collaboration through shared learning and open communication across sectors and perspectives.

Join the conversation and become a Commit to Connect Champion (www.committoconnect.org/network-champions)!

Resources

- Commit to Connect: www.committoconnect.org

- Developing Program Goals and Measurable Objectives: www.cdc.gov/std/program/pupestd/developing%20program%20goals%20and%20objectives.pdf

- Eldercare Locator: www.eldercare.acl.gov

- Evidence-Based and Promising Practices to Promote Successful Intergenerational Service Delivery by Dr. Shannon Jarrott: www.committoconnect.org/intergenerational-engagement-literature-review

- Generations United: www.gu.org

- Generations Working Together: www.generationsworkingtogether.org

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Dr. Jill Juris, Appalachian State University
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End Notes

[1] *Loneliness and Social isolation Linked to Serious Health Conditions.* (n.d.). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html

[2] *Current Cigarette Smoking Among Adults in the United States.* (2023, May 3). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/adult_data/cig_smoking/index.htm

[3] *Prevalence of Both Diagnosed and Undiagnosed Diabetes* (n.d.). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. www.cdc.gov/diabetes/data/statistics-report/diagnosed-undiagnosed-diabetes.html

[4] *Obesity is a Common, Serious, and Costly Disease.* (2022, July 20). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html

[5] Office of the Surgeon General. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.* www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf.

[6] Office of the Surgeon General. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.* www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf.

[7] Generations United. (2021). Intergenerational Programs Benefit Everyone. Fact Sheet: Intergenerational Programs Benefit Everyone. www.gu.org/app/uploads/2021/03/2021-MakingTheCase-FactSheet-WEB.pdf

[8] Generations United. (2021). Intergenerational Programs Benefit Everyone. Fact Sheet: Intergenerational Programs Benefit Everyone. www.gu.org/app/uploads/2021/03/2021-MakingTheCase-FactSheet-WEB.pdf

[9] Generations United. (2021). Intergenerational Programs Benefit Everyone. Fact Sheet: Intergenerational Programs Benefit Everyone. www.gu.org/app/uploads/2021/03/2021-MakingTheCase-FactSheet-WEB.pdf

[10] Wenger-Trayner. (2023, June 4). Introduction to Communities of Practice. wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice

[11] Settlement House Member Locations (n.d.). UNH New York. www.unhny.org/our-members

[12] Jarrott, S. E. (2022). Evidence-Based and Promising Practices Promote Successful Intergenerational Service Delivery. Commit to Connect. www.committoconnect.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ACL-Literature-Review-summary-only-062322-JVL-MCH-SJ.pdf

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