Benefits of Intergenerational Programming with Older Adults

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Introduction

Intergenerational programs have been around for many years. Like with any other intervention, there are both positives and negatives to them. There are also many ways to implement intergenerational programs. More often than not, they are utilized by staff at an assisted living home, nursing home, or continuing care retirement community. Children from the community, usually ages 4-10, come to spend time with the older adults. The therapist involved in setting up this program comes up with ideas for the children and older adults to do together. Once the children are ready to begin, they are usually paired or grouped with an older adult and they complete activities together. These activities can range anywhere from arts and crafts, music, reading, gardening, or simply socializing together. Throughout this paper, there will be evidence of the methods that worked, methods that did not work, and ways to implement intergenerational programming in a variety of settings. Intergenerational programming can have ample benefits if implemented correctly.

Framing the Question

When picking a topic to research, finding what you are passionate about is key. Working with older adults is something that has always been important to me. I want to know any method possible to help older adults reach their highest potential. Once I had decided on the population I wanted to learn more about, I had to find something I did not know a lot about. I realized that throughout my entire internship, I watched children come and go to programs with the older adults but I never saw true benefits for the older adults or the children. I wanted to find the proper methods of intergenerational programming because I want every intervention that I do to be beneficial to my clients.
Methods and Considerations

In order to have a proper intergenerational program, you should start off with an educational training for all people involved. You would want families of older adults and children, the older adults, children, and the nurses and staff involved in the training. I believe that training and education can really make or break the program. Having goals and objectives included and shared in the training will help the older adults know the correct way to interact with the children. Finally, having an enormous amount of programs is important. You do not want the children to become bored. If the children become bored, they will no longer have a positive experience from this situation.

Literature Review

Intergenerational programs are very prevalent in the field of Therapeutic Recreation. Almost every facility that houses older adults uses intergenerational programming of some sort. It is so vital that the older adults still feel as though they are a part of the community. Often times, once older adults move into residential facilities, their loved ones stop coming to visit as frequently. Older adults living in nursing homes do not get to see their children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren as often as those people who still live in the community. By having children come to the nursing homes, these older adults are getting to learn from these children (Camp).

While therapists often have children from the local schools come to retirement homes, there are rare cases where the older adults will go to the school systems. In one
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article by Werner, adults over the age of 55 went to recess with the students and helped them to maintain or lose weight, get away from the screens of their handheld devices and television, and enjoy physical exercise more. Since the students have the help of the older adults, they have someone to look up to, which helps them to be more motivated. When older adults and children interact, there are positive outcomes for both the children and the older adults.

When it comes to the interventions that can be used during intergenerational programming, the options are endless. In one study, a small group of fourth graders worked with a group of older adults in a nursing home by incorporating music (Belgrave). Throughout the study the children would sing, dance, make music, and also talk to the older adults about the music and instruments. At the end of the study, the older adults claimed to feel more useful and helpful because they could assist the children in using the instruments. Animal-assisted therapy is also an intervention that works well with intergenerational programming. Most people enjoy animals, especially cats and dogs. When the children and the older adults work together with the animals, they can show a lot of their emotions. Animal assisted therapy helps older adults talk to the children and, likewise, helps the children to not feel afraid or nervous around the older adults.

For some interventions, the best method is to just integrate the children into what the older adults are already doing. Many older adults, especially those who are developing dementia, are used to a schedule. They like to know that every Monday and Wednesday at 10:30 there will be a Bingo group, and if that gets changed, older adults can really struggle with adapting to that change. That is why it is important to have the children come to the
groups already being implemented. If the children are interested in a group already on the calendar for the older adults, it is more beneficial to the older adults. This way, they are already in their comfort zone and they get to show off a skill, activity, or group that they really enjoy.

One of the most important parts to intergenerational programming is education. Both the children and the older adults need to have a training of about a week in order for the program to be beneficial to both child and older adult. In the article *An Intergenerational Program with Benefits*, the writer talks about educating the children and their families. Holmes states that the children must understand more about older adults and then teach the children to not see them in a negative light. It is also important to have the families on board, too. If the families do not want the children with the older adults, or if the families have a negative outlook on older adults, then the intervention will not be beneficial for the child. Likewise, the older adults will need education on how to work with children. Older adults look at the children and see “cute and fun little babies.” It is important that the older adults are taught how the children think and what will help them learn faster. Also, going over the goals for the intervention will help the older adults to know what to do with the children and they will also feel as though they are helping.

Since education and training are such a big part of this intervention, there needs to be a staff ready to help train the participants. Usually, this consists of the recreation therapists, teachers, wellness coordinators, and nursing staff. Utilizing the professionals and their abilities will help the older children and older adults to really get the most out of
the intervention. However, the staff may need an in-service training. There are many companies that offer in-service trainings at both schools and residential homes.

**Data Collection Method**

The information I used was from the library’s database. I utilized the OneSearch option. Due to the amount of time available, I could only use the articles that were available online. If I would have started the whole project sooner, I would have liked to use the interlibrary loan. There were many articles through the interlibrary loan that seemed interesting; however, they would not have arrived in time.

The information I found seemed very credible. Since it was from the library’s database, I assumed they were credible. They were also from journals I had heard of before, such as the Early Childhood Education Journal, the Journal of School Health, and the Journal of Music Therapy. Since my question pertains to a certain intervention, almost all of my articles were based on a study. The majority of studies were done in continuing care retirement communities or school settings. They were all based on intergenerational studies and how well they worked.

I continued to search for more articles through the library’s OneSearch instead of using references in already found articles. I attempted to utilize the references, but I could not find an article I liked. I think it is a good idea to use the reference list; it just did not work for me.
Conclusion

Therefore, with the proper training, resources, and interventions, intergenerational programming can be beneficial for older adults. Children bring a new and wonderful perspective to everything they do and older adults want to be a part of that. Older adults love to feel needed and with the intergenerational programs in place, more older adults will be able to feel this way. As awareness of this intervention gets out and people learn the best practices and correct way to implement them, intergenerational programming will become a normal part of treatment. Then maybe, the negative stigma that comes with older adults and nursing homes will fade and be replaced with fun and fascinating memories of spending time at the nursing home.
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References


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