



Senior Series

A partnership between Ohio State University Extension
and Ohio Aging Network professionals



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Intergenerational Programming

Intergenerational relations refers to any informal interaction between youth and senior adults. In many countries where generations continue to live in close proximity, the grandparent-grandchild relationship remains a strong intergenerational bond. Developed countries, such as the United States, have seen a weakening of this bond because families are often separated by distance. With the changing of the family structure, some youth are affected by stereotypes of older people. Community leaders can intervene and play the role of a middle generation by encouraging interaction between the young and the old.

"On the Island of Madeira, there is a beautiful plant botanically named *Brunfelsia*, but the natives call it Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. When the blossoms open, they are deep purple; as they age they become lavender, and later white. There are three colors on one plant, as we have the young, the middle-

aged and the old in one family and in society. Each color is beautiful by itself, but in combination, they contribute to the beauty of each other. So it could be, and often is, for the generations" (JC Penney Forum, 1983).

Intergenerational programs can take advantage of this concept; youth learn from or help the older adult; the middle generation is facilitator or director; and the older adults serve as teachers or receivers of services. Each are interdependent and all are needed for a successful experience. Back-and-forth flow makes all three generations enjoy intergenerational relationships. An example of a successful intergenerational experience can be seen in the following example from the Kansas State Cooperative Extension Service.

Grandletters

In the past, families lived closer together and senior adults were an important part of the family. Today,

the changes in society and family have greatly influenced intergenerational relationships. Somehow we need to reestablish and support the relationship of children and senior adults.

Grandletters is a way for grandparents and grandchildren who are separated by distance to strengthen their relationship. It can also be used by senior adults who wish to “adopt a grandchild” so they have contact with a younger generation. The program encourages ten letters to be exchanged between a senior adult and a child. The letter topics were selected by a group of senior adults, parents, and professionals for their importance to both generations. Ten letters are exchanged in the following order:

1. affection and friendship;
2. family and heritage;
3. generosity and love;
4. responsibility and courage;
5. respect for elders;
6. honesty and commitment;
7. helpfulness;
8. competition and justice;
9. conflict and violence; and
10. sadness and grief.

By exchanging letters sharing views and experiences related to the topic, both generations will learn more about one another. The older adult will gain the satisfaction of knowing that their ideas are being conveyed to a young, impressionable person. Likewise, the child will enjoy sharing thoughts and

feelings about an issue or experience, as well as discovering more about the senior adult. Research shows that children who have a close relationship with their grandparents are less likely to have negative stereotypes of senior adults or fear of growing older.

The Process

- Choose a child, 7 to 12 years old.
- Contact the child’s parent(s) and ask them to introduce the idea to their child.
- Decide how to correspond. You may write or type your special letters or you may record them on audiotape or videotape. Or, if you are both hooked-up electronically, use e-mail.
- Decide how often to correspond. It is recommended that you correspond at least once every two weeks.
- Plan your special letter. There are materials available to help you in getting started (contact your local Ohio State University Extension office or Aging network).
- Mail your special letter. Make sure to address your mail directly to the child.
- Enjoy the correspondence. Be patient. This process may take longer than you anticipated. Contact the child’s parents if you have not heard from the child within two weeks. If the child loses interest completely, don’t be discouraged. Choose a different child and start again.

- Follow-up. Let the child and his or her parents know what the letters have meant to you. Record your feelings, thoughts, and reactions in a journal.

Scrapbook and Journal

A scrapbook and journal are important pieces of this process. They will serve as records of both your experiences and the child's experiences. As you write in your journal, direct your comments to the child as if he or she were an adult. The journal is like a time capsule, a record of you to be appreciated by the child as they grow to be an adult.

If you choose to do the grandletters program or a similar idea of your own, it will help you and your special chosen child (grandchild or other) build a firm and lasting relationship despite the distance that separates you.

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References

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