Let’s Do Something Together: The Components of Effective Intergenerational Programs

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The U.S. population is aging. By 2030, 20 percent will be 65 or older, and many will be looking for ways to keep busy after retirement or needing some type of care during the day. On the other end of the age spectrum there are 13 million young children in out-of-home care, with increasing demand for programs for them as well. Many communities are finding it practical to bring these two age groups together during the day. As a result, the number of intergenerational (I-G) programs is growing. Their goal is to help the elderly maintain current abilities and to support young children as they gain new skills.

Because I-G programs are a relatively new phenomenon, there is little research on what makes them effective. To obtain this information, HighScope recently completed a two-year project, funded by the Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan, on how I-G programs can promote healthy mental involvement and social interactions between young children and seniors in a joint day care setting. To carry out the project, we collaborated with Generations Together, a day care facility that serves both senior citizens and children from infancy through school age in Dexter, Michigan. Each group has its own space in the building, and there is also a common area where the two age groups come together for planned activities every morning. Seniors and children have additional opportunities to meet informally in one of these areas throughout the program day.

Project Design

The project had two components: training and evaluation. We collected baseline data on the program and its participants, identified program strengths and areas for improvement, and developed and conducted a series of ten staff development workshops. We then collected follow-up data to measure program changes and their effects on the involvement and interactions of participating children and seniors.

Training

Each training module addressed a particular aspect of human development and I-G programming, including active learning and intrinsic motivation, the indoor and outdoor learning environments, social interactions and interpersonal problem-solving, team building among staff, support for children dealing with loss and grief, and observation and planning for program implementation. (See pp. 3–4 for a list of the titles and learning objectives of the 10 I-G training modules.) Based on findings from the initial assessment, training focused especially on the learning environment (helping staff make better use of the many opportunities offered by the Generations Together joint day care facility) and interactions (helping staff promote more mutuality in the ways seniors and children were engaged with one another).

Evaluation

To evaluate the training project, HighScope developed and administered two research instruments. The HighScope I-G Program Quality Assessment documented the program’s physical setting, activities, and interpersonal environment. The HighScope I-G Involvement and Interaction Inventory measured the level of engagement of seniors and children. Using a simple pre–post evaluation design, trained observers collected data on 25 baseline and 25 follow-up I-G sessions.

Lessons Learned

1. Space: Effective intergenerational programs have a designated space that is shared, accessible, and stocked with materials that are inviting to both age groups. During the project, the space available for planned activities and informal relationships was expanded and enhanced. The original I-G room was stocked with materials that interested both ages and promoted more interaction. An underutilized lobby was turned into an I-G meeting center where seniors and children could cuddle and read, work on games and puzzles, or rock and sing an infant or doll to sleep. Additional adaptations were still needed to take advantage of the facility’s spacious outdoor area for I-G activities.

2. Scheduling: Effective intergenerational programs provide time as well as space to build relationships between children and seniors. Establishing a consistent daily schedule not only increased planned I-G interactions, it also enhanced interest in spontaneous gatherings throughout the week. At follow-up, staff were still working on making transitions smoother—particularly from individual classroom time to joint activities—so participants were better prepared to begin I-G activities.

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3. Initiative: Effective intergenerational programs emphasize process over product and relationships over materials. They provide opportunities for planning and reflection. I-G staff are often better trained in early child development than late adult development, designing activities that appeal to children and relegate seniors to the role of passive onlookers. The training helped staff plan experiences that were equally engaging across all ages. Sessions became more open-ended and interesting to participants, especially the seniors; however, opportunities for planning and reflection were still limited at follow-up. If it is true that children look forward and seniors look backward, providing opportunities for both groups to plan and reflect on their activities should enable them to expand and maintain cognitive and social functioning.

4. Interaction: In effective intergenerational programs, caregivers explicitly promote cross-age interactions by providing appropriate materials and encouraging communication. The numbers alone told a positive story about interaction: By the follow-up assessment, 37 percent more seniors were participating in I-G sessions. This increased presence automatically created more opportunities for cross-age interactions as the seniors shared a common space and materials with children. While this change was encouraging, the overall level of cross-age interaction, particularly children’s involvement with the elderly, was still disappointing. It was hoped that as staff continue to gain a better understanding of seniors’ developmental needs, they will begin to explicitly foster the sharing that is the hallmark and goal of I-G initiatives.

5. Assessment: Effective intergenerational programs use objective observational assessment to plan activities and share information with families. Staff improved significantly on every aspect of program planning and assessment. Valid documentation with objective anecdotal notes is now standard in early childhood education; this project emphasized its importance in planning for seniors and I-G activities as well. Also, just as staff appreciated the value of sharing observations with children’s parents, they learned that seniors’ families also wanted to know what—and who—engaged their loved ones all day. Staff must now reflect on how to use the information gathered to continue improving the program, especially in the areas of enhancing individual initiative and I-G interactions.

Elders have so much wisdom to offer, and young children are eager to learn. Our challenge in the emerging intergenerational field is to develop programs that leave a lifelong impression on children and let seniors feel they have made an important contribution to the next generation.

To learn more about the Intergenerational Project and download copies of the executive summary and final report, visit www.highscope.org/EducationalPrograms/EarlyChildhood/Intergenerational.htm. To inquire about I-G program development and staff training, contact the Foundation's Educational Services Division at 734-485-2000, ext. 218.
Module 1. The High/Scope Intergenerational (I-G) Program Components

Learning objectives. By the end of this session, participants will

- Recognize the components of the High/Scope approach, as represented on the I-G Wheel
- Recognize some elements of high-quality I-G programs and assess their own setting in terms of quality
- Make connections between the components of High/Scope and the training goals for this I-G setting

Module 2. Active Learning and Intrinsic Motivation in I-G Programming

Learning objectives. By the end of this session, participants will be able to

- Describe the ingredients of active learning and intrinsic motivation
- Discuss the role of caregivers in an active learning I-G setting
- Differentiate between active and passive experiences

Module 3. High/Scope: Its Beliefs, Philosophy, Practices, and Supporting Research

Learning objectives. By the end of this session, participants will be able to

- Describe the High/Scope educational approach
- Understand the research that validates the High/Scope educational approach
- Assess their own setting in terms of quality

Module 4. The Indoor I-G Learning Environment

Learning objectives. By the end of this session, participants will be able to

- Discuss and apply guidelines for the indoor learning environment
- Define the types of materials, strategies for storage and accessibility, and space arrangements that support relationships and human interactions in an I-G setting
- Understand the role of the learning environment in promoting goals for I-G learning and human development
- Assess their current setting and plan for improvement

Module 5. Human Interactions

Learning objectives. By the end of this session, participants will be able to

- Discuss the rationale and research support for supportive adult-child (and other human) interactions
- Identify the types of play young children engage in and strategies for participating as a partner in play and intergenerational activities
- Discuss the rationale for conversing with (rather than questioning) children and seniors
- Identify and use supportive interaction strategies that encourage active learning for children and meaningful relationships and experiences during intergenerational activities

Module 6. Encouragement vs. Praise and Interpersonal Problem Solving

Learning objectives. By the end of this session, participants will be able to

- Discuss the effects of using extrinsic motivation (praise and rewards) with children and seniors
- Distinguish between praise and encouragement and explain the rationale for using encouragement strategies
- Demonstrate the six steps of solving problems and resolving conflicts in I-G situations
- Discuss the importance of acknowledging feelings and finding out the details of problem situations
- Plan support strategies for children and seniors experiencing social (behavioral) difficulties

Module 7. Team Building

Learning objectives. By the end of this session, participants will be able to

- Understand and discuss basic characteristics of effective teams and team members
- Discuss solutions to issues and problems associated with teamwork
- Discuss and devise various teams that are designed to work on I-G issues
- Work as a team to develop I-G scheduling that works in this setting
- Explore other types of I-G programming (e.g., the Eden Approach) and how teams can work to apply the relevant concepts and strategies to this setting
Module 8. Loss and Grief: Working With Children on Delicate Issues

Learning objectives. By the end of this session, participants will be able to

- Relate differences in how children and adults think to how they handle loss and grief
- Become aware of literature and other resources discussing children’s grief
- Become aware of the range of feelings children experience
- Become aware of common behavioral and physical responses to grief and loss
- Become aware of points to consider when communicating with children about death, grief, and loss

Module 9. Observations and Planning for Intergenerational Experiences

Learning objectives. By the end of this session, participants will be able to

- Take objective and factual anecdotal observations in an I-G setting
- Use anecdotal observations to plan intergenerational experiences
- Be aware of the High/Scope infant-toddler, preschool, and elementary key experiences
- Correlate the High/Scope key experiences with knowledge of what seniors do and generate a list of senior key experiences
- Discuss and begin to use observations, key experiences, and developmental knowledge about children and seniors to plan appropriate experiences in an I-G setting
- Use (or develop) a lesson plan form to design effective I-G experiences

Module 10. The Outdoor I-G Learning Environment

Learning objectives. By the end of this session, participants will be able to

- Discuss and apply guidelines for the outdoor learning environment
- Understand the role of the outdoor learning environment in promoting I-G goals for learning and relationships
- Assess the appropriateness, safety, and learning possibilities of the outdoor areas in this setting and plan for improvement