Best Practices in Intergenerational Programming: Practice 9
Facilitators Consider the Social Environment and the Role of Staff Members

Practice 9 • Social Environment

Intergenerational programs are most effective when facilitators consider the social environment, including the role of staff members.

In addition to the physical environment of a space or program, the social environment can influence participants’ experiences with intergenerational programming. Examples of the social environment include how safe participants feel sharing ideas with the group and how staff members pair children and adults based on common interests or friendships.

Staff members are critical elements of the social environment. Their comfort with the participants’ ages and abilities influences how the children and adults feel about each other. How staff members move around the space and offer help and encouragement is central to an activity’s success. Facilitators do not have to be at the center of things to be effective; being able to step back when participants are interacting well is a good sign of the activity’s success.

Social-emotional development is fostered through relationships. When children and elders see each other often, it helps build relationships, as do chances to share stories and preferences. Staff can encourage these exchanges. For example:

“Sam, please tell Miss Jo about your trip to New York. She used to live there.”

“Mr. Jorge used to build boats. He will help us with our ‘What floats?’ experiment.”

“Decide with your partner which type of seeds you will plant for our garden.”

Application of the Practice

Offer settings between children and seniors that allow them to build their relationships. Suggestions include mealtimes, dramatic play (with costumes and props), and reading.

Some great book titles to share between old and young include:

• Amazing Grace by Mary Hoffman and illustrator Caroline Binch.
• A Chair for My Mother by Vera Williams.
1. Staff members of the adult and child programs collaborate to plan activities.
2. Participants are involved in decision-making about the activity and during activities.
3. Participation is voluntary.
4. Participants are prepared ahead of time and reflect on the activity afterward.
5. Activities reflect interests, backgrounds, and social histories of program participants.
6. Activities are age- and role-appropriate.
7. Activities support interaction among intergenerational partners.
8. Facilitators skillfully stage the environment to promote interaction.
9. Facilitators consider the social environment and the role of staff members.
10. Adaptive equipment is used as appropriate.
11. Facilitators document and communicate experiences to build on in future activities.

Additional Resource

Reference

Program Ideas
Staff members who intentionally connect with participants while guiding their engagement support positive interactions.

- Learn about participants, including normative and non-normative aspects of their development to build understanding and comfort with the population.
- Encourage participants to ask questions (formal and informal) among themselves.
- Pair participants based on common interests, backgrounds or complementary abilities.
- Give participants time to respond to questions.
- Allow participants time to get to know one another through frequent interactions that allow them to share stories and preferences.
- Introduce the activity and then step back to allow for child and older adult interactions.
- Help participants interpret discoveries through sharing.
- Ask questions and model curiosity: “I wonder what would happen if ...?” “How could we ...?”
- Show confidence in connections within relationships. Note ways that participants are working well together, sharing, and helping each other.

Best Practices for Intergenerational Programming

- The Doorbell Rang by Pat Hutchins.
- Jennie’s Hat by Ezra Jack Keats.
- No, David! by David Shannon.
- Dear Mr. Blueberry by Simon James.
- Epossumondas by Coleen Salley and illustrator Janet Stevens.
- The Old Man and His Door by Gary Soto and illustrator Joe Cepeda.
- Tops & Bottoms by Janet Stevens.
- The Gardener by Sarah Stewart and illustrator David Small.

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