

## Developing a Voluntary, Neighborhood Intergenerational Program

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**I**NTERGENERATIONAL programs, that bring the young and old together, are becoming increasingly popular. Nancy Reagan's special interest in the Foster Grandparent Program has afforded this project a great deal of press coverage. Recently, a film with an intergenerational theme, titled *Close Harmony* received the Academy Award for Best Documentary.

The Intergenerational program described in this paper is a voluntary, neighborhood effort. Unlike the Foster Grandparent Program, our program does not offer stipends for task-oriented assignments. Unlike many other similar projects, our program does not use older adults to assist in institutional settings. Instead, we encourage our elderly participants to assume responsibility for planning and organizing. This approach has resulted in a feeling of commitment to an ongoing group experience. The involvement of both the senior adults and the children is completely voluntary.

Our Intergenerational Program is a community effort involving the joint participation of two South Bronx agencies, the JASA East Concourse Luncheon Club and The Fellowship Chapel Learning Center. The project was initiated by the program staff of the East Concourse Luncheon Club, a senior center sponsored by the Jewish Association For Services For the Aged. The tutoring staff of the neighboring Fellowship Chapel Learning Center as-

sisted in finding children to participate in the Intergenerational Program.

Staff members of both agencies were excited about the idea of starting this program. The Director of the F.C. Learning Center felt that the children at her center needed an opportunity to unlearn many of the negative stereotypes they had learned about older adults. She also felt that these children, most of whom are from economically deprived backgrounds, could benefit from exposure to positive adult role models. In addition, the program provided an opportunity for integration. Most of the children live and attend school in a community whose population is 90 percent black and Hispanic. Participation in an integrated program would be a new experience for them.

The program staff at East Concourse, the author and her assistant, were equally enthusiastic about the idea of developing an intergenerational program. We felt that this project would be a wonderful way to break down the barriers of age, race and religion. Many of our older adult members had been victims of muggings or robberies. As a result of these experiences they felt considerable distrust toward neighborhood young people. We hoped that our Intergenerational Program would help to reduce this fear and resentment.

In addition to helping to break down barriers, we believed that our program would fulfill an important emotional

need for our senior participants. None of the recreational, social or educational programs that we could offer our members could quite compare to the genuine affection shared in a relationship with a child.

We began the Intergenerational Program by recruiting elderly volunteers from the membership at East Concourse. We planned to operate the program each Wednesday from 3:00 p.m. until 4:00 p.m. This time slot was inconvenient for most of our senior adults, who prefer to be home by mid-afternoon to insure their safety. However, the children could not arrive at an earlier time because of their school schedules.

As a result of this inconvenient hour we were able to recruit only six volunteers. These volunteers were an ethnically mixed group (three Jewish and three black). They included five women and one man. All of them were enthusiastic, outgoing and socially well adjusted. Almost all of the volunteers had children and grandchildren of their own. Flexibility and curiosity were two of the characteristics shared by each of the volunteers.

We met with the volunteers to clarify the goals and purpose of the Intergenerational Program. We decided to use a recreational rather than an educational approach. We wanted to avoid conflict with the Learning Center, where the staff was already providing a tutoring function for the children. Each of the volunteers suggested different activities that could be organized on a low budget and might be fun for the children. We agreed to use their skills in planning some of these programs.

A few of the volunteers expressed doubt about their ability to be patient and effective with the children. The group offered support to assuage these doubts. They reassured one another that by simply being themselves they

would be able to form a natural bond with any child. The group also talked about the need to establish certain ground rules. For example, running and wild behavior would be unacceptable. The program staff agreed to reinforce these ground rules in the interview process.

We began recruiting the children for our Intergenerational Program by making two trips to the Lighthouse Learning Center to observe the tutorial program and meet some of the children. The tutoring program included children ranging in age from six through eleven, all of them of black or of Hispanic backgrounds.

On our third visit to the Learning Center, our staff began conducting interviews. We had prepared a brief list of questions seeking information such as age, address etc. and interests (hobbies, exposure to old people etc.). At first we interviewed the children in pairs. However we found that this method was too distracting for the youngsters and for us. We made sure that the remainder of our interviews were held individually in a private corner of the Learning Center.

Each of the children was given a letter explaining the purpose of the program to take home to his or her parents. The letter included date, time, place and notice that there was no fee. We encouraged the parents to contact us if they had any questions.

We followed up our interviews and letters with phone calls to parents. We found that this personal contact was important. Some of the parents were hesitant about the fact that the program was operating in a synagogue, the East Concourse Hebrew Center. We reassured them that despite this location our program was nonsectarian. Other parents expressed concern that their children might fall behind in their schoolwork as a result of participating in our program. We explained that help with homework

could be arranged between the older adults and individual children if this was a priority. We also stressed the fact that this program would be mutually beneficial for both the children and the seniors.

The Director of the F.C. Learning Center supported our efforts by discussing the value of the Intergenerational Program with the parents and by putting an announcement about the program in their monthly newsletter.

The program started out slowly and quietly. Initially seven children attended (age seven through ten). On the basis of interest and personality, we matched each senior adult with one or two children. The first two sessions were spent talking, getting acquainted, playing quiet games and eating. Food became a very important part of the program. The older adults took pleasure in taking turns bringing treats to share. The children took delight in eating the various snacks given to them each week. Later on, one little boy spent his allowance money to buy cookies for the group.

Gradually the size and scope of the program expanded. Children began telling their friends about the program. As new children joined we interviewed them individually. We gave each one a letter to take home to his or her parents.

Soon we had between twelve and fourteen children attending our Intergenerational Program each week. We had to change the one-to-one approach we had used initially. Instead, we decided to set up three separate activity areas each week. Children had their choice of quiet games, an arts and crafts project or a conversation/homework table. The age range of the children had also expanded (five through eleven). Therefore we felt the need for more variety in the program. We included dance and music in our programming. We were continuously trying to appeal to the creativity in the children. We op-

erated the program with a loose structure, but also with limits.

Some of the older boys became restless and rowdy at times. However, a reminder about "the rules" of quiet behavior was usually enough to help them control this behavior. These boys gravitated toward our male volunteer, Jesse (who is black). He taught them a number of games and developed warm relationships with several of the boys.

Two of the younger boys became quite close to Bertie (a Jewish woman). These little boys, both Hispanic, were able to discuss the anger and hurt they experienced because of prejudiced comments directed against them. Bertie shared some of her own experiences with anti-Semitism. She told the boys that no one should be ashamed of who he or she is. A great deal of affection was exchanged among the three of them. On one occasion the boys brought in their fathers and proudly introduced them to "grandma Bertie."

Another little girl became quite close to her "grandma Ida." This little girl has a sad history of exposure to foster homes and separation from her mother. Ida, a Jewish woman, was extremely nurturing to the little girl, who is black, helping her with homework, encouraging her in art projects and much more. Ida, in turn, felt needed; a feeling she rarely experienced with her own grandchildren now that they were older.

One of the elderly volunteers, Marie, is quite gifted in arts and crafts. She worked closely with a little girl who also has art ability. Together they made greeting cards, mosaic designs, puppets and many other projects. Marie is Jewish and the little girl is Hispanic. A great deal of affection was shared between them.

Sometimes the Intergenerational Program functioned as one large group. Once, for example, we showed slides of

the Bronx Zoo and then discussed them. On another occasion we had a talent show. Each child took a turn at the microphone, singing, dancing or telling a joke.

Our final meeting before our summer break was a group session. We read an article about our Intergenerational Program that had been printed in Bronx Borough President's newsletter. The article quoted a number of the children and older adults. It was received with a great deal of enthusiasm. Everyone was given a copy of the article.

Afterwards each child and volunteer took a turn at the microphone and told the group what the program had meant to him or her. The feelings shared were warm, caring and a little bit sad because we were parting for the summer. Everyone was eager for the program to resume again in the Fall.

Recently, the program staff held a meeting with the older adult volunteers to evaluate the previous year's program and continue planning for the 1982-1983 season. The reservations expressed about the previous year's program included; not enough structured planning of programs and not enough contact with the parents of the children. The structure of each weekly meeting had been too loose. This year the volunteers want to plan each session more carefully. All of the volunteers agreed to take responsibility for planning a different program. For example, one of the women who enjoys leading discussions agreed to do this with the children. Another volunteer who is skillful at crocheting and knitting agreed to teach this skill to the children if she is provided with materials.

The volunteers feel that structure and good planning is important for effective work with children. Restlessness and disruptive behavior can be the result of boredom. Therefore, it is important to keep the children eager and enthusiastic

at each session. We want to offer them choices, as well. A quiet games table will be available each week as an alternative for those children who are not interested in the main activity.

The volunteers also felt that more contact with the parents of the children would be helpful. In the previous year several of the parents dropped in to observe briefly. But only one parent stayed for an extended period of time. The volunteers feel that they will be able to understand the children better if they also get to know their parents. This year they plan to have an open-house for the parents of children involved in the Intergenerational Program. The open-house will have to be held on either a weekday evening or a weekend afternoon, because many of the parents work.

Despite some minor reservations and suggestions for needed improvements, the volunteers agree that our Intergenerational Program has been a success. We feel that the goals originally established for the program have been met. The relationships that have developed between the older adults and children participating in the program have indeed broken down barriers. Age, race and religion have been overshadowed by the powerful exchange of affection between people. The children are certainly being exposed to positive adult role models. The senior volunteers feel needed and valued. As relationships between the parents of the children and the older volunteers develop the program can benefit the entire community.

I believe that our Intergenerational Program can serve as a model for other communities. There is a natural affinity between children and older adults that can easily be developed. It helps if two agencies work cooperatively; one serving the elderly and one serving children. Funding for a prospective intergenerational program can be limited or

nonexistent. The spirit of group cooperation and the enthusiasm of the volunteers will carry the program. Interdependence between the young and the

old is a unique and strengthening relationship that can bring a new dimension to community development efforts.

### **25 Years Ago in this Journal**

While inter-generation differences always exist, these differences are probably less sharp today than in the past generation. We need many more activities in our Centers in which the parents with their children can participate together. We must begin to experiment with some modification of our present system of conducting activities on an age level. Ultimately, the needs of our adolescents can only be met in the company of an established, integrated and mixed community; and no one truly wants to be relegated to a world of his own. It is true that on the face of it teen-agers object to joining too frequently with their parents in activities. But if properly presented and carefully paced they ultimately can have such rich experiences with their parents that these can become ongoing elements in the Center program.

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