

Forever Friends: An Intergenerational Program

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Photographs courtesy Sharon A. Power.

Children Absorb Our Culture's Negativity about the Elderly

Adult society generally views aging and the elderly negatively, and these attitudes appear to have been inculcated in the young. With the decline in the number of multigenerational family households, frequent and informal contact between young and old occurs far less often. But America's population is aging rapidly; the baby-boom generation is becoming the grandparent boom. By the year 2010 as many as one in three Americans will be over the age of 60 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992). Numerous studies have found that both groups can benefit from contact with the other.

Three decades of research has reported that young children distinguish among people of various ages and hold a variety of negative or distorted views of the elderly. Seefeldt and colleagues (1977) examined attitudes toward the elderly by 180 children 3 to 11 years of age. Most children labeled elders stereotypically as *ugly*, *tired*, and *sick*, and they disliked the thought of aging themselves. Chitwood and Bigner (1980) found that preschool children associate pictures of the elderly with such adjectives as *sad*, *bad*, *poor*, and *ugly* more than they do pictures of the young or middle aged. Children as young as three, when presented photographs of both young and old people, can easily distinguish age variables (Rosenwasser et al. 1986). Britton and Britton (1969) and Kogan, Stephens, and Shelton (1961) concluded that children's perceptions of the elderly are age related, too. They found that between the ages of four and six, children's awareness of the elderly increases, and by the time children arrive at school, they can consistently and correctly identify the elderly in pictures they are presented. Miller, Blalock, and Ginsburg (1984), who confirmed that children distinguish young

people from old, also found that children prefer the company of young people over that of old people in almost all social contacts.

The decrease in the number of extended-family households and the resulting rise in the number of nuclear and single-parent families have increased age segregation. To reunite young and old and to dispel the negative myths held by the young regarding the elderly, many intergenerational programs have been developed in the past 25 years. Building on the success of the Foster Grandparent Program and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), many programs focus on bridging the gap between the generations. Sometimes elders serve as tutors (Tice 1980; Baggett 1981) or as educational resources to enrich the schools (McGuire 1986; Seefeldt 1987; Corbin, Metal-Corbin, & Barge 1989; Aday, Rice, & Evans 1991). In these and other models, a service perspective is employed, with elders most often serving the young (Sheehan 1978; Newman, Lyons, & Onawola 1985; Wrenn et al. 1991).

The lack of opportunities for interaction in natural settings presents a challenge to connect the generations in other ways. The logical place to find large numbers of children is the local elementary school, and the logical people to coordinate and facilitate connections between children and elders are public school teachers. Strategies must be developed that support and respect the unique gifts and challenges of each age group, that work to reverse the stereotypes, and that dispel the myths that divide young children and elders. This article describes one such program—a program that prides itself on its mutuality and reciprocity. Elders and children participate as equal members, and the relationships that evolve make them Forever Friends.

Each year, for the past 11 years, the Forever Friends Program has linked one classroom of second graders at Hillside School in Brookfield, Wisconsin, with approximately 25 residents of St. John's Tower, an independent-living retirement facility in downtown Milwaukee. Forever Friends began as an opportunity for the children to form friendships with healthy elders and for teachers to dispel the myth that all elderly people are frail and in nursing homes. It has evolved into an intergenerational program that has touched the lives of approximately 225 children and 85 elders.

The program is an integral part of a holistic educational approach. The regular instructional program is followed, with the classroom teacher identifying activities in which children and elders might jointly participate. Children and elders are given opportunities to work together as members of the whole group, cooperative groups, and partnerships, as well as individually. Units of study and themes vary from year to year to meet the needs and interests of each new group of children. But regardless of the topic, young and old together learn about the subject and each other.

After initial preparation in the classroom, the children meet with their elder friends approximately once a month, exchanging letters and phone calls between meetings. The elders participate in selected classroom activities, accompany the children on field trips, participate in holiday and spring musical programs, and join in many creative writing projects. A summer picnic at St. John's is the culminating activity for the Forever Friends group and their families. What follows is a composite of several years' activities, blended to offer a month-by-month model of one year's schedule of activities.

Classroom preparation

To prepare the children for meeting their new friends, a variety of activities are presented within the classroom setting. The first is a brainstorming session. The children are asked what words come to mind when asked the question, "What is old?" The words are listed as given, with no editorial comment, on a large piece of chart paper. The descriptors are usually negative—*sick, dying, slow, wrinkly, worn out, tired, in nursing homes, with canes, grouchy*, and the like. After each child has an opportunity to respond, the list is read orally. A few more words are added and, as the list is taken down, the teacher closes the discussion and casually remarks, "Hmm, Santa Claus is old and these words don't seem to describe him very well. It makes me wonder . . ."

The final segment of this activity is a read-aloud of *Song and Dance Man* by Karen Ackerman. The main character of this award-winning story is an active, former vaudeville performer who entertains his grandchildren. At the conclusion of the story, the children are asked to describe the grandpa. They typically use such positive descriptors as *fun, great dancer, good cane-twirler*, and so on.



Three intergenerational literature books are shared with the class each week for three weeks, followed by brief discussions in which the main characters are described. A new list of descriptors is generated. Children begin to notice the difference between the initial "What Is Old?" list and the words they use to describe the characters in the stories they are hearing.

A similar intergenerational program can be developed by anyone, anywhere. Once convinced of the importance of uniting the children with whom you work with elders, you can easily make contact with local senior citizens. We encourage you to replicate the ideas we offer or create others more suitable to your situation or locale. Regardless of how you begin, we urge you to *start your own intergenerational program.*

Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children, by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen, is then read and discussed. Because the ages of the elders involved with the program generally range from 65 to 90-plus, it is important to prepare the children for the possibility of death. (Since Forever Friends was established 11 years ago, three elders have died.) *Lifetimes* portrays all living things as having a beginning and an ending. The children also read *My Great Aunt Arizona* by Gloria Houston, which personalizes the aging process by introducing the main character at birth and following her life until she dies on her 93d birthday.

After these literature experiences, the children are told that they will each have an opportunity to have an elder friend. They share questions (How old are they? When will we meet them? What will they be like?) and begin preparations for their first meeting.

Another activity in preparation for meeting their elder friends is a class discussion of *same* and *different*. Under each heading the children list characteristics that compare them to elders. When they finish, they see that the similarities far outnumber the differences. The children are then asked to form small groups and list four questions

that they would like to ask an older person. They come together later as a large group and share their questions. Copies of the questions are given to each child so that each can choose five to ask her or his elder friend. The answers are shared with the class when the group returns from its first visit to St. John's.

The first meeting is held at St. John's for two reasons. First, the

the children go to a large room where residents are seated, two each at tables for four. The children are allowed to fill in the empty seats at random, and the person to their right becomes their friend for the year. The random pairing has been extremely successful. It gives the partners an opportunity to discuss the questions brought by the children and encourages further conversation. The opportunity to "discover" things about each new person is enhanced as well.

During the school year, the children and seniors gather together once each month. After the initial meeting at St. John's in September, the elders come to school in October for the second meeting. They are taken on a tour of the building by the children and share a Halloween art activity and a snack. The elders bring along a short story about their favorite Halloween to share with their friend.

A field trip to a one-room school is planned for November. Young and old alike enjoy penmanship lessons, writing on slates, and trying to avoid the dunce cap.

The children present a musical holiday program for parents and friends in December. The elders are invited to join the children on stage for the final three songs. Traditional holiday songs are



children are always eager for a field trip and an adventure. Second, the elders can enjoy the comfort of familiar surroundings. Having the children come to them lessens whatever apprehensions they might have about meeting their new friends and gives them the opportunity to show the children their home. Upon arrival,

The elder population is seen as a drain on society's resources, consuming a disproportionate share of our federal tax dollars through Social Security and Medicare entitlement programs. They are often perceived as sick, cranky, passive, poor, and in need of others' care, time, and attention. While this is true in some cases, it isn't in a great many others.

Start Your Own Intergenerational Program

Seek a commitment from yourself and your program administrator to initiate an intergenerational program in your school or center.

Contact elders through retirement facilities, senior centers, church groups, the local Council on Aging, or the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP).

Prepare the children

- Discuss the program with the parents.
- Conduct the "What is Old?" activity.
- Select appropriate children's literature.
- Read and discuss *Lifetimes* by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen.

Develop a calendar of activities

- Field trips
- Writing activities
- Discussion topics

Meet with the elders

- Describe the program's goals and activities.
- Discuss children's abilities and interests.
- Offer guidance regarding matters of confidentiality, behavior management, and discipline.

Begin!

- Introduce the children and elders.
- Offer child-made pictures, photos, and ice-breaker questions or activities.
- Plan for lunch or a snack.

selected to minimize possible stage fright by the elders and to avoid the need for prepared music and rehearsals. Refreshments are served by the parents after the program, and the children and their families have an opportunity to socialize with their elder friends.

In January the groups attend a play together, then discuss the characters and share their views about the drama. Participants are asked to write a new ending to the play and to share it with their partners.

An African safari is held at school in February. The children share African folktales and play traditional games with their elder friends. Slides are shown and a gorilla (the teacher in a very hairy costume) serves a treat of

hot fudge sundaes (which include vanilla, cocoa beans, and cashews, all African exports).

In March the two groups tour a hospital. The visit is a culminating activity for a science unit. Both groups are shown a variety of medical procedures. The children get stress tests, elders have their blood pressure taken, and both groups are taught CPR techniques.

In April, when the children are involved in a literature unit that incorporates books about hats, each group writes about a favorite hat. When all stories have been written, illustrated, and compiled in a class book, the elders come to school for a fashion show. Each child reads a story while wearing her or his special hat. Parents are also invited and treats are provided.

The children study several artists during the month of May. They are invited to imitate their favorite artistic style, and their original artwork is displayed in the classroom. Families and elder friends are invited to a gallery opening. Children share information about each artist and lead their guests on a gallery tour. Time is provided for everyone to complete a drawing in the style of a favorite artist. Special refreshments include delicate peanut butter-and-jelly finger sandwiches and juice served in plastic stemware.

In June the elders again join the children in singing a few songs during a musical program. Families and friends gather afterward to view children's work on display in the classroom and to share refreshments.

At St. John's Tower in July, children and their families join the elders for an old-fashioned picnic and group games. Relay races, bubble-blowing contests, and a sing-along are enjoyed by everyone from 4 to 94.

Children's attitudinal responses and change

By the conclusion of each school year the children have written stories about their friends. Now, instead of using such words as *old*, *sick*, *wrinkled*, *tired*, and *slow*, the children describe the elders in a positive way.

She loves kids, including me. . . . She walks so fast that when I am starting to walk she's at the end of the hall! I have to run to catch up! . . . She has been to lots and lots of other countries. Kids from different countries stayed with her for one year. They probably liked it! Anyone would like living with her!!!

My St. John's friends' names are Mr. W. and Mr. N. They're both very, very nice! I like them and they are both the nicest people in the world. They both sing good. Do you know what? Mr. W. is a stamp collector and I am, too, and each time I see

him he gives me stamps—really neat ones!

It's nice to have older friends because they are very nice and they are cuddly and soft.

Mr. and Mrs. R. are the best! . . . They are both very gentle and whenever I say good-bye, he kisses me on the hand!

Miss L. likes to read books. When I saw her the first time she was wearing a blue dress. Miss L. has white hair, brown shoes, a cane, and a smile! I think she likes me because I'm cute! We always had so much fun through the year. She has a huge smile!

Mr. R. has the coolest cane I've ever seen. It looks like a tree branch. In just 70 years I can have one just like it.

Miss S. . . . is one of my best friends. She is funny and very, very kind. She is almost all the way Irish. She is 94 or 95 years old. . . . We have lots and lots of fun together.

The St. John's participants are equally enthusiastic. "Forever Friends makes me feel young!" one woman says. "It has given me charming young friends." Another resident reports, "Forever Friends has given me such joy! What more could I ask for?"

Sustaining friendships

Many pairs of children and elders choose to continue to remain in contact after the school year ends. Some child-elder pairs have kept in touch since 1985, sharing calls, cards, notes, or letters at birthdays or holidays and throughout the year. One of the St. John's seniors explains, "It is nice to see [the children's] happy, smiling faces when we meet them after they have left the program. We are not forgotten." Both groups have grown more understanding and appreciative of the other. Some may truly remain Forever Friends.

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