Best Practices in Intergenerational Programming: Practice 3

Participation is voluntary.

Practice 3 • Voluntary participation

Intergenerational programs are most effective when participation is voluntary.

It is important that potential participants of an intergenerational activity are given a choice of participating in the activity or not. In communicating, staff should be encouraging and enthusiastic, but not coercive. Once informed, participants can make a decision concerning their ability and willingness to join. Some participants may need time to ease into the routine of intergenerational contact, and staff can support that. By providing a choice, staff members set the tone of the activity in a positive light, while increasing the comfort of all involved.

Benefits of Voluntary Participation

- It empowers adults and children by putting the participants in control.

- Participants gain personal power and feel a sense of mastery over their own lives when they have choices.

- True friendships grow best when connections are voluntary, not forced.

- Staff facilitation is easier when participants join activities voluntarily.

- A learning community develops, as opposed to unwilling or resentful participants going through the motions.

- The total program improves as the community of learners grows.

Application of the Practice

Think about intergenerational exchanges going both ways. Children can visit adult settings and can also invite older adults to their classroom. A child who declines invitations to join activities outside the classroom may be reluctant to leave the comfort of the classroom rather than being afraid of older people.

Project TRIP

Transforming Relationships Through Intergenerational Programming

A Children's, Youth, and Families at Risk Project of Virginia Tech.

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This is one of 11 fact sheets on the emerging best practices associated with intergenerational programs.

Intergenerational programs are those that connect younger and older generations to foster positive experiences. Research continues to grow, noting that when successfully delivered, intergenerational programs result in positive health effects, child learning, and appropriate socialization for both young and old (Jarrott 2011).

The third practice relates to **voluntary participation.**

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Program Ideas

- Be clear with descriptions, instructions, and expectations.

- Model participation.

- Pair compatible participants.

- Be enthusiastic and encouraging without being coercive.

- Arrange the task and seating conveniently and comfortably.

- Assist with the task.

- Allow participants to ease into the task.

- Allow creativity with the task.

- Offer a choice of more than one activity.

- Do not assume that a refusal to participate in one activity means a lack of interest in intergenerational programming.

Additional Resource

Florin, P., and A. Wandersman. 1990. "An Introduction to Citizen Participation, Voluntary Organizations, and Community Development: Insights for Empowerment Through Research." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 18 (1): 41-54.

Reference

Jarrott, S. E. 2011. "Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going? Content Analysis of Evaluation Research of Intergenerational Programs." *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 9:37-52. doi:10.1080/15350 770.2011.544594.

Best Practices for Intergenerational Programming

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 participants.

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.