



Expression

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL ON AGING

Member's Editorial

Reconnecting the Generations

Whether it's quilting, learning computer skills or singing in a choir, young and old are doing more together these days. That kind of connection is called 'intergenerational' and although it's been around forever, it's the 'new wave.' It's a concept that has the potential of strengthening families and communities and enhancing the health and well-being of all generations.

Intergenerational simply refers to interaction between all generations. As children, most of us were able to benefit from the reassuring presence of a caring grandparent whose traditions contributed to anchoring us solidly to our family and community. Over the last 30 years, however, profound changes in the structure of the family and the workplace have eroded the traditional links between the generations. This has created a need for formalized intergenerational activities and for expanding the family circle to include 'surrogate'



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grandparents to interact with youngsters and vice versa.

While there is a need for close connections between generations in all layers of our society, there seems to be particular benefits in the case of adolescents. Disconnection between generations implies a dissociation from the social context and may be partly responsible for some of the alienation and difficulties experienced by teenagers who have had very little contact with family members of other generations.

Distance, the isolation of families (especially single-parent families) and the unnatural segregation of age groups (school,

continued on page 2



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continued from page 1



workforce, seniors) have contributed to a malaise that is as detrimental to seniors as it is to youth and the other generations in between. The good news is that the population of seniors in Canada is increasing. That means that an ever-growing wealth of nurturing, skills and talent is now available to enhance the experience of younger generations, who in turn can brighten the lives of their elders.

It has become abundantly clear that meaningful activity in later years contributes to seniors' good health. We also know that to thrive eventually as adults, youngsters and teenagers need self-esteem and support. All that's needed is

some infrastructure and programs to help bring generations together for their mutual benefit.

While early intergenerational connections seem most successful in preventing teenagers from eventually dropping out of school and the social system, this issue of *Expression* looks at ways of bridging the gap with the current generation of teenagers, who have grown up in a society that has not quite adjusted to the major social changes that occurred in the second half of this century. Seniors can contribute to this adjustment.

The United Nations has proclaimed 1999 the **International Year of Older Persons**. The Year's theme, *A Society for All Ages*, invites us all to continue to contribute to the health of our communities by taking positive action to reinforce the bonds between the generations.

Juliette Pilon
NACA Member
Ontario

Intergenerational well-being

People of all generations have a right to the comfort, wisdom, energy and mutual support of intergenerational exchanges. This support is now understood to be one of the determinant factors of health and well-being. Breaking down the barriers and establishing meaningful exchanges between the generations is a health issue not only for individuals but for our entire society.

Dr. Mel Shipman, Executive Director of **United Generations Ontario**, notes that while intergenerational activity occurs naturally where children and youth live near grandparents and other older adults, opportunities for natural intergenerational play have dramatically decreased in our mobile society.¹ Activities that once pulled families together, like caring for frail elderly, minding small children and teaching cultural traditions take place with less frequency than in the past because of the requirements of the work world, the distances that separate families and the higher prevalence of divorce. This has had negative effects on all generations, but particularly on youth and seniors, who are more reliant on the sense of belonging and mutual support that comes from close family ties.



Seniors and adolescents

Lacking sound grounding and guidance, some adolescents seek acceptance through crime, drugs, prostitution and violence; more and more drop out of school; and suicide has become a major concern. Meanwhile, a population explosion is occurring among knowledgeable, skilled and caring retirees who often live far from their children and their families and may be at risk of feeling disconnected and unappreciated in their retirement years. Creating opportunities for interaction between these two groups stands to benefit both.

A perfect fit

The late *Maggie Kuhn*, the outspoken American activist who founded the 'Gray Panthers,' felt that adolescents and seniors have many common traits. For example:

- ◆ Both groups are not taken seriously. The old are told, "We don't do it that way anymore." The young are told, "You don't know what you're talking about."
- ◆ Both have limited incomes.
- ◆ Both are going through dramatic bodily changes. The young are growing hair; the old are losing hair.
- ◆ Both are 'confronted' to the drug scene, though faced with

different drugs and different 'pushers.'

- ◆ Both can be in varying degrees of conflict with the middle generation.
- ◆ Both have difficulty securing employment because age discrimination against the young and old is still rampant.
- ◆ Both are free to be agents of social change.² (adapted quotation)

At-risk teenagers

Why are teenagers often identified as an at-risk group? Poverty seems to be one factor. The *Campaign 2000 Report Card, 1997* notes that the number of poor children in Canada has increased by 58% since 1989. And the number of poor children in single-parent families has increased by 64%.³ Poverty is also associated with the rate of school drop-outs. In 1991, 18% of twenty-year-olds had not completed their high school.⁴

Finally there is a broader social context which, together with poverty and dropping out of school, places many youth into an at-risk category. The **Ontario Premier's Council on Health, Well-Being and Social Justice** noted that this context includes relationships between young people and their families, schools, communities and their world.⁵ A consulting group specializing in mentoring draws

the same conclusion: "at-risk youth are not just at-risk of leaving school early, but are also at-risk of dropping out emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically from society."⁶ They need support in order to gain the self-esteem and other tools that will enable them to overcome the life pattern that has placed them at risk.

At-risk seniors

As people age, their children (and grandchildren) can move away. Retirement and physical decline can also reduce social interaction. Eventually, death may take away spouse, friends and family. Seniors risk losing their connectedness to the world they have known and can suffer from social isolation.

Researchers are finding increasing evidence that community involvement and a strong social support system are essential to seniors' long-term mental and physical health. These supports — which encourage interaction and a sense of connectedness — contribute to the general well-being of seniors and help prevent loneliness, depression and illness. They are especially important for those coping with life stresses such as bereavement, forced retirement or physical illness.

continued on page 4

Seniors can therefore benefit, both as givers and as receivers, from intergenerational activities in their communities. By contributing their knowledge and goodwill to the younger generation, they will reap the rewards of 'connected-ness' and appreciation. As they age, they will also benefit from a continued sense of belonging and the caring support of the young people they will have come to know through their work in the community.

Intergenerational programming is happening

There has been very little Canadian research in the area of intergenerational activities and no extensive compilation of existing programs and successes. Yet many groups and communities have become aware of the importance of linking the generations and have found ways to make it happen.

Activities can take place in many areas: a program director at a seniors' centre that arranges for a high school student to shovel an older person's driveway and a teacher that recruits a caring senior to help a student to read and write bring visible and immediate benefits to both the senior and the teenager. These go beyond the mere provision of service by one generation to another. A strong bonding can occur during intergenerational interactions. Expressions of appreciation abound, cross-generational comfort levels are

raised and friendships are formed. Both parties feel an increased sense of accomplishment and belonging.

The following examples of intergenerational programs taking place across Canada may inspire seniors' groups, youth groups, social activists, municipal corporations and governments to put in place infrastructures to connect community youth with community elders in meaningful ways. Useful addresses are provided at the end of this newsletter.

Mentoring

Mentoring is an age-old concept involving a capable senior with a younger learner. A mentor encourages, listens, gives advice, advocates, acts as a role model and shares information and experience. Mentoring at-risk teenagers can have a far-reaching impact on their self-esteem, world-view and eventual quality of life and contribution to society. It also brings rewards to the mentor and a greater understanding of the current social context of youth.⁷

Several national organizations use the mentoring model. **Frontier College** seeks to prevent the life-long difficulties associated with non-existent or poor reading and writing skills. Using a one-on-one approach, it specializes in making literacy more accessible to street youth, immigrants, the

disabled, and high-school dropouts. **Prime Mentors of Canada** works with potential at-risk creative juniors who tend to be neglected and underachieving. It helps them develop creative problem-solving skills which enhance learning, school adjustment and self-concept. The **Big Brothers and Sisters** offer companionship and guidance to youngsters growing up in single-parent households.

There are also many innovative mentoring programs developed at the community level. The **Black Achievers Program**, at the Greater Toronto YMCA, brings together black and minority youth between the ages of 12 and 21 who work with adult achievers/mentors from similar ethnic backgrounds. Youth are exposed to counselling, job shadowing, summer employment, leadership development, life skills, etc. The program plays an important role in strengthening the partnership between home, school and community.

Want ads – Intergenerational

Former businessman and competitive swimmer; good outdoorsman; avid hockey fan; variety of other interests including woodworking and writing. Seeking to share outings with young person (including a season's pass to the Coliseum) in exchange for some lessons in computer use and the Internet.

Want ads – Intergenerational

Teenage Internet surfer and sci-fi adept looking for a senior to teach him woodworking and other 'old time' skills including fishing if possible. My interests (apart from the computer) are frisbee, hockey and movies. My parents are separated and my grandfather lives far away. I would like to build a small jewelry box for my mother.

Projects and programs that work

Intergenerational programs can touch on every aspect of life. As young people and older adults get to know each other, relationships develop and the line between givers and receivers blurs; mutual respect and benefit becomes the norm.

In Montréal, Quebec, **Santropol roulant** involves young people in the lives of seniors through meals on wheels. The wheels just happen to be on bicycles instead of cars. The program was set up with the help of the **Volunteer Bureau of Montréal**, the **Café Santropol** and **Youth Service Canada** to deliver meals to seniors and others living with a loss of autonomy, from all backgrounds and cultures. It provides a means of achievement for students and a source of comfort and contact for secluded seniors. *Santropol* bicycles

delivering hot dinners have become a common Montréal sight!

In Charlottetown, P.E.I., an innovative program has 'ham' radio operators joining forces with high school senior students to operate an amateur radio station at **Colonel Gray Senior High School**. Students can visit and operate the station under the guidance of seniors, who make themselves available during lunch hour and after school and frequently during the day and evening. The seniors are licensed ham operators and offer a qualifying course for the students. The social studies classes use the station for projects. The program has not only opened contact with the outside world but between the generations.

Since 1977, the **Intercultural Grandmothers Uniting** has been a growing network of First Nations, Métis and other Canadian older women in rural Saskatchewan. The network's purpose is to improve individual and community health through building bridges of understanding between the generations and the races, strengthening the grandmothers in their leadership and working towards healthy, violence-free families and communities. It is sustained by the **Seniors' Education**

Centre of Regina through a partnership with the **Seniors' University Group** of the **University of Regina**.

In Peterborough County, Ontario, **Students Supporting Seniors** has brought students from seven high schools to volunteer, each spring and fall, for a clean-up day to help seniors. The program is 10 years old and involves over 800 students who assist seniors in 400 homes. It is coordinated and supported by the **Senior Citizens' Council** and ten regional **Community Care offices**. The schools provide staff, a local **Rotary Club** provides transportation, and the **Kiwanis Club** of **Scott's Plains** provides funds for advertising. Students tackle a wide variety of jobs for seniors — including yard work, cleaning and general chores. Warm friendships have grown from the contacts made on the service days and seniors often have the opportunity to further enjoy the company of young helpers and share their own knowledge and stories with them.

continued on page 6



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The **Volunteer Grandparents Society of B.C.** has been at work in British Columbia for 25 years. Its experience has shown that relationships formed through the program have often developed into life-long friendships. The surrogate grandparent is there for childhood, adolescence and beyond. *Edward Hutchings*, director of the Society tells the story of two 'school grandparents' and a grade 6 class labelled 'unmanageable.' After a year of activities and regular visits by school grandparents *Jim and John*, the levels of behaviour and self-esteem of the young people had improved. Proof and reward came to the two volunteers in the form of a letter from young Nathan:

"Dear Grampa Jim and Grampa John,

Thank you for the polar bear. I named him Polaroid. He stays in my bed and I play with him and everybody loves him. And I was wondering how fun is it to be a volunteer and did your older brother ever agree with any of your ideas or did he hate them all. My brother thinks he has all good ideas and he never listens to mine. I hope there's another field trip like the one we had and I hope you come. When I grow up, I'm going to be a volunteer with lots of little kids like me and I'll tell a lot of stories. And I'll still have the polar bear because I will take care of it all my life."

In Winnipeg, Manitoba, schools are discovering that seniors do not fit the stereotype of 'old people' and that they are a new and much-needed source of talent, energy and caring. At **Churchill High School**, nine senior volunteers assist each week in woodworking, math classes, chess tournaments and other activities. In Grade 12 English, students are writing a history book under the guidance of *Bill Burdeyny*, a former Winnipeg Tribune Editor. Burdeyny feels that retirement has opened more doors than it has closed and that his work with youth has benefited him at least as much as it benefits the teenagers. The program involving over 100 seniors with 20 schools is organized by **Creative Retirement Manitoba**.

The **Christie-Ossington Neighbourhood Centre** and **Toronto Intergenerational Partnerships** run a very successful program with 'high-risk' unemployed youth who are taught skills that they use in service to seniors. The goals of the program are to reduce the level of environmental risks to seniors living in their homes and to train young people in the skills and sensitivity necessary to perform assessment and home maintenance services. The work focuses on safety, energy conservation and quality of life; it includes checking for fire hazards, making minor repairs, cleaning and painting. More than anything else, seniors who have

benefited from the services found that these youth, who had been frightening to them before, were now seen to be trustworthy, polite, generous and caring teenagers. The young people, on the other hand, feel accepted and appreciated.

1999: OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

"Canada, a society for all ages"

The **International Year of Older Persons** (1999) provides seniors across Canada with a unique opportunity to contribute to intergenerational well-being through exchanges with children and youth in their communities.

By setting up connecting links and infrastructures, seniors' groups and youth-oriented programs can work together towards rebuilding the ties that make communities wholesome, bringing young and old together in a spirit of cooperation, mutual support and shared affection and regard. In doing so, they will be contributing to reducing the isolation of families, the alienation of youth and the prevalence of ageism in Canadian society.



For Further Reading...

Please refer to your local or university library for a copy of these materials.

B.C. Council for Families. *The resource and information kit for intergenerational programming*. Vancouver: 1994.

Canadian Mental Health Association. *Young & old together: To unite the generations*. Sudbury: 1997.

Fédération de l'âge d'or du Québec. *Guide de l'intergénération: Complices en action*. Montréal: 1995.

Gamble, C. *Generations together: A mentoring partnership manual*. Toronto: the Volunteer Centre of Metropolitan Toronto, 1992.

Hals-Eisbrenner, C. and M. Shipman. *The Ontario mentoring experience*. Toronto: United Generations Ontario, April 1997.

Kramer, C. and S. Newman. *Senior citizen school volunteer manual*. Pittsburgh, PA.: Generations Together, University of Pittsburgh, 1996.

Lutz, S. and J. Haller. *Seniors and children at risk: Building bridges together*. Washington, D.C.: National Council on Aging, 1996.

Maurer, E. W. *The generation connection: Video and facilitators guide*. Vancouver: the Generation Connection Society, 1993.

Maurer, E. W. *Perceptions of abuse: An adolescent perspective*. Vancouver: the Generation Connection Society, 1995.

Newman, S. *The impact of the school experience on the well-being of older persons*. Pittsburgh, PA: Generations Together, University of Pittsburgh, 1988.

Newman, S. and S. Brummell (eds.). *Intergenerational programs: Imperatives, strategies, strategies, impacts, trends*. New York: The Haworth Press, 1989.

Ward, J. *Developing intergenerational programs with the frail elderly*. Toronto: Ontario Office for Seniors Issues, 1992. (available from United Generations Ontario)

For More Information...

National Organizations

Big Brothers and Sisters of Canada, (905) 639-0461; toll free: 1-800-263-9133; in Quebec: 1-800-661-4252

Canadian Council on Social Development, (613) 236-8977
Child Welfare League of Canada, (613) 235-4412

Frontier College, (416) 923-3591; toll free: 1-800-555-6523

Intergenerational Alliance, c/o Canadian Institute of Child Health, (613) 224-4144

Prime Mentors of Canada, (416) 923-6642, ext. 7503 (Dr. Conchita Tan-Willman).

Provinces and Territories

Alberta Seniors Directorate, (403) 787-5016, 1-800-667-7161 within Alberta only

Alberta Connections, c/o Alberta Community Development. Fax: (403) 427-1496

BC Council for Families, (604) 660-0675, 1-800-663-5638 within BC only

BC Volunteer Grandparents Society, (604) 736-8271

Community Services Council of Newfoundland and Labrador, (709) 753-9860

Creative Retirement Manitoba, (204) 949-2565

Fédération de l'âge d'or du Québec, (514) 252-3017

Generation Connexion Society, (B.C.) (604) 731-5399

L.O.V.E. Committee, Prince Edward Island, (902) 675-4791

N.W.T. Seniors Advisory Committee, 1-800-661-0878 within N.W.T. only

Nova Scotia Senior Citizens Secretariat, (902) 424-6322

Saskatchewan Seniors Mechanism, (306) 359-9956

Senior Goodwill Ambassadors/Office for Seniors, New Brunswick, (506) 453-2480

Volunteer Grandparents of Manitoba, (204) 944-4369

United Generations Ontario, (416) 955-9787

Tips List

For seniors who want to get involved

■ Contact your municipality or local Volunteer Centre to find out what programs are in place in your community. Seniors' groups, associations, clubs or retirement homes may already be carrying out intergenerational activities.

■ Check out organizations that have a youth clientèle (YMCA, YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers, Big Sisters, 4H Clubs, Frontier College) as well as smaller youth agencies in your community (such as the youth centre), high schools, service clubs (Kiwanis, Rotary, etc.)

■ If there are no programs in your community, contact one or more of the organizations featured in this *Expression* and find out about their members or programs in your area. These organizations may also be able to offer resources (videos, handbooks, program guides, training manuals) which contain excellent information on how to design and deliver a broad range of intergenerational programs and activities.

For seniors' groups interested in setting up an intergenerational program

■ Link up with one of the national or provincial organizations to obtain information and guidance for developing an intergenerational project. Use the reading list, contacts and other resources mentioned in this newsletter to help you get started.

■ Consult your members to find out what their preferences and needs are and to determine the type of project that will suit them. Perhaps they would like to learn new skills. Programs involving teens in teaching seniors how to use the computer and the Internet have been very successful.

■ Consult local organizations (service clubs, recreation department, social services, school boards and principals, etc.) to determine the needs of youth in your community. You may be able to form a partnership. Define the roles, relationship and responsibilities of the program partners early in the process.

■ Be realistic, flexible and keep it simple. It's easy to become too focused on the 'program.' Remember that intergenerational activities *are about bringing people together* for mutual aid and benefit.



Notes

- 1 Shipman, M. *Intergenerational programming: From instrumental service to social imperative and a vision of a civic society*. Toronto: United Generations Ontario, Oct. 1997.
- 2 Kuhn, Maggie. *Grey Panther Network Newsletter*. Winter 1985.
- 3 Family Services Association of Metro Toronto. *Child poverty in Canada: Campaign 2000, Report card 1997*. Toronto: 1997.
- 4 Gilbert, S. and Orok, B. "School Leavers." *Canadian Social Trends*, (Fall 1993): 2-7.
- 5 Ontario Premier's Council on Health, Well-Being and Social Justice. *Nurturing health: A new understanding of what makes people healthy*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1993.
- 6 De Rosenroll, D. et al. *The Canadian stay-in-school mentor strategy*. Victoria: Peer Systems Consulting Group, 1993.
- 7 Smink, J. *Mentoring programs for at-risk youth*. Clemson, NC: National Drop Out Prevention Center, Clemson University, 1990.

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