Intergenerational Interactions

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Intergenerational interactions are a valuable part of our society. Through intergenerational relationships enjoyment, knowledge, and support can be shared. As western society's family structures change (Ruby et al., 2007), the value of intergenerational interactions needs to be upheld. Certain environments and urban designs (4) are more facilitating and encouraging of intergenerational interactions. Recreational activity (5) can be used to initiate intergenerational interactions and relationships. Educational interactions further facilitate the passing of knowledge between generations. Through these relationships, companionship can address the social isolation (10) that older adults may deal with, while also providing positive role models for younger people. Research has shown that intergenerational interactions can be beneficial and fulfilling for both younger and older generations (Christensen and Soreff, 2006; Davis et al., 2002).

Intergenerational interactions can be beneficial and life giving for both younger and older generations.

Environment and Design

Recreational (5) and non-recreational environments can be designed to encourage and facilitate intergenerational interactions in a spontaneous or deliberate way. Kaplan et al. (2007) provided unique insight into this area by identifying the goal or function of the particular area, discussing the design principles and design concepts, and further giving an appropriate design example. Examples of some of the goals or functions of the space include social contact, awareness and orientation, autonomy and personal control, and functional ability. Examples of environments that can achieve these goals include interactive water fountains, designs that incorporate art, mixing neighbourhoods with child and older adult care facilities, and park designs that provide sitting facilities near playing facilities. Intentional urban design (4) is an important factor influencing opportunities and barriers for intergenerational interactions.

Larkin et al. (2010) discussed environmental design concepts that have implications neurologically, and thus influence the quality of intergenerational interactions. Research found that an environment that supports intergenerational interactions should provide accessibility and personal control, a balance of stimuli, opportunities for formal and informal interactions, a shared sense of place, and flexible surroundings.

Figure 2: Intergenerational game

Figure 3: Younger adult assisting older adult on the computer

Activities

Various recreational activities (5) can be used to initiate and develop intergenerational relationships. Penn State University (2009) has provided a general website with specific resources that can be used to initiate and develop short-term and long-term intergenerational relationships at both an individual and community scale. One of the resources included by Penn State University (2009) is a detailed sourcebook, which has specific instructions for intergenerational activities. St. Thomas University (2003) has also provided intergenerational activity suggestions. Davis et al. (2002) described particular toys, materials, and games that can be used to facilitate intergenerational activities. Penn State University (2009) further considered community scaled intergenerational activities by providing an intergenerational festival guide.

Education

Intergenerational interactions can be formed with the intention of passing on expertise. Educational intergenerational activities were the focus of Generations United (2012). Educational activities may relate to a variety of topics, including culture and traditions, environmental awareness, family history, gardening, financial literacy, music, science experiments, and storytelling. Technology can be used as the educational topic for older adults, where younger people may act as teachers (Christensen and Soreff, 2006). Rogers and Tayler (1997) discussed the wealth of knowledge that older adults can pass on to younger people. In view of the high number of baby boomers who will be retiring, the importance of passing on knowledge at an organizational level has also been stressed (Share Baby Boomers' Knowledge with Intergenerational Mentoring, 2010).

A number of sources talk about the educational and social value of intergenerational gardens. Gardens have been used to share the knowledge of older generations with younger generations. Intergenerational gardens can provide an environment where strong relationships form between generations, and between the community and nature (Grant, 2002). Within the context of various cultural backgrounds, family gardening was found to be a positive opportunity for sharing gardening knowledge with younger generations (Ruby et al., 2007). Resources for starting an intergenerational garden are available

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Figure 4: A meal enjoyed between generations

Though research has shown intergenerational interactions to have positive effects at an individual scale, community scale benefits are the result of many of these individual relationships.

through Roots and Shoots School Garden (2000). Intergenerational gardens can be found in Winnipeg, including the Intergenerational Gardening Program through Assiniboine Park Conservatory and the Intergenerational Garden through Sustainable South Osborne Community Cooperative.

Companionship

Intergenerational companionship may develop between generations where the younger and the older generation can benefit. VanderVen (2004) and Rogers and Tayler (1997) discussed how meaningful, non-family, intergenerational relationships are important in improving the lifestyles of at-risk youth. Christensen and Soreff (2006) describe a case where intergenerational interactions were used to help older adult's feelings of isolation (10). In this example, both younger and older generations acted as mutual mentors: the older adults taught the students about life, and the students taught the older adults about technology. VanderVen (2004) also discussed strategies for creating intergenerational relationships.

Final Thoughts

The value of intergenerational interactions can be seen for both older and younger generations. These interactions can be encouraged through various environments and designs, and relationships can be formed through activities, education, and companionship. The context and setting in which the enjoyment, expertise, and support is experienced and shared may vary. However, their potential for positive and valuable results has been shown through studies. Though research has shown intergenerational interactions to have positive effects at an individual scale, community scale benefits are the result of many of these individual relationships.

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