Getting Young and Old Together

A growing number of U.S. programs forge links between the ages at a time when social patterns tend to separate them.

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ome call them the sandwich generation, that bulging demographic cohort of thirtysomethings and fortysomethings who face an onerous triple duty: caring for young children and elderly parents while holding down full-time jobs. More than one-third of the U.S. work force confronts this problem, a number that is sure to rise.

Far more likely to have living grandparents, whether related or not, have much to offer one another. An older person can fill a void for a child who does not have a grandparent living nearby. And companionship with a young child bolsters an elder against the isolation and loneliness that often accompany old age.

Such links also fulfill an important social function. Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson invented the term "generativity" to describe the necessary transmission of life experiences from elder to younger generations. In the 1970s, anthropologist Margaret Mead prophetically wrote that an increasing lack of contact between old and young relatives would create a need for surrogate grandparents.

Efforts to connect generations are producing a host of new programs across the U.S. that brings retirees together with at-risk teenagers, is being launched in nine cities. In Omaha and seven other cities, elderly volunteers visit regularly with chronically ill children in a program called Family Friends. Generations Together, a research group based at the University of Pittsburgh, organizes phone links between older people and so-called latchkey kids, who return to empty homes after school. At the Point Park College Children's School in Pittsburgh, some preschoolers are being taught about aging by program toddlers from a local day-care center. Because of the proximity of the centers, the teachers use activities like planting seeds to illustrate the stages of the life cycle. The aim is to "foster a child's development of positive attitudes toward the elderly," says Cheryl Mack, program coordinator at Generations Together.

Without such personal contacts, experts say, stereotypical images emerge. A child can become afraid of older people because he thinks they are going to die. But by spending time with the elderly, kids learn to accept the frailty of the aging while discovering their strengths. In one Pennsylvania program, toddlers from a local day-care center spend time with Alzheimer's patients after being read such books as "Grandpa Doesn't Know It's Me." Youngsters also learn that death is a natural component of life. Generations Together, for example, is developing a curriculum dealing with separation and loss. It will help children cope not only with an elder companion's demise but also with other issues, like their parents' divorce or the loss of a favorite pet.

Such approaches do more than weave a few strangers' lives together or provide a convenient way to occupy idle hours. The full impact of such programs will not be felt until decades from now, when caregiving becomes a pressing necessity. As the baby boomers turn geriatric and the rest of society has to bear the enormous burden of caring for them in what is likely to be an era of dwindling resources.

"It is a modern paradox that children are far more likely to have living grandparents but much less likely to know them well," says Fran Pratt, who directs the Center for Understanding Aging at Framingham State College in Massachusetts. Psychologists point out that old people and youngsters, whether related or not, have much to offer each other. An older person can fill a void for a child who does not have a grandparent living nearby. And companionship with a young child bolsters an elder against the isolation and loneliness that often accompany old age.

Mutual benefits: at Messiah Village, a retirement community in Mechanicsburg, Pa., toddlers from a local day-care center are paired with residents, visiting once a week with their "special friends." The program to stimulate intergenerational contacts was launched eleven years ago as the population continues to age and as more women, the family's traditional care givers, enter the job market. What's a working couple to do with junior and Granny between 9 and 5? Throughout the U.S., a growing number of programs are now aimed at stimulating contact between young and old at a time when social patterns tend to separate them.

One such effort is a day-care center for young and old alike set up by Stride Rite Corp. of Cambridge, Mass., the first private company to establish this type of facility. The $700,000 pilot program, which opened last month after three years of planning, consists of adjoining centers that allow easy mingling and interaction between 55 children, from 18 months to five years old, and 24 elders over 60. Separated only by windows and hallways, the old and the young have plenty of opportunities to visit one another. Shared activities such as cooking and birthday parties are planned by the staff, but informal get-togethers happen spontaneously. "I tell my friends what they are missing," says Eva DaRosa, a 79-year-old great-grandmother whose smile brightens whenever children are nearby.

The program was initiated by Stride Rite Chairman Arnold Hiatt, who pioneered on-site child care in the early 1970s. Hiatt recruited faculty members from Boston's Wheelock College to develop a curriculum of shared activities such as storytelling and puppet plays. "It is to 'foster a child's development of positive attitudes toward the elderly,'" says Cheryl Mack, program coordinator at Generations Together.

The center attracts half its participants from families who live near the company's corporate headquarters; the others are serviced phone links between older people and so-called latchkey kids, who return to empty homes after school. At the Point Park College Children's School in Pittsburgh, some preschoolers are being taught about aging by

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