

# Launching Intergenerational Programs in Early Childhood Settings: A Comparison of Explicit Intervention with an Emergent Approach

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What began as a case study of intergenerational initiatives in university-based early childhood programs evolved into a comparative study of two different program implementation processes. Despite operating with the same goals, university partners, and resources, two early childhood centers pursued fundamentally different strategies for launching their intergenerational programs. One site followed what we call an “explicit intervention” with a set timeline and series of planned steps for finding, placing, and involving seniors in classroom activities. The other pursued what we call an “emergent” (or “organic”) strategy with no predetermined plan for finding senior volunteers and integrating them into classroom activities. Drawing on data collected from interviews with program staff and parents, and observations of intergenerational activities, this study serves to describe, compare, and contrast these alternative program initiation strategies. Both models are effective, but represent different approaches to valuing the contributions of older adults in the lives of young children.

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**KEY WORDS:** intergenerational programs; intergenerational; early childhood settings; emergent approach.

## INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

A growing body of literature provides compelling answers to why intergenerational programs in early childhood settings are beneficial to both older adults and young children. It is generally noted that children benefit from extra nurturing and attention, and seniors benefit from the sense of being needed and appreciated (McCrea & Smith, 1997). Furthermore, some recent studies note that when senior adults consistently volunteer in preschool settings, they tend to have a positive impact on the classroom environment. For example, in a 2-year pilot study

of three preschools in Hawaii participating in the Senior-Kupuna in Pre-schools (SKIP) initiative, senior adult volunteers, enlisted as mentors for children needing additional assistance, were found to have a “calming effect” on the classrooms; teachers and observers noted less disruption and noise with the presence of older adults (Cheang, 2002).

Another study launched from the University of Pittsburgh found that senior adults in early childhood settings-functioning as volunteers or paid staff-tend to take roles that are different, yet complementary to those taken by trained early childhood staff (Larkin & Newman, 2001; Newman, Larkin, Smith, & Nichols, 1999). Whereas younger staff members more readily assume professional responsibilities for curriculum development and classroom management (i.e., guiding children’s behavior), senior adults tend to exhibit more natural, familial-type behaviors and relate to children in less formal ways. Even when lacking formal training in early childhood education, senior adults, drawing on insights derived from their own experiences raising

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their children and grandchildren, frequently demonstrate a great capacity to be effective, nurturing caregivers and educators. Yet, for them to be fully integrated members of the child care team, there needs to be some sort of a structured planning and staff training process (Larkin & Newman, 2001; Newman et al., 1999).

The idea of instituting intergenerational activities is also appealing as a strategy for stimulating children's thinking about aging and lifespan development. In 1996, at the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) conference, Susan Bredekamp, speaking as a representative for the accreditation division of that association (National Academy of Early Childhood Programs), stated that early childhood education curricula should demonstrate age-span awareness as part of the accreditation criteria for quality early education programs. Her statement indicates recognition within the profession that just as it is important to expose children to nonbiased material about gender and cultural variation, so is it important to expose them to rich information about all of the developmental stages of life, including old age.

Although some educators aim merely to expose children to information *about* aging, where bringing pictures and stories of older people into the classroom might suffice, others subscribe to a deeper understanding of aging directly through interpersonal relationships with older adults. As discussed in Kaplan, Wagner, and Larson (2001), research shows the negative stereotypes that children as young as 3 years of age hold about senior adults (according to Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper, & Serock, 1977) do change as a function of having shared experiences and regular contact with them (Parnell, 1980; Seefeldt, Jantz, Serock, & Bredekamp, 1982; Travis, Stremmel, & Duprey, 1993). Drawing from the works of Dewey, Vygotsky, and Montessori, Newman and Smith (1997) emphasize that intergenerational activities should be conducted in a manner that provides participating children with "self-guided experiences of exploration and discovery" (pp. 5–6).

Whereas there is clearly a connection between developmental theory and the intergenerational framework, it is not always obvious from an organizational standpoint how to go about establishing effective programming that brings younger and older generations together for their mutual benefit. What seems to be lacking is a clearly outlined conceptual framework that would guide a range of alternative program implementation strategies. Toward that end, this article compares two different approaches to integrating senior adults into early childhood settings that successfully combined the value of building intergenerational relationships with early childhood education practice.

## CONTEXT FOR THE COMPARISON STUDY

Penn State University has two accredited child care facilities that serve the children of University students, faculty, and staff. In September 2001, the directors of both centers entered into a collaborative arrangement with Penn State Cooperative Extension to establish the *Penn State Early Childhood Education Intergenerational Program*. The partnership was soon expanded to include several senior adult-serving organizations, including Community Academy for Lifelong Learning (CALL), a community agency that provides classes and other lifelong learning opportunities for local senior adults. Representatives from the partnering organizations formed a program planning team to explore the rationale and feasibility for establishing an intergenerational program at the University's two childcare sites.

From the perspective of the early care and education professionals, what made the intergenerational concept compelling was the perception that the involvement of senior adult volunteers would enhance the cognitive development and social skills of the children. Those representing senior adult-serving organizations instead emphasized how the older participants would benefit from opportunities to contribute to the healthy development of young children. Thus, the intergenerational plan took the "older persons providing services to pre-schoolers or youth" approach (Lyons, 1992, p. 9).

The program planning team decided to seek funding to hire a part-time intergenerational program coordinator. This was made possible in November 2001, when a small grant was obtained from Kellogg Leadership for Institutional Change initiative.

During the early stages of the program implementation process, what was originally planned as a case study of a single program model being implemented in two sites evolved into a comparative study of two distinctly different program planning and implementation processes. It turned out that the two early childhood education centers, though starting with the same general purposes and presented with the same invitation for collaboration with the same set of partners, developed what appeared to be diametrically opposed implementation strategies. One center approached the initiative by developing a specific timeline and set of steps to introduce intergenerational activities; the other center managed the challenge as an emergent curriculum, which would unfold according to the interests of senior volunteers and the relationships that grew spontaneously among the participants. The discovery of the fundamentally different approaches to programming posed an unanticipated research opportunity to compare outcomes.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

**Study Purpose**

This study aimed to delineate two intergenerational program implementation approaches; one was guided by an explicit intervention strategy, the other by an organic (or emergent) process of development. Both approaches are presented as appropriate alternative strategies for introducing intergenerational engagement in early childhood education sites. Differences are considered in terms of *how* prospective senior adults are located, oriented, and integrated into classrooms. The contrast between center philosophy and the intergenerational interactions taking place in the classrooms is also considered.

**Methods and Procedures**

With the purpose of comparing program development strategies utilized by the two early childhood education sites, four types of data-interviews, questionnaires, observations, and written documents-were collected and then triangulated to check for confirming or disconfirming evidence. Data sources are described in detail below:

- Semistructured interviews were conducted with both center directors and the lead teachers and parents (one from each site) who were most active in the program planning process. Respondents were asked to describe their own involvement and personal perspectives regarding the program development process at the respective sites. These interviews, all conducted by the program coordinator, followed the same semistructured protocol and were centered on the same general questions, but with allowance for digressions and changes in sequence. Interview data were later sorted into coding categories for comparison according to the main themes that emerged from the conversations.
- Observations were conducted twice during regularly scheduled morning activity periods at each center (i.e., during unstructured free play), with each period lasting 45–60 minutes. All observations were conducted by the same researcher (the program coordinator) but on different days of the week. The observer wrote detailed descriptive notes that focused on the quality of the intergenerational exchange including the content of the interaction, who approached whom, body language, and dialogue. These anecdotal records documented intergenerational exchanges involving a total of 88 children and four senior adults in the two settings. Later, the qualitative data were organized to show the evident patterns in how intergenerational relationships were built at each site.
- Ten staff members from each center filled out questionnaires to provide information about the frequency, duration, and various other aspects of senior volunteers’ visits to their classrooms. These specific organizational details helped to verify the comparability of the two programs.
- Various written documents were collected and analyzed including center newsletters, minutes from meetings, philosophical statements, and marketing materials highlighting the programs.

This data source provided ancillary information on how the intergenerational programs are viewed and presented to parents and the general public.

**FINDINGS**

Before presenting comparative data regarding the University-based early childhood education centers’ respective intergenerational program development strategies, it is important to note differences in scale. The center that pursued an explicit or planned intervention strategy, described henceforth as “Center A,” has eight classrooms, 28 teachers, 147 children, and 10 senior adult volunteers. Center B, which pursued an organic or emergent intervention strategy, has three classrooms, 10 teachers, 56 children, and three senior adult volunteers. Both centers have similar hours of operation and similar profiles of children in terms of age (from 6 weeks to 5-year-olds) and were from similar socioeconomic status (SES) groups.

Table I provides a comparison between both centers and their respective program initiation styles in terms of five variables: (a) level of prior experience, (b) interest in intergenerational programming, (c) program planning, (d) tactics used for recruiting senior adults, and (e) senior adult orientation strategies. The text that follows further elucidates these comparisons.

**Prior Experience**

The directors of both centers had previous intergenerational programming experiences consisting largely of children visiting senior centers or groups of seniors visiting the early childhood centers. Both expressed very positive views of these experiences and noted a long-standing interest in finding additional ways to have older adults actively involved in the daily lives of children at their centers.

The two directors also articulated similar visions of having senior volunteers actively involved in most aspects of the early childhood curriculum, which would have a positive influence on the entire center in terms of creating a more nurturing, learning-rich, and stimulating environment. Another point of convergence was their desire to ensure that individual placements represented good matches between the seniors’ skills and interests and the needs of the center. However, their perspectives on senior volunteers’ roles and classroom assignments differed, as discussed below.

Both directors were successful in garnering support from key stakeholders (e.g., parents, senior citizen organizations, university administrators) and in building teacher interest and involvement in their respective inter-

**Table I.** Comparison of Two Intergenerational Programs and Their Initiation Strategies

Variable	Center A	Center B
Initiation style	Explicit plan	Emergent plan
Prior experience	Director has prior IG program experience	Director has prior IG program experiences
Planning	Collaborative planning meetings organized among several agencies	IG activities are discussed within regularly scheduled staff meetings
Recruitment	Kick-off event to recruit through CALL and other partnerships	Word of mouth; held intergenerational tea event
Orientation	Intergenerational Coordinator runs group sessions	Individual tours; prospective senior volunteers are paired with staff mentors

generational program efforts. They voiced similar concerns about the necessity, yet difficulty, associated with finding external resources to build a sustainable program. The key element for which funding was perceived to be needed was to hire a part-time coordinator to help organize and monitor the intergenerational aspect of their programs. Directors and teachers alike felt they could not take on developing the intergenerational program's recruitment, training, and evaluation functions.

### Planning

Program planning at the two centers differed. Center A intentionally tried to "jump start" its intergenerational program. Formal planning meetings were set up with teachers and stakeholders in an effort to determine who and how many seniors would participate and how they would participate. In contrast, Center B let it evolve naturally. Though intergenerational activities were discussed in staff meetings, no effort was made to predetermine the number of seniors to be involved in their program or their specific roles in the classrooms. The general plan for integrating senior volunteers into classroom activities was to introduce them to staff and children and allow relationships to emerge based on the seniors' interests and children's responses.

### Recruitment and Orientation

An early point of divergence between the centers' implementation strategies was in terms of senior adult recruitment. For Center A, the partnership with CALL played prominently in their plans; CALL cosponsored the senior recruitment/program kick-off event and actively promoted it with their 600+ members. The emphasis of this event and two additional senior orientation meetings was to boost the number of seniors joining the program. These sessions were proactively publicized; a press release was sent to local news outlets and flyers were distributed to local organizations.

Center A's orientation meetings were constructed carefully to facilitate sign-ups. Beyond learning about

the center's philosophy, policies, and general operational procedures, prospective volunteers took part in organized classroom activities, designed to enable the seniors to meet and interact with the children. By the end of these half-day sessions, those senior adults expressing an interest in regularly volunteering in the program were provided with a packet of registration forms and a list of assignment opportunities from which to choose.

At Center B, the process of finding prospective volunteers was far more informal. One of the vehicles for meeting prospective volunteers was an Intergenerational Tea event. A large gathering of children, family members, teachers, and senior adults who had some connection to the center (e.g., as grandparents of children at the center) was organized. No registration materials were distributed at this event. In fact, Center B did not develop a structured recruitment drive at all; instead, they took a more personal approach with emphasis placed on finding older adults in the community who already had relationships with staff, parents, and/or children at the center. Ultimately, it turned out that the lead teacher was involved in the identification and recruitment of all three volunteers at the center through her personal contacts. One of the seniors is her mother, another is from her church (she spoke with her at a church party), and the other she met at a neighborhood party.

The process of signing up senior volunteers at Center B did not involve any formal orientation sessions. Interested seniors were simply invited to visit the center so they could check out the program and see if there was a good match. The following is an account of one such visit taken from one of the interviews:

A teacher was assigned to meet the senior and facilitate a personalized tour in which she was introduced to the Director and various teaching staff members and got the opportunity to see classrooms on a typical day. The senior was asked to state her ideas about what she had in mind in terms of involvement with the children and teachers, what ages she felt most comfortable with, how she hoped to spend her time at the center, when she would be available, etc. Center staff also described their philosophy and procedures. Everything that was learned

about the senior was discussed at the following staff meeting and used to make an informed decision about the appropriate placement for her (if one existed) at the center. The following week, the senior was invited to take part in the program. The senior agreed to make a commitment to volunteering at the center and expressed a desire to bring her dog with her for the first session as she felt this would be a nice way to meet the children with whom she would work. Staff accommodated her request.

In the process of finding, introducing, and placing seniors in the intergenerational programs, both centers called on the Intergenerational Program Coordinator, who divided her hours between both centers, but in different roles. At Center A, the Coordinator was expected to be more proactive in directing the process of finding and enlisting seniors, whereas at Center B, her recruitment role was minimal, and she had less decision-making power to determine who would visit and join the program.

**Comparison of the Planned and Emergent Strategies**

Various statements made by the programs’ directors, teachers, and parents, and descriptive notes of the intergenerational activities taking place in each setting are selected to compare the differences in center philosophy, activity planning (emergent versus explicit), and the roles of senior adults in the program. The first set of quotations portrays participants’ ideas about the value of having an intergenerational program.

rally. In Center A, more emphasis is placed on formal activities; senior adults are seen as active, contributing staff helpers.

At both sites, the children witness the continuing vitality of senior adults. As they interact comfortably with senior adults on a regular basis, they begin to ask questions about growing older, broadening their ideas of adulthood and family relationships.

The teacher in Center A sees the senior adult’s role as more like that of an assistant or an attentive grandparent. In contrast, a volunteer in the organic program gets directly involved in the children’s play as a participant in the fantasy, whereas the volunteer in the planned program takes a facilitating role (although not a disciplinarian role).

In the following comparison from the observation records, the volunteer and the teacher in the organic program work together caring for the same group of children. In the planned program, the adults trade off responsibilities for taking care of the children.

These examples show how Center B’s organic program’s curriculum integrates the older adults and children so that they are both integral parts of the whole. In the planned program, the senior volunteers act more as assistants to the teachers, although they have extended time to focus their attention on the children in a warm, familial way. In the planned model, the senior volunteers are encouraged to assist with the existing curriculum rather than be the curriculum. The volunteers are actively recruited to help out, to be “an extra pair of hands,” and to get something back in terms of satisfac-

Organic (Emergent)	Planned (Explicit)
“I grew up in a family that cared for an elderly relative. And there were meaningful relationships. I had the responsibility for taking care of my grandmother’s hair.”—Director	“It was always a dream of mine to find how to mix the generations in a program . . . I was an early childhood person . . . with interests to work with the elderly. This lets me combine both interests.”—Teacher

In Center B’s organic model, intergenerational dialogue is cast in terms of relationship rather than in programmatic terms. Relationship building is the first step, and later, the older adult individual begins to make a contribution to the classroom in ways that evolve natu-

tion for making a difference by helping others. They add to what teachers do by having the time to focus on the special needs of some children and by expanding program staffing so that the workload is shared among many. Because relationships are the foundation of the intergen-

Organic (Emergent)	Planned (Explicit)
“The biggest thing they contribute is the opportunity to develop relationships with older adults that defy stereotypes about how aging is about getting old, getting sick, and dying. . . . Our whole philosophy here is that the curriculum must be based on relationships. . . . We try to integrate the topic of aging.”—Director	“The kids need someone who wants to spend time with them . . . and they sense that from these seniors. . . . They have all brought something new and they are willing to share. . . . In any activity, the seniors help the teachers.”—Director

## Organic (Emergent)

"I remember when he learned about her hearing aid. I found him trying to stick marbles in his ear at home. . . . He told me he thought she wore big marbles in her ears. . . . And, right there, we talked about hearing aids . . . I made sure he understood about hearing aids and other kinds of aids, and how as we age, sometimes we may need help. . . . I also wanted to make sure that he had no fear about hearing aids or walking aids."—Parent

## Planned (Explicit)

"B. (senior) talked about how the children took notice of her skin today. She said they touched her arms and looked closely at her aging spots and wrinkles. We talked about the children's curiosity and how they can learn through touch, sight and sound."  
—Teacher

## Organic (Emergent)

A child comes up behind G. (senior) and pretends to bite her with a toy shark. They laugh together. "Who will help me save the guy from the shark?! Save him! Save him!" G. has excitement in her voice. She gets a couple of children involved for a few minutes playing this game.—Observation Record

## Planned (Explicit)

C. (senior) sits down on a huge pillow with T. (child). He lies down and she lies down next to him. They both talk quietly for a few minutes. Another child comes over. They all play together for a few minutes. The boys hug C. but soon get wound up and the teacher has to remind the boys to calm down . . .—Observation Record

## Organic (Emergent)

N. (senior) walks to the story corner and sits on the floor. 4 children quickly join her. 1 child sits on her lap. As another child joins the group, N. says, "Sit right here. I have a story." J. (teacher) joins the group by sitting down and putting a child on her lap. N. is reading the book *Blueberries for Sal* and has brought along a bucket of blueberries for the children to eat. N. asks the children a question about the story and J. encourages the children's involvement by pointing to pictures . . .—Observation Record

## Planned (Explicit)

The baby makes more noise. B. (senior) talks to her again and moves closer. She talks to the baby in a gentle tone and the baby listens closely and stops making noise. A teacher walks by and gives the baby more food. The teacher continues on with her clean up of the breakfast foods.—Observation Record

erational exchange in Center B, the senior adults are not so much "providing service to the preschoolers" as sharing interpersonal benefit.

Each model is effective in integrating the generations for their mutual benefit, but a different approach to valuing the contributions of older adults in the lives of young children is apparent. Over time, as relationships and patterns evolved, the integration of older adults in the classroom grew more similar between the two sites. As senior adults in the organic center became more familiar with the curriculum, they could assume a leadership role in organizing and directing activities. As senior adults in the explicit intervention center formed closer personal ties to the children and staff, they were able to interact more intuitively in exchanging responsibility for guiding children's activities.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides some empirical evidence about how establishing desired modes of intergenerational in-

teraction can be arrived at through different strategies. The comparison shows that there are qualitative differences in how the older adults are recruited and integrated into classroom activities resulting from the underlying philosophical perspectives that frame the purposes for including them in these preschool environments. Although the underlying intent and many of the specific curriculum projects are similar, the nature of their interactions appears to be shaped by a differing view of their roles vis-à-vis the needs of young children.

The organic program conceptualizes the intergenerational component as being primarily about relationships, and thus, it takes what we would call a constructive/developmental approach to integrating the two age groups. The planned intergenerational program describes the volunteers' role as "to provide help" both to teachers and to children. In this sense, the program is constructed as an educational model for older adults to provide service to younger generations and thus, to "make a difference."

The philosophical difference in these two programs

causes recruitment strategies to follow separate paths. The organic program has used a personal technique of inviting older people who have voiced an interest or a need that would be a good fit with the intergenerational goals in a one-on-one approach. Conversely, the planned program has discovered success in partnering with community agencies and conducting an intentional marketing campaign aimed at finding prospective volunteers.

The conclusions drawn from this study should be viewed with caution. First, the researchers took a complex topic (the variation that exists between intergenerational programs) and attempted to establish a simple dichotomy between implicit (organic) and explicit (planned) processes as the foundation for comparison. This is an oversimplification of what takes place in human services programs. They are inevitably influenced by many factors, including program priorities; available resources; and administrative, structural, and cultural factors woven into the settings in which the respective programs are delivered.

There were also methodological limitations to this research, including the fact that the sites were not selected randomly, and, as university lab schools, they are atypical; lab schools tend to have more resources and higher staff-child ratios than other early childhood education settings. To further explore the validity of the organic-versus-planned distinction in the way intergenerational programs are developed, more research is clearly needed. Other studies can compare how the process evolves in a variety of early childhood settings, with differing program staff configurations, cultural groups, program philosophies, and administrative constraints.

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