

“I think It’s about Time We Spent Time Together”: Linking Young Children and Persons with Dementia

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ABSTRACT

Research of intergenerational (IG) programs linking young and old has identified a range of benefits for older adult participants. However, when the older adults involved have dementia, findings are equivocal. Finding activities that are neither too challenging nor too simple and that appeal to young and old challenge IG coordinators. We utilized Allport’s contact theory to develop an IG program at a co-located day program with 5 objectives: (a) authority support, (b) equal status among participants, (c) common goals, (d) intergroup cooperation, and (e) Pettigrew’s requisite element of opportunity for friendship. Groups of 4 adults and 4 children met twice weekly during 2 three-month sessions: the first meeting involved a shared story and the second incorporated a related activity. Thematic analyses of facilitators’ structured journals revealed 5 emergent themes: (a) facilitator’s role, (b) role of care staff support, (c) importance of pre-planning, (d) valuable programming characteristics, and (e) participant relationships. Contact theory proved invaluable in planning, implementing, and assessing the activities. This theory has potential to enhance sustainability of IG programs and should be tested further.

BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

- IG programs link members of younger and older generations with a goal of mutual benefit.
- IG programs uniting young children and cognitively impaired elders present unique challenges due to the adults’ physical and/or cognitive abilities and the children’s comprehension of the adults’ circumstances.
- Research of programs linking these groups has revealed benefits, including enhanced mood and increased social interactions among the adults and, for children, unconditional affection, additional attention, and appreciation for older adults and individuals with disabilities. Negative effects have also been identified, including infantilization of adults and poorer attitudes towards older adults among young children.
- The intergenerational research field lacks a unifying theory to address these mixed findings. Psychological theory on linking disparate group members provides guidance.

Contact theory has been used in programs designed to promote positive inter-group contact between disparate group members. The theory’s tenets, as they apply to the current project, are:

- **Authority support** – support and value for IG activities from key stakeholders, tradition, and custom.
- **Equal group status** – a strengths perspective that each participant can contribute to and gain from the interaction.
- **Common goal/ cooperation** – programming that fosters interdependence in achievement of a shared goal.
- **Friendship** – activities support mechanisms of friendship, including self-disclosure and frequent, regular contact.

PARTICIPANTS

The current study used mixed methods to assess the experiences of children, adults, and facilitators involved with the IG program. Adult participants were clients diagnosed with dementia attending an ADS program co-located with a child development lab school (CDLS). The 11 adults were primarily white with 1 African American participant. They ranged in age from 61-98 (M=83) with 7 females and 4 males. MMSE scores ranged from 8-26 (M=18). Over the course of the study, 20 CDLS students ages 3-5 joined the IG activities. Equal numbers of boys and girls made up this ethnically diverse group of participants. The primary IG activity facilitators were 3 women with human development training; one specialized in early childhood education, while two possessed adult development and aging expertise.

PROCEDURES

- Each facilitator had primary responsibility for planning and facilitating two IG activities each week over a 3-month period. Each worked with a sub-group of ADS clients and one classroom of children.
- Groups of 4 children and 4 adults met twice weekly, once for a story and then for a related activity. Each meeting lasted 30-60 minutes.
- Stories focused on relationships or mutually interesting topics; activities were planned to encourage friendship and cooperation.
- Care was taken to identify activities and procedures in which both adults and children could experience success and support each other.
- Activities fit into 3 main categories: gardening, cooking, and art/music.
- During activities, intergenerational pairs worked together.
- Facilitators promoted interactions through questions and prompts and by encouraging adults and children to support each other in mentoring, modeling, and partner capacities.

QUALITATIVE METHODS

The present paper represents analyses of facilitators’ journaling, guided by contact theory, of observations, recommendations, and personal reflections immediately after each IG session. The authors analyzed journals and identified emergent themes through the constant comparative method.

FINDINGS

Thematic analyses of journals revealed 5 major themes.

Role of Facilitator: The IG facilitators were crucial to the activities’ success. They communicated with staff, were familiar with interests and characteristics of both program’s clients, handled unanticipated events, facilitated activities, and ensured that staff supported client care needs. As important as their role to make things happen was their ability to step back and let the adults and children support each other.

Role of Care Staff: CDLS and ADS staff proved both a help and a hindrance. While they supported facilitators’ efforts to meet individual participants’ needs, their support proved cumbersome when they were uncomfortable with the other program’s clients and when they could not appropriately support the IG interaction. Commonly, care staff would complete activities for an adult or isolate a child rather than foster interaction between child and adult.

Pre-planning activities: Pre-planning IG activities contributed to positive outcomes. In so doing, safe and attractive materials were selected and made accessible. Seating arrangements supported child-adult **cooperation** and, thus, **equal group status** as participants worked toward **common goals**. Activity adaptations were pre-planned so that individuals with varied abilities could contribute to the activity. Communication related to activity planning contributed to rapport with program staff and administrators, which built **authority support**.

Programming characteristics: The IG program was designed to foster group interaction and positive affect among participants. The purposely structured reading and activity sessions elicited **cooperation**, reciprocity, and ultimately, mutual benefit for participants.

Participant relationships: **Friendships** blossomed as children and adults had multiple opportunities to work with each other and share their stories. Conversely, IG pairings were less successful if group members changed frequently. Despite cognitive impairment, the adults provided modeling, mentoring and friendship as they guided the children’s creative expression and worked toward **common goals**. In turn, children also served as models and mentors to the adults. As sessions progressed, participants interacted with less direction from the facilitator and turned to their IG partner for support and camaraderie.

DISCUSSION

Facilitators in the current study served several key roles. Besides facilitating successful IG contact between children and adults with dementia¹ their journals capture important components of an IG program that support the contact theory’s value to IG programs. In conclusion:

- IG programs must share goals, including those reflecting overarching value of IG programming and participant goals specific to the IG activities.
- Cross-training promotes a strengths perspective as it: (a) fosters facilitator pre-planning and (b) engenders appropriate care staff support.
- Relationship formation is supported by: (a) participant collaboration, (b) opportunities to share stories, and (c) continuity of contact.
- Support from authority and custom is reciprocal. Authority support enables IG programs, which, if successful, build the tradition of IG contact and increase the potential for sustainability of the program.
- Contact theory should be further tested as a tool for conceptualizing and comprehending the influence of IG contact on children and older adults.

¹Gladwell, M. & Jarrott, S. E. (2003). An observational assessment of elders with dementia during intergenerational activities. Poster presented at the annual meetings of the Gerontological Society of America, San Diego, CA.