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 3-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.

PROCEDURES

• Each facilitator had primary responsibility for planning and facilitating two IG activities each week over a 3-month period. Each worked with a subgroup 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.

DISCUSSION

Facilitators in the current study served several key roles. Besides facilitating successful IG contact between children and adults with dementia 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.