

Filling the gap: intergenerational activities and their importance to nursing.

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Abstract:

My 4-year-old daughter's preschool class recently formed a relationship with the participants of a local adult daycare center. Once a month, the preschoolers walk to the nearby center for some type of activity with the older adults: sharing stories, songs, Bingo games, or whatever seems appropriate for the theme of the month. This arrangement seems to be "win-win" for both the children and the older adults, as shown by the responses of the participants.

As I experience this intergenerational activity through my daughter, I wonder why these experiences are so important to the participants. As a nurse, I also wonder why nursing, a profession that cares for people across the life span, has really not grasped intergenerational programming as a way to provide holistic care. And, if nurses were to embrace this thinking, how could intergenerational activities be implemented into the care of patients and families?

Keywords: intergenerational programs | nursing | holistic care | intergenerational activities | nursing patients

Article:

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Benefits to Participants

Intergenerational activities are usually planned and implemented with the hopes of "entertaining" the older adults, rather than the children involved. However, the children have much to gain by being involved with older adults in a relaxed setting. In our society where anti-aging is big business, it might be assumed that children grow up with negative attitudes toward aging and the elderly population. When children are allowed to see older adults being happy, active and having fun, these attitudes can change.

An elementary school child involved in a one-on-one relationship with an older person through a school activity said, "I have started to notice and treat the elderly better than I used to."¹ The fact that the child is now "noticing" older people is beneficial in itself. Stereotypes are formed not only from what people experience, but also from what is not experienced.² This child was able to dispel previous stereotypes held by simply having exposure to an older adult.

In addition to improving attitudes toward the elderly population, children who participate in intergenerational activities can improve attitudes toward their own aging.² Pine found that children became "compassionate" and "curious" when able to spend time with older adults, even when the older person had difficulty communicating with the children.³ Children also learned difficult lessons about death and dying when working with the older adults, which allowed families to open up this type of discussion with them.³

The older adults are usually considered to be the primary beneficiaries of intergenerational activities. It is generally believed that the older adult participant feels personal satisfaction, as well as increased self-esteem through the activities.²

There is also evidence of improved cognitive functioning and a decrease in "undesirable" behaviors in the older adult. Hamilton et al. found that cognitively impaired participants seemed intact on the days the children visited, and that even older adults who were not included in the activities due to loud outbursts or violent behaviors were subdued when allowed to watch the activities with the children.¹

Why Is This a Nursing Issue?

Intergenerational programs and activities are not readily found in nursing literature, but appear to be typically associated with disciplines such as psychology, education and family studies. Because nursing draws from multiple disciplines for our knowledge base, intergenerational programming is certainly an avenue that is worth exploring. Reasons such as changing demographics in our population, as well as our quest to provide holistic, family-focused care while fostering healthy lifestyles justify our need to pursue intergenerational programming further. In addition, negative attitudes toward older people are prevalent and nurses should try to help eliminate them.

Our society is aging. This increase in older adults in our population means that nurses will encounter older adults in all settings. "Older adults are the largest consumers of healthcare in the United States."⁴ Nurses in acute care settings may not consider their practice specialty to be gerontology, but for many, it is.

In a setting such as home health, where Medicare is the primary payer source, the typical patient is usually over 65. And with a new phenomenon in our society, grandparents raising grandchildren, even those nurses primarily employed in pediatrics will have opportunities for interactions with older adults.

Nursing care is said to be holistic. Part of providing holistic care is to consider the family and its role in the patient's health. Intergenerational programming is one method nurses can use to provide holistic care. As the older adult population grows, the typical family unit will probably change also and be more representative of the population. Participants in intergenerational activities will be better prepared to face these changes as they occur.⁵

In considering holistic care, end-of-life issues must also be considered. Participants in intergenerational programming often have to deal with death and loss, which gives nurses the opportunity to begin dialogue and provide teaching on end-of-life issues.

Health promotion and disease prevention are an integral part of nursing care. Intergenerational activities could be used as a forum to teach participants, children and adults about health promotion topics. It is often assumed that older adults are too old to make changes in their own health, and do not desire to do so; however, this thinking is false. In regard to the children, they are in an ideal position to learn about healthy aging through education about healthy choices that will affect them throughout a lifetime.⁵

Finally, one reason that this is such an important nursing issue is that intergenerational activities can help dispel stereotypes against the elderly population. Ageism is an overlooked problem in our society, particularly in healthcare. Nurses have the opportunity to provide education to help improve attitudes toward older people. Bringing children and older adults together might change some of the stereotypes that exist about the elderly.

Intergenerational Programming

For nurses interested in implementing intergenerational programming into their patient care, the first step is to think "outside the box." Collaboration with colleagues in various settings is necessary. Could an older patient on a cardiac unit spend time on the pediatric unit helping with a child who needs extra attention? Or perhaps a home care nurse could collaborate with a school health nurse to arrange some activities between older adults and children. Nurses may even need to consider pairing with non-healthcare settings, such as churches, daycare and schools.

Of utmost importance to nurses is to first assess the preferences of their patients. While it might be assumed that everyone likes children, some older adults may actually find participating in activities with children insulting and demeaning. Nurses must recognize that there is a risk of infantilization of the older adult when paired with a child in a child activity. Others may have no desire to be around children, citing that they had already raised their own children and grandchildren and now would prefer a more quiet, relaxed atmosphere.⁶

Nurses also should educate other nurses, and administration in particular, in the need to rid our profession of stereotypes against the older adult patient. Nurses tend to think of older people as frail, feeble and demented because these individuals are often the recipients of our care. Intergenerational programming can allow nurses to see that most older adults are healthy, active and happy.⁷

As our elderly population is increasing, the importance of intergenerational programming will also increase. While planning and implementing intergenerational activities might not seem a likely nursing activity, it would be beneficial and meaningful for many reasons. Children involved in the programs are more likely to have positive attitudes toward the elderly and toward aging.¹ Older adults tend to have increased self-esteem and improved cognitive functioning.¹ And nurses who might hold negative attitudes toward the elderly could have these stereotypes dispelled.

Through open-mindedness and creativity, nurses could integrate intergenerational programming ideas into patient care in order to provide more holistic, well-rounded care.

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