



# Bringing different ages together through shared activities

Bringing together different generations can offer many benefits, both to those taking part and the wider community. This briefing explores why you should consider setting up your own intergenerational activity and provides tips on how to make your activity a success.

An intergenerational activity is one that brings people of different age groups together to undertake an activity and/or socialise and spend time with each other. It can be an opportunity for different generations to share knowledge and experiences and to learn from one another.

Studies suggest that intergenerational activities are effective in improving the wellbeing of older adults, and are appropriate for people with dementia. They have the potential to nurture a sense of being useful to society and to create more positive associations with ageing.

In addition, by enabling older adults to mentor children and younger people, intergenerational activities have the potential to improve young peoples' academic, behavioural, social-emotional and motivational outcomes.

# What are the benefits of offering intergenerational activities?

There are a range of potential benefits from providing opportunities for different generations to engage with one another. These benefits extend not just to the participants themselves, but can help activity organisers and the wider community.

## Benefits for older people

Older people benefit from spending time with different age groups in a number of ways.



I think it helps my mental health more if I'm actually connected with a variety of different people rather than being defined by my age [...] I don't think people want to be defined by their age. I think it's much more conducive to lifting people's mental health by mixing with different age groups.

- Engaging in any type of positive activity with others helps create social connections and can decrease feelings of isolation. Having opportunities to engage with a range of people of all ages and backgrounds, rather than just your peers, can have a positive impact on wellbeing and reduce the likelihood of depression by feeling more connected to the wider community.
- Intergenerational activities can provide an opportunity for exchange of knowledge, skills and experiences to help bridge age and cultural gaps. For example, younger people can help reduce the digital divide by helping older people to acquire new skills, such as using smart phones or other forms of technology that younger people are at ease with.
- Positive interactions with young people can also help to challenge negative perceptions or fears older people may have of younger generations, helping to break down any barriers or stereotypes.
- There are also health benefits for older people participating in activities with younger people.

This can include improved physical health through being more active. There is also evidence that points to benefits for older adults with memory loss and dementia in engaging in activities with children and young people.

“ It [the volunteering I do] changes the way they [older people] see the younger generation because we [young people] get more respect and want to get their [the older people's] respect. ”



## Rainbow Spirit

Rainbow Spirit, set up in 2011, supports gay and bisexual men of all ages and backgrounds through creative activities and friendship. Men between 20 and 75 attend the group each month. Many of the younger members are asylum seekers and the group provides them with a safe space and support. Older, British-born members of the group benefit from learning about the lives and experiences of the asylum seekers.

Each meeting includes a discussion, which could be around coming out or growing old as a gay man, and a shared activity such as dancing, singing, practising yoga or creating artwork.

*"I think quite a lot of the younger people are seeking asylum [and...] have led discussions about what it is like to be seeking asylum. [...] That's an educational session really for all of us [...] I think some people were quite shocked – the conditions people were coming from in their own countries and also the conditions they find themselves in here."*

## Benefits for children and younger people

It is not all one-way traffic. Young people can also benefit from opportunities to engage with their elders.

- Studies have found children have improved classroom behaviour and early literacy development through sitting and sharing stories and other activities with older people. Older people have a lifetime of skills and knowledge to share with younger people. They can help to bring the past to life for young people by sharing their own life experiences.
- Intergenerational activities can help improve attitudes to older people, including generating greater understanding, more respect and alleviating fears of getting older by seeing older people being active and enjoying their lives.
- Intergenerational interactions can also help children to develop emotionally and socially, helping them to develop skills such as compassion, respect and good listening/communications skills with people from different backgrounds, ages and life

experiences. A young person may benefit from new, positive role models, especially where they have no grandparents in their own family.

- There are also wellbeing and mental health benefits. One of the recurring themes highlighted by Ageing Better projects nationally is that of the increasing awareness of loneliness experienced by all ages. Young people can benefit from reduced anxiety by mixing with a wider range of people and increased feelings of self-worth by sharing their knowledge or expertise.



It is quite nice because you get to hear how things worked [in the older people's days] and they share stories with us and we share stories with them.

## 'Afternoon for Elders' intergenerational project

King Edward VI Handsworth Grammar School for Boys wanted to bring the subject of ageing to life for its year 8 geography students. Ageing Better in Birmingham helped the school to connect with isolated older people in the local area. Residents of Pannel Croft Retirement Village invited some of the boys from the school to attend their International Men's Day event in November 2019. Eight boys attended and the event was greatly enjoyed by everyone involved. This paved the way for future contact.

*"I really enjoyed playing Scrabble with the older resident. [...] I told him about my school and he told me about his childhood. I think it's sad that he hasn't got any family here though. I would like to write to him and become a pen pal maybe, if my teacher says it's okay."*

*"It was an absolute delight to talk to the students and play noughts and crosses with them! They're smart little chaps aren't they?! It has been a while since I have seen my grandchildren; they are older now, but these kids reminded me of the times I used to take my boys to the park after school."*

In December 2019, the school invited 15 older people to come and see their school and hear about its history, share homemade cakes, play board games with pupils and share conversations. The boys had prepared a prompt list as a conversation guide in case they didn't know what to talk to the older people about, however everyone found that once they had broken the ice, the conversation flowed naturally.

*"I really enjoyed chatting with them [the pupils] and learnt a lot about young people, and maybe they learnt something from me. Their prompt list indicated that they had some preconceived ideas about 'being old' and hopefully I was able to dispel some of them. Amongst other things we talked about learning languages and, as I am learning Spanish, I was able to show them the language app on my phone."*

*"Interacting with older adults enables our young students to develop social networks, communication skills, problem-solving abilities, positive attitudes towards ageing, a sense of purpose and community service."*



## Benefits for community groups

Opening up activities to a wider age range can also help community groups reach new people and better achieve their aims.

- Many people, older men in particular, are put off at the prospect of attending a group or activity aimed at 'older people'. Intergenerational activities, open to all and built around a common interest, can be more appealing.
- Encouraging a mix of ages to attend activities can help make activities

Personally, I wouldn't want to belong to a group which was a pensioners' group. I'm 68, but I don't see myself as a pensioner, you know.

more accessible to some more isolated community members. For example, the Chat and Splash group, which meet to swim and socialise in Balsall Heath, were able to reach older Asian women who only started attending because their daughters or daughters-in-law accompanied them. Having

younger relatives attend with them acted as an enabler in getting the older women to come and build their confidence.

## Benefits for the wider community

Lives are becoming more segregated for many people. Accommodation for older people, for example, is often set apart from where younger generations live. Therefore, activities shared between generations can help to create a greater sense of community by bringing different groups (such as different ethnic groups, faith groups etc.) within those communities together.

These opportunities can help dispel inaccurate and negative stereotypes. In some instances it can reduce levels of, or fear of crime through a better understanding of the lives of younger people. This may also have an impact on overall satisfaction levels of people within the community.

There were three or four [daughters bringing their mothers] at the beginning [...] and the older women would say, 'No, I can't be left', and I would say, 'You'll be alright, I'm here and I'll take care of you'. And you know, I don't think anybody's daughter stays now.

Intergenerational work can help to promote the transmission of cultural traditions and values from older to younger generations and vice versa. This can help to build a sense of personal and societal identity while encouraging tolerance.



## Think Positive

When different generations come together it provides an opportunity to learn about different world views but also to develop shared understanding. Think Positive, a support group for vulnerable adults in Castle Vale, have enjoyed having the opportunity to share activities with local children on a number of occasions, including making bird boxes and reading stories to children from the local nursery.

*"We try to do quite a lot of work with children because we want ages to mix. So we thought it would be nice for the nursery to do their reading class at the coffee morning. Well, it was lovely for both ages to meet and listen to some stories."*

The group were also invited to share their views on environmental conservation with a primary school class as part of a project the children were doing on saving the planet. During the visit group members and children sat together, drawing pictures and discussing ways to help the planet. The older people found it interesting that the children focused on ending pollution of the seas and oceans, whereas they had focused more on recycling.

*"Saving the world needs us to all work together no matter what age."*

# Tips for running a successful intergenerational activity

Now you know the benefits of running an intergenerational activity here are some things to think about when you're developing your activity.

## Reaching participants of different ages

There are a variety of community organisations and institutions that could help you reach people from different age groups.

- Local schools, colleges, universities and youth groups may be good places to make contact with younger people who would like to take part.
- Organisations that support older people, such as Ageing Better in Birmingham, local care homes and sheltered housing complexes can be a way to reach older participants.
- Be aware that some institutions and organisations will have a lot of competing demands on their time, so regular face-to-

face meet-ups might not be possible.

- Invite friends and neighbours of different generations. Ask participants to do the same.

## Choosing an activity

Choose an activity that everyone can contribute to, but ideally one which requires cooperation so there are opportunities to interact and learn about one another. Offering a specific activity often appeals to more people than just meeting up to talk. Ideas for activities include:

- Planning and preparing a meal together can be a great shared activity and there is the added benefit of sharing a meal together afterwards.
- Planting seeds or plants and gardening activities help to illustrate the different stages of the life cycle. A container garden can be created if bending or space are issues.
- Sharing skills, where younger people teach the older people and vice versa. Skills could include using social media or new technologies, arts and

crafts, bicycle maintenance and cooking.

- It is a good idea to have a range of different ways to participate so that people can take part in a way that best suits them, their ability and confidence level. If your group will meet on a regular basis, having activities that build and develop week to week can be useful as people's skills and confidence grow.
- Think about ways to generate conversation. Sharing hobbies and interests, swapping stories, playing games and creating scrapbooks together can be good activities for helping to build connections. A list of topics to discuss that will appeal across the generations, or prompts to encourage conversation, such as photographs, can be helpful to start things off.

## Selecting a time and place

- Hold the activity somewhere all generations will feel comfortable.
- Ensure that the venue has good access for people who

are less physically able and is in a location that everyone can reach easily.

- If older people will be arriving using public transport, time activities when bus passes can be used.
- Consider organising activities at different times, including weekends and evenings, to increase the likelihood of working-age people being able to attend.
- Think about the times of year activities run. Summer holidays can be a time some older people feel left behind as they see others in their community going on day trips and family holidays.

## Ensuring things run smoothly

- It may be helpful to co-produce ground rules with participants at the start of an activity, so everyone is clear on expected behaviour.
- Engage potential participants in deciding on and planning activities. This can help to



connect people and create a sense of belonging to a group.

- Get feedback from people as you go along. This will help you to make improvements and ensure the activity is having the impact you would like. Understanding what works well and being able to demonstrate this will help support any applications for funding you make.

## Keeping friendships going

- The quality of the relationships that are built is more important than how often participants meet. However, you may

want to run your activity over a period of time, so that trusting relationships can naturally develop. Younger participants may move on to other work or study commitments over time. Where possible, try to keep friendships going by encouraging participants to stay in touch by writing to one another or having regular telephone chats.

- Most importantly, make sure you learn from one another and have lots of fun.

## About this leaflet

This leaflet was produced as part of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. The content is based on learning from the programme. The examples are of activities supported by the programme and the quotes are from people running and taking part in activities.

Ageing Better in Birmingham is part of Ageing Better, the six-year (2015-2021) £78million programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better partnerships are based in 14 locations across England, from Torbay to Middlesbrough and the Isle of Wight to East Lindsey. Working with local people, charities, businesses, public sector services and voluntary groups the Ageing Better partnerships are exploring creative ways for older people to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. Ageing Better is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

## Further information and useful contacts

### Ageing Better in Birmingham

[www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk](http://www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk)

### Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC)

[www.bvsc.org](http://www.bvsc.org)

### Intergenerational working – learning from Ageing Better

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Intergenerational-working.pdf>

### A systematic review of the effectiveness of intergenerational programmes

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5663734/pdf/fpsyg-08-01882.pdf>

### All in together: creating places where young and old thrive

<https://www.gu.org/app/uploads/2018/06/SignatureReport-Eisner-All-In-Together.pdf>