

Intergenerational Programmes: Exploring the potential benefits for preschool children

What are intergenerational programmes?

Intergenerational programmes attempt to bring together the 'young' and 'old' in communities. Although there are a variety of different approaches, these programmes are thought to provide mutual benefits for both generational groups, including reducing loneliness and isolation, improving health and wellbeing and combatting ageism. In the UK, concerns about a growing ageing population and the separation of generations in communities has increased interest in intergenerational programmes such as the one run by BS3 Community Development (BS3). This intergenerational programme involves children from BS3's preschool provision regularly visiting people living with dementia in a local care home to interact with them during fun activities.

Why was this research done?

Currently, research of intergenerational programmes overwhelmingly focuses on the impact of participation for older generations. Little is known about the effects of participating in intergenerational programmes for preschool-aged children. Intergenerational programmes involving *both* preschool children and people living with dementia have also received little attention from researchers.

As a result, this study attempted to explore preschool children's experiences of being involved in BS3's intergenerational programme. The aim was to investigate the potential benefits for children of interacting with the residents of the care home living with dementia.

This involved:

- Visiting the care home with the preschool children twice a week over June and July 2019 to see what happened during the interactions between the children and residents.
- Asking children about the time they spent with the residents through small group activities.
- Interviewing preschool staff and volunteers about what they think the outcomes for children could be of participating in the intergenerational programme.
- Using a survey to ask the parents about the possible effects of being involved in the intergeneration programme for their children.

What did the research find out?

Findings from the study revealed that the intergenerational programme may produce potentially unique benefits for preschool children because the interaction with people living with dementia was not reliant on verbal communication, which is often a characteristic of other relationships with adults.

Instead, preschool children were encouraged to form connections with residents through activities, developing their confidence in the situation.

"I think it is good for their confidence to walk into another situation that they wouldn't come up against every day." (Hazel, staff)

Preschool children were also involved in both giving and receiving informal care during the programme. Mediated by staff, gifts such as children's drawings or treats were often exchanged between the preschool children and residents, showing the programme fostered caring relationships between the generations.

"I would say June [is my favourite] because she gives us all the sweeties and is really kind." (Isabel, child)

"He did tell me once one of the residents cuddled and kissed him" (Parent 2)

Through continued involvement in the intergenerational programme, children's understanding of the residents with dementia increased. This resulted in the children acting with empathy and maturity towards the residents.

"Because they were [born] very, very long ago, I think." (Daisy, child)

"Be nice to the older people" (Noah, child)

Significantly, the research revealed that the benefits of confidence, care and empathy should be considered alongside moments of children's shyness and disconnection. Although these may seem potentially negative effects for children, these aspects often formed part of the children progressing toward stronger connections with the residents.

"I feel there was a lot that she was learning because she was watching him draw and she was learning to interact with him without talking, rather than just shutting down because sometimes she can just freeze. And she was getting the cues from him, once he had drawn, she then drew a picture of herself" (Amy, staff)

In summary, continued involvement in the BS3 intergenerational programme may bring about beneficial experiences for preschool children, encouraging confidence, caring connections and empathetic understanding of residents living with dementia. Through the support of staff and activities, both positive and potentially negative aspects of interactions may allow children to form stronger connections with residents. These intergenerational relationships are potentially unique as they are not necessarily reliant upon verbal communication, although more research is needed to explore the relationships further.

For more information about this research please see the Research Summary or contact Lois Peach (lois.peach@bristol.ac.uk) at the University of Bristol.