The Complement of Research and Theory in Practice: Contact Theory at Work in Nonfamilial Intergenerational Programs

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Purpose of the Study: We assessed whether a shared site intergenerational care program informed by contact theory contributed to more desirable social behaviors of elders and children during intergenerational programming than a center with a more traditional programming approach that lacks some or all of the contact theory tenets. Design and Methods: We observed 59 elder and child participants from the two sites during intergenerational activities. Using the Intergenerational Observation Scale, we coded participants’ predominant behavior in 15-s intervals through each activity’s duration. We then calculated for each individual the percentage of time frames each behavior code was predominant. Results: Participants at the theory-based program demonstrated higher rates of intergenerational interaction, higher rates of solitary behavior, and lower rates of watching than at the traditional program. Implications: Contact theory tenets were optimized when coupled with evidence-based practices.

Intergenerational programs with stakeholder support that promotes equal group status, cooperation toward a common goal, and mechanisms of friendship among participants can achieve important objectives for elder and child participants in care settings.

Key Words: Adult day services, Evidence-based practice, Behavior, Observation, Programming

With growing numbers of elders and children receiving care at formal programs, effective means of supporting development in these settings become ever more imperative. Increasingly, care providers and educators simulate kin relationships by bringing together children and elders with a goal of supporting mutually beneficial intergenerational interactions (e.g., Service-Learning, Experience Corps, or children visiting nursing home residents to share activities). Contact may occur infrequently, semi-regularly, or on a daily basis.
Elders may nurture the children (e.g., Camp et al., 1997), children may support elders’ diminishing abilities (Deutchman, Bruno, & Jarrott, 2003), and both age groups may collaborate to benefit other populations.

Shared site intergenerational programs are relatively new (the earliest program, Messiah Village, opened in 1978 and continues to operate a childcare on the site of its long-term care community) and represent a unique constellation of programs providing services concurrently to youth and elders at a single location. The second most common shared site format involves the colocation of an adult day services (ADS) program and a childcare center (colocation of a childcare center with a nursing home is most common; Goyer & Zuses, 1998). Each program has its own space, and participants may have limited or frequent opportunities to interact with the other generation. Similarly situated programs have demonstrated starkly contrasting approaches to programming, with equally variable results. We compared two shared site programs operating from different philosophical and theoretical perspectives. Differences in program outcomes will reflect differences in use of theoretically informed practices.

**Literature**

The assessed experiences of intergenerational participants are generally positive. For example, intergenerational care programs like the ones we studied are associated with improved affect and increased engagement among frail elders (Jarrott & Bruno, 2003) and enhanced social maturity among children several years after leaving the program (Femia, Zarit, Blair, Jarrott, & Bruno, 2007). At the same time, practitioners often experience significant obstacles blending diverse ages and abilities (Hayes, 2003). Challenges stem from participants’ developmental and generational differences, failure to obtain specialized intergenerational cross-training or materials, lack of intergenerational experience, and staff attitudes about intergenerational contact that are neither assessed nor addressed. A few researchers report null or negative effects of nonfamilial intergenerational contact (e.g., Middlencamp & Gross, 2002). Authors speculate that undesirable outcomes represent program artifacts, such as unprepared staff, nonresponsive elders, or an infantilizing environment (e.g., Salari, 2002; Seefeldt, 1987). Traditional intergenerational programs, such as the community-based program we studied, often begin with the best intentions of one staff person but lack administrative support or resources that insure staff are prepared to work with diverse ages and use best intergenerational practices (Steinig, 2005).

Ethnographic research by Salari (2002) at two ADS programs with intergenerational components highlighted the importance of age- and generation-appropriate intergenerational programming that offered elderly participants active roles. Elders in these contexts achieved more positive outcomes than those at programs characterized by environmental or behavioral infantilization, where elders withdrew from programming and interacted negatively with staff. When children are introduced at ADS programs, Salari cautioned; the setting is prone to infantilization of elders because of the elders’ declining abilities. Salari illustrated in detail what other researchers have speculated; problems associated with intergenerational care programs often reflect implementation failure rather than an inherent inability for young and elderly care recipients to engage with each other for mutual benefit. In this developing field, the lack of theoretically and research-based practices negatively affects the outcomes and longevity of these more traditional intergenerational programs (Hamilton et al., 1999; Mancini & Marek, 2004). Researchers utilizing theory- and research-based practices can more accurately identify the source of an intergenerational program’s success or failure (Lavee & Dollahite, 1991).

Our goal was to describe two shared site intergenerational programs, to which families self-referred, and differential outcomes resulting from different theoretical and philosophical underpinnings. We compared the programs to determine whether a more traditional approach or a theory-based approach more effectively fostered positive intergenerational contact.

Theory- and evidence-based models of intergenerational programming are scarce, although excellent training programs and intergenerational handbooks abound (e.g., Bressler, Henkin, & Adler, 2005; Epstein & Boisvert, 2004; Newman, Ward, Smith, Wilson, & McCrea, 1997; Steinig, 2005). Developmental and educational theories are presented in arguments for why intergenerational programming should be promoted (e.g., generativity as the developmental challenge of late adulthood) but not how to insure their effectiveness. Caspi (1984) first applied contact theory (Allport, 1954), which
was developed in reference to interracial contact, to the intergenerational setting when he used it to shape an elderly volunteer program at an elementary school. Contact theory proves a useful guide for intergenerational practitioners because its application fosters positive intergroup interaction, which is the goal of quality intergenerational programs.

Tenets of contact theory include four named by Allport (1954) and a fifth tenet Pettigrew specified in 1998. When achieved, these tenets promote positive contact between members of disparate groups; in the intergenerational field, age is the key dimension of disparity. The following describes the tenets and how they are applied at the theory-based program in the current study. Here, contact theory informs staff training and materials, program scheduling, and development of intergenerational activities. Table 1 illustrates the tenets with an intergenerational activity completed at the theory-based program (see Jarrott, Gigliotti, & Smock, 2006, and Jarrott et al., 2010, to learn about the theory-based program’s development).

### Table 1. Contact Theory Tenets Applied to an Intergenerational Cooking Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenet</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support from authority</td>
<td>Staff from each program meet at a regular time to plan the activity Each program’s schedule reflects regular intergenerational activities; staff plan other activities accordingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common goal</td>
<td>A mutual goal of building relationships by sharing social history and experiences is a constant across activities Adults are asked to help children develop fine motor skills; some adults benefit from practicing these skills themselves The mutual goal is to cook and share an omelet for a morning snack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>Materials are arranged for intergenerational pairs. One pair has eggs to crack, one has cheese to grate, one has milk to measure, one has green onions to cut with scissors. Each takes a turn using an old-fashioned hand mixer Staff offer directions for participants to cooperate on their step in the omelet making, for example, “Jim, can you hold the bowl while Sonia stirs the eggs?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal group status</td>
<td>Adults and children are given active roles in the activity One adult participant who used to work as a cook and who has good communication skills is asked to provide general directions to the pairs Others are asked to hold the grater while their partner grates the cheese, to steady the bowl while another breaks the eggs, or to take turns cutting the green onions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for friendship</td>
<td>Staff facilitators ask the former cook questions about his work experiences; they ask other participants about foods they enjoy making and eating Sharing a meal is a common social behavior that builds friendships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intergroup Contact Characterized by Cooperation and a Shared Goal.—The second and third tenets relate to a value for teamwork between group members and should inform what and how activities are planned and implemented and how materials are presented. At the theory-based program, staff members begin by identifying developmental or relational goals for both generations and using these to develop an activity that engages participants’ current abilities and interests. They discuss which participants might enjoy the activity and any social history that might inform roles participants are asked to assume. These steps increase interest in participation, which is always voluntary.

The physical setting proves critical to cooperation between intergenerational partners. The theory-based program implements most activities in a...
shared space between the adults’ and children’s rooms with two to three adults and two to three children seated at a round table with adults’ and children’s chairs alternating to create intergenerational pairs. Paired or centrally located materials enhance teamwork as partners share materials to achieve a mutual goal.

Equal Group Status.—Although Salari (2002) expressed concern in her study of intergenerational programs where elders and children were treated alike, the theory-based program takes a strengths-based view of this contact theory tenet. Salari’s concern reflected instances where elders were treated like children (e.g., addressed with pet names and “baby talk” voices). A different perspective on equal status at the theory-based program is that each child and elder has something to contribute to and something to gain from the intergenerational contact. Staff members support this principle when they design activities that exercise the participants’ remaining or developing skills so that each partner can have an active role. The tenet supports respectful treatment of both generations; children and elders in care settings are often viewed for what they cannot do, and they gravitate toward opportunities to exercise their skills and share them with others (e.g., Camp et al., 1997; Salari, 2002).

Opportunities for Friendship.—Caspi (1984) referred to the importance of frequent and regular contact between elder volunteers and young children, which he associated with the elementary students’ positive attitudinal change. Pettigrew (1998) presented a related idea as a fifth tenet of contact theory. He determined that intergroup contact was more positive when it facilitated mechanisms of friendship such as self-disclosure, which is best achieved through repeated contact. The theory-based program implements scheduled intergenerational programming three times weekly, along with informal opportunities for visiting. Participants, who may have been initially uncomfortable with each other, develop familiarity and companionship with the other generation through frequent regular contact. They build friendships as they learn each other’s interests and stories when facilitators ask questions to foster self-disclosure.

The systematic application of contact theory to intergenerational practice is unique. The goal of our study was to assess whether a program informed by contact theory contributes to more desirable social behaviors of elders and children during intergenerational programming compared with a center with a more traditional programming approach that lacks some or all of the contact theory tenets. Strengths of our approach lie in our comparison of programs utilizing different approaches to fostering positive intergenerational contact. Additionally, we used a standardized scale (Jarrott, Smith, & Weintraub, 2008) that captures data on both children’s and elders’ experiences and has demonstrated reliability.

Methods

Sample

Our sample included children and older adults participating in intergenerational programming at one of the two shared site care programs consisting of a child development center and ADS. The theory-based program was located on a university campus, and the second site was the geographically closest comparable program, about 20 miles away. Data were collected from 59 participants (25 children and 10 adults at the theory-based setting; 20 children and 4 adults at the traditional program). Children at the theory-based program ranged in age from 15 months to 5 years, and there were equal numbers of boys and girls. The adults were 50 years of age and older and were 80% men. At the traditional center, children ranged in age from 12 months to 5 years, whereas adults were 65 years of age and older. Males and females were equally represented at this site’s children’s and adults’ programs. Given the rural Appalachian location of both centers, the majority of participants, both adults and children, were Caucasian.

Program Descriptions

Both centers’ ADS programs provided activities, care, and supervision daily for 10 (traditional) to 18 (theory-based) adults with cognitive and/or physical impairments. At the theory-based childcare center, 41 children received year-round full-day care, whereas the traditional program served approximately 15 children year round and provided an after school program for elementary school-age children (who are not part of the current study). To complement the detailed description of the theory-based program earlier, the following portrays intergenerational practice at the traditional program.
At the traditional program, intergenerational activities occurred each morning in the ADS area and included all the preschool-age children and ADS participants. The ADS activity director, who has geriatric nursing training, planned and presented the activity to the group where elders were seated in an u-shape around the children, who were seated in rows of small chairs facing the facilitator. Activities typically involved singing and movement led by the activity director; children may have been directed to move independently or to interact with an elder. Elders remained seated throughout the activity. Other activities involved the facilitator reading children’s stories to the group; she may have asked the children and adults to respond to questions or provide the refrain used in a story. Activities typically lasted for 20–30 min. Other adult and child staff members sat in chairs next to the elders and watched the activity.

Measures

Trained observers using the Intergenerational Observation Scale (IOS) captured observations and recorded the predominant social behavior of target participants for the duration of each intergenerational activity (see Table 2). We based the IOS upon Rubin’s (2001) Play Observation Scale, which has demonstrated validity measuring analogous child outcomes (Coplan & Rubin, 1998). The IOS, which requires observer reliability at four steps in the training process demonstrated kappa scores of .81 in a similar observational setting (Jarrott et al., 2008). Observations started when the facilitators began the activity and ended when it was completed. Participants were observed for two intergenerational (IG) sessions when possible; 59% of the participants were observed at two different IG sessions. The rest of the sample was observed at one session. Table 3 presents the steps in the IOS process.

For this study, five students were trained as observers using a four-step process to become reliable observers. This procedure has been used successfully in our past work, and readers are referred to Jarrott and colleagues (2008) for a detailed description. Observers began collecting data for the current study only after they demonstrated acceptable interrater agreement at each training step, indicated by kappa scores of .60 or higher.

The percentage of observations for each observed behavior was calculated. For each participant, the number of 15-s observation frames during which the behavior was predominant was divided by the total number of 15-s observation frames. The mean percentages of each of the behaviors for each of the four groups of participants are depicted in Figure 1.

Results

A series of one-way analysis of variances (ANOVA)s was used to determine if there were group differences in each of the behaviors observed across the four groups of participants (see Table 4). A separate ANOVA was computed for each category of behavior observed. A significant group effect was found for IG interactive, IG parallel, peer interactive, watching, and solitary. There was not a significant group effect for peer parallel and unoccupied; however, the occurrence of these behaviors as predominant was low (see Figure 1). There was also not a significant group effect for when staff interaction was observed as the predominant behavior. Variables where the percentages for the predominant behaviors were skewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Intergenerational Observation Scale Behavior Category Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interactive intergenerational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallel intergenerational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallel peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unoccupied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were transformed, and the analyses were examined using the transformed variables. The pattern of findings remained unchanged, so we chose to present the raw untransformed scores because they are more interpretable.

Follow-up ANOVAs were used to examine differences in each of the behaviors across the two sites for the cases where a significant group effect was found. The ANOVAs compared the means of the percentages of predominant behaviors for each site. The follow-up ANOVA for IG interactive revealed that participants at the theory-based site (M = 10.25, SD = 11.74) displayed higher IG interactive behaviors than the traditional site (M = .35, SD = 1.70, F(1, 57) = 16.76, p < .001). Solitary behavior was also higher at the theory-based site (M = 32.68, SD = 21.41) than at the traditional site (M = 9.89, SD = 11.80, F(1, 57) = 22.42, p < .001). Both peer interactive and watching were higher at the traditional site (Ms = 14.23 and 53.34, SDs = 18.37 and 25.61, respectively) than at the theory-based site (Ms = .95 and 38.37, SDs = 3.36 and 25.55, Fs(1, 57) = 17.55 and 4.88, ps < .001 and .05, respectively). The follow-up ANOVA comparing IG parallel across the two sites was not significant (F(1, 57) = .96, not significant). To further examine the significant group effect for IG parallel, two additional follow-up ANOVAs comparing the means across sites for IG parallel for each generation were computed. The children at the theory-based center were higher on IG parallel than those at the traditional site, F(1, 43) = 6.15, p < .02 (means are listed in Table 4), whereas the adults at the traditional site were higher on IG parallel than those at the theory-based site, F(1, 12) = 6.00, p < .03.

Discussion

Use of contact theory to inform intergenerational programming appears to support the goals of intergenerational contact. Desirable outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Observer activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Each observer identifies four to six participants to observe and watches these individuals to familiarize themselves with the participants’ physical and facial characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Observer watches Participant 1 for 15 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Observer codes predominant behavior of Participant 1 for 15 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Observer repeats Steps 2 and 3 for Participants 2–6 in turn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Observer repeats Steps 1–4 until the activity concludes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Flow Chart of Intergenerational Observation Scale Observation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Observer activity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Observer repeats Steps 1–4 until the activity concludes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Means of the observed predominant behaviors for each group. Significant group differences were found for intergenerational (IG) interactive, IG parallel, peer interactive, watching, and solitary.
The findings suggest that the theory-based program, which was designed to foster intergenerational interaction, was more successful in promoting active engagement and lower levels of passive observation. Conversely, the traditional program, which did not adhere to the theoretical framework, resulted in low levels of intergenerational interaction and higher levels of passive engagement or interaction with age peers. The study also revealed that the elders in the traditional program wanted to engage with the children, but the activities were not supportive of this aim.

Table 4. Group Differences in Observed Behaviors During Intergenerational (IG) Programming

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>F</th>
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<tr>
<td>IG interactive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>7.64**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traditional program adults</td>
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<td>4.17</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IG parallel</td>
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<td>6.02**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traditional program adults</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer interactive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theory-based program adults</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Watching</td>
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<td>3.41*</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>50.00</td>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.

for children and elders alike were observed at the theory-based program, specifically higher levels of active engagement and lower levels of passive observation. Conversely, absence of the contact theory tenets, or failure to optimize these tenets, at the traditional program contributed to low levels of intergenerational interaction and higher levels of passive engagement (watching) or interaction with age peers. The finding that intergenerational parallel behavior was higher among the traditional program elders indicated that the elders may experience some benefit from intergenerational contact, but the children did not experience this same benefit. It appeared that the elders wanted to engage with the children, but the activities were not supporting this aim.

The dissimilar means of presenting activities at the two programs reflected differing care philosophies and views of the elders’ and children’s talents. They affected the degree to which children and elders in the intergenerational setting could partner to achieve a common goal, which is one of
the tenets of contact theory. The theory-based program’s facilitation process, including alternating child and elder chairs, giving each intergenerational pair materials to share, and prompting partners to share stories and take on roles, promoted engagement, which supports interactions with intergenerational partners. Conversely, activities at the traditional program were presented such that quiet watching was often the appropriate behavior; thus, the goal of intergenerational interaction was harder to achieve. The seating arrangement further inhibited interaction as children sat next to their peers and faced the activities director rather than the older adults. As a result of these different facilitation techniques, intergenerational interactive and solitary behavior were more common at the theory-based program, where activities are designed to engage participants with each other through active engagement with materials. Even if an adult chose not to interact with a child, he or she had materials that were engaging and contributed to higher levels of solitary behaviors. At the traditional program, few materials were presented to participants to use with their intergenerational or age peers or independently. Given high levels of inactivity common to elder care programs (Ice, 2002), solitary behavior is not always undesirable even if the goal is interaction between generations.

At a superficial level, the traditional program might be considered to practice tenets of contact theory, but the program did not utilize best practices related to the tenets. They demonstrated support of administrators and tradition for intergenerational contact. A designated staff member was responsible for daily activities but appeared to lack training of best intergenerational practices for fostering positive interactions. Children and elders were largely treated as equals but without a demonstrated value for what each child and elder could contribute to the activity. Cooperation toward a common goal was present; old and young listened quietly together and watched the facilitator, who did not encourage much active cooperation between generations. Finally, participants shared regular frequent activities together, but they had limited opportunities to exercise the mechanisms of friendship, such as sharing their own stories with each other.

Pettigrew (1998) described deficiencies in the contact theory reflecting a laundry list of elements needed to achieve positive intergroup contact and failure to address the processes through which the tenets effect change. The criticism proves relevant in our analysis. Demonstrating equal group status and achieving cooperation toward a common goal need not equate with high levels of positive intergroup contact. Rather, the processes by which these tenets are achieved reveal the value of contact theory in intergenerational settings. Such practices are needed to optimize intergenerational contact at the traditional program and many centers like it where staff members seek to promote positive intergenerational relationships, attitudes, and individual development but lack capacity to implement practices that achieve these objectives.

Our IOS is useful as it captures the manifestations of the contact theory tenets or the behavioral responses of both generations of participants in the contact setting. The scale has high face validity as it captures the pro-social behaviors that intergenerational programs purport to promote—interaction between generations. A second set of items has since been developed and piloted that documents qualities of the physical and social environment. Items such as whether staff communicate respectfully with both age groups and how materials are presented shed light on the process of achieving the observed participant outcomes. These additions represent a next step in understanding the process of applying contact tenet theories to achieve desired outcomes.

**Replication Considerations**

Despite the significant differences observed in our analyses, we recognize limitations of our small sample size. Calculations indicated moderate (interactive and watching behavior) to large (IG interactive and solitary behavior) effect sizes, giving us confidence in our findings. However, ADS and childcare composition is often more diverse than our sample; a more varied sample of elders (and children) would give us greater confidence in the effectiveness of contact theory-based programming. Culture and gender are other dimensions of disparity that might affect youth and elders’ experiences and inform best practices for positive intergroup contact. These dimensions have not been studied in the intergenerational programming research. Furthermore, as a quasi-experimental study, we cannot conclude a causal relation between practices informed by contact theory and observed participant outcomes.
Although the IOS has determined high rates of reliability (Jarrott et al., 2008) and these findings lend support to the validity of the scale, further indicators of the scale’s validity are needed. Without options to select other valid scales targeting social behavior in the intergenerational setting, the IOS remains a good option for assessing both generations of participants. Future use of the IOS behavioral scale in conjunction with the environmental assessment developed since the current study was completed will enhance scholars’ understanding of the impact of intergenerational program practices.

Even within the theory-based program, some child and elder participants were never coded for predominant intergenerational social behavior, and the mean level of intergenerational behavior was lower than other behavior categories. Such findings suggest that even the theory-based program would benefit from analysis of the supplemental scale items to determine which practices contribute to high levels of intergenerational interactions for individual participants. For example, activities where facilitators demonstrate comfort with and responsiveness to both generations or activities that present materials in a paired fashion (as opposed to central or individually) may be associated with more intergenerational interaction. Program administrators or intergenerational coordinators can then use activity analyses to develop training materials and activities that increase facilitators’ use of evidence-based practices informed by contact theory.

Despite the need for additional scale development and a larger sample, our findings indicate that use of evidence-based practices reflecting contact theory tenets supported higher levels of positive intergenerational interaction. The traditional program we observed possesses strengths that other short-lived intergenerational programs lack, such as frequent contact and the support of administrators and staff members. With greater attention to the process of connecting the generations, staff at the traditional program would enhance the unique benefits their young and old participants can enjoy. Our observations reflect research reports of challenges intergenerational program staff experience (e.g., Hayes, 2003; Jarrott et al., 2006). Although intergenerational relationships occur naturally in the family context, positive contact is not necessarily instinctual or easy.

Intergenerational programming is growing in popularity, yet facilitators often feel isolated as they develop their program to the best of their abilities. Most facilitators have training working with one generation or the other and would benefit from connections with groups like Generations United (www.gu.org), which provides training webinars, conferences, and grants for new and experienced intergenerational programmers alike. Practitioners will find the greatest success if they employ techniques informed by theory and research. Contact theory remains a vital tool in supporting positive intergenerational contact and is complemented by the evolving body of intergenerational programming research.

References


