The universe of current adult day care center administrators (n = 36) and a stratified random sample of child day care center administrators (n = 300) in Virginia were surveyed to gather information about professionals’ perceptions of the benefits and problems associated with providing regular intergenerational exchanges in day care settings. Findings of a qualitative analysis revealed that problems attributed to generational differences and organizational/service delivery issues were counterbalanced by sociocultural and organizational benefits.

Key Words: Elder care, Child care, Day care administrators

The Perceived Benefits and Problems Associated With Intergenerational Exchanges In Day Care Settings¹

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Past research on older adults’ attitudes toward children and children’s attitudes toward older adults suggests that, in general, children and older adults mutually benefit from shared experiences and daily contact, such as could be provided in an intergenerational day care setting (Seefeldt, Jantz, Serock, & Bredekamp, 1982). Yet, one fundamental question which remains unanswered is whether current administrators of child and adult day care centers are receptive to intergenerational models. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to give professionals the opportunity to describe, in their own words, their perceptions of the benefits or problems associated with providing regular intergenerational exchanges between young children and older adults in day care settings.

Review of the Literature

Current estimates suggest that 25 to 50% of adult children caring for elderly parents have simultaneous responsibility for children (Azarnoff & Scharlach, 1988; Connors, 1989; Stone, Cafferata, & Sangl, 1987). Of women caring for children and elderly persons, 73% report difficulty finding adult care, and 55% report difficulty paying for child care (Emlen, Koren, & Louise, 1988).

Although public, corporate, and political awareness of the problems and issues of elder and child care is increasing (e.g., Azarnoff & Scharlach, 1988; Connors, 1989; Glickman, Birchander, & Greenberg, 1989), viable solutions for families needing assistance are painfully slow to develop. It is clear that, while families wait for solutions, heavy caregiving responsibilities and a lack of available resources are causing increased stress and burden (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1988).

New approaches and dependent care options are needed for today’s contemporary families that will embrace the needs of both dependent children and dependent older adults (e.g., Kingson, Hirshorn, & Cornman, 1986). One compromise arrangement that has received a tremendous amount of attention in the business literature in the past few years, and which may become one of the more promising solutions to come out of the dependent care crisis, is intergenerational day care (e.g., Creedon, 1989; Watts, 1990).

Many definitions and applications of intergenerational day care exist, including those early childhood programs in which older adults contribute to the learning and development of young children as caregivers in child care (e.g., Newman, Vander Ven, & Ward, 1991). In the context of this discussion, however, intergenerational day care is meant to be an organizational structure in which adult day care and child day care are offered in the same facility, and where participants engage in joint as well as age-segregated activities. Each day care center usually has its own staff and space so that the special dependent care needs of each population can be met.

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About 9% of the adult day care centers in the United States in 1986 (the most recent data available) shared a common location with child care (Conrad, Hanrahan, & Hughes, 1990). Support for this model of care and other new approaches will, undoubtedly, be driven as much by consumer issues (cost, convenience, accessibility) as by the opinions and attitudes of the current and future professionals who will provide the care.

The educational experiences of child and adult day care center administrators offer very little common ground on which to build an appreciation for the unique needs of young and old client groups (Travis, Stremmel, & Duprey, 1993). Moreover, it is not known what preconceptions administrators may have about the benefits and consequences of bringing young children and frail older adults together. If the current professionals in the field are not supportive of the service model, it is unlikely that future efforts to develop these new program types will be successful; hence this qualitative study is designed to give current professional providers an opportunity to describe their perceptions of intergenerational exchanges in day care settings.

Methods

Procedures and Sampling Method

Because low response rates of less than 50% are a pervasive problem in mail surveys involving child care professionals (e.g., Stremmel, 1991; Stremmel, Benson, & Powell, 1993), the study used a multi-step mail survey method described by Dillman (1978) to enhance response rates. A pre-survey letter was sent to a sample of adult day care center and child care center administrators inviting them to participate in the survey. Six weeks after the survey instrument was mailed, nonrespondents received two reminder letters at 2-week intervals, followed by a repeat mailing of the survey instrument.

The sample was drawn from lists of all licensed child and adult day care centers in Virginia, as of December, 1991. In the case of adult day care, the universe of licensed centers (N = 38) was initially included in the study. However, two licensed centers functioned as satellite centers and shared an administrator with a primary site. Thus, although 38 adult day care centers were licensed in the Commonwealth during the study period, only 36 center administrators were included in the study.

The sampling frame for the child care administrators consisted of all child care centers licensed in Virginia (N = 1,100). Child care centers were randomly selected proportional to their location in seven geographic regions used by the Licensing Division for the Virginia Department of Social Services. This strategy was used in an effort to capture the diversity of the state’s child care centers, which extend from rural Appalachian coalfield communities to affluent Washington, DC, suburbs. Guidelines established by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) were followed to arrive at the desirable sample size. The final sample consisted of 36 adult day care administrators and 300 child care administrators for a total of 336 potential respondents.

As a result of the multi-step mail survey design, approximately 68% of the administrators (n = 227) responded to the questionnaire. This response rate represented 94% of the adult care group and 64% of the child care group. Response rates for the child care administrators by region ranged from 100% (n = 10) in the far southwest Virginia rural coalfield region to a low of 56% (n = 14) in the most northern (rural agricultural) region bordering on Maryland and West Virginia. The other five regions had similar response rates in the range of 60 to 68%.

The Survey Instrument

The survey provided background information on the respondents; measures of respondents’ attitudes toward children, older adults, and intergenerational exchanges; and responses to two open-ended questions designed to help the researchers “create an accurate picture of how child and adult day care center administrators feel about intergenerational exchanges.” Reported here are selected background characteristics of the respondents and their perceptions of the benefits and problems associated with providing, on a regular basis, intergenerational activities in day care settings, as described in the responses to the open-ended questions.

Results

Background Information

Consistent with the distribution of centers in the state, the vast majority of the respondents’ centers (68%) were located in large mid-size cities. Ninety-one percent of the adult day care respondents worked for nonprofit centers compared to 45% of the child care group.

The majority of the respondents were female (90%) and white (83%). Child care respondents ranged between 20 and 74 years of age with an average age of 41 (median = 39). They were in their current positions between 2 months and 42 years with an average tenure of approximately 6 years (median = 4.5). Adult day care administrators were between the ages of 28 and 65 with an average age of 44 (median = 41). These administrators reported being in their positions between 3 months and 18 years, and averaged about 4.5 years in their positions (median = 2.8). The difference in job tenure probably reflects the relative newness of adult day care in the state of Virginia.

One striking feature of the sample was the diverse educational backgrounds of the administrators. Backgrounds in the health and human services were pervasive in the adult day care group (e.g., nursing and social work). The child care administrators, on the other hand, brought such diverse backgrounds as business administration, education, psychology, philosophy, and the physical sciences to their positions.

Similar to national data cited previously, 10% of the respondents considered themselves to be employed...
in an intergenerational day care center. Slightly over half (58%) of all center administrators reported planning activities to bring children and older adults together, although the majority of those providing activities (51%) classified the planned interactions as “rare.” In descending order, the administrators reported the use of the following intergenerational activities: music (72%), free conversation time (69%), telling/reading stories (55%), playing games (49%), arts and crafts (44%), field trips (37%), and cooking/baking activities (20%).

When asked about public support for intergenerational day care, a majority (78%) of the administrators felt that there would be support for intergenerational centers in their communities. Similarly, 77% reported that, if provided with adequate resources, they would be “somewhat” to “very likely” to provide intergenerational day care services.

Sixty-four percent of the responding child care administrators and 88% of the responding adult care administrators included comments for the open-ended questions on the perceived benefits and problems associated with providing regular intergenerational exchanges in day care settings. Three themes focusing on sociocultural, generational, and organizational or service delivery issues emerged from the data. For clarity of discussion and ease of comparison, we have separated these results according to child and adult day care response groups. The percentages of respondents who addressed each theme are omitted to facilitate the flow of the narrative; however, they are presented in Table 1.

**Child Care Administrators’ Perceptions of Intergenerational Exchanges**

**Sociocultural Themes.** — Administrators felt very strongly about the opportunities that intergenerational programs provided for children and elders to respect and learn from each other; although, as seen in Table 1, proportionately more adult than child care administrators expressed this theme. In general, child care administrators favored this theme over other sociocultural issues, but the ideas were not well developed. Remarks often included very brief statements about children and elders sharing knowledge and experiences, or helping each other succeed during joint projects and activities. As one administrator simply stated, “Adults and children can learn from each other.” In general, child care administrators felt that children, many of whom rarely saw an older adult, developed a better understanding of aging and learned from the “wisdom” of the elders during intergenerational exchanges.

Access to unconditional love, attention, and companionship was the second major sociocultural theme cited by the child care administrators. Comments typically mentioned the bi-directionality of giving and receiving love, and the uncomplicated and unconditional exchanges of love and attention that had been observed between young children and elders. As a consequence of these exchanges, the administrators stated that elders felt “useful, needed, and appreciated.” Children, on the other hand, gained access to valuable adult companionship which, according to several administrators, helped children’s self esteem and social development. As stated by one child care administrator:

> The adults get a special charge of energy, from being around children. Their love for children is seen in their eyes. It helps the children to learn to communicate with older adults and brings much joy to them.

An opportunity to experience grandparent figures in the absence of an available extended family was, by far, the sociocultural theme that received the greatest depth of response among child care administrators,

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<td><strong>Organizational and service delivery</strong></td>
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<td>Benefits (cost savings, reduced service</td>
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while having the lowest rate of occurrence in the written responses. The responses came from child care administrators across all geographic sectors of the state, suggesting that these observations were not solely a rural or urban family phenomenon. The administrators included comments about the numerous factors contributing to a decline in young children's and older adults' exposure to extended families. Among other things, they cited an increasingly mobile society, growing numbers of dysfunctional families, and delayed childbearing among the "baby boom" generation resulting in the death of grandparents earlier in the childrearing years. One respondent's comments, which were typical of others on this theme, were as follows:

Children who do not have the benefit of a grandparent either living within the confines of the same dwelling or still surviving can still enjoy this rich experience with an older adult. The children are given an opportunity of developing a kinship with older adults and vice versa. So, if the older people are not near their own grandchildren or younger relatives, this experience gives them the opportunity to keep abreast of their development, likes, etc.

**Generational Differences.** — In most cases, child care administrators who identified benefits of intergenerational activities also found problems with such programs. The major issues in these narratives are consistent with the very real differences that exist between the very young and the very old. Thus, we have labeled this theme "generational differences."

Specifically, child care administrators mentioned problems that resulted from different energy and activity levels between the two groups. "It's hard for some children to understand the limits for some older adults," reported one child care administrator. Another wrote:

I feel children are too energetic and taxing on older adults. Younger children are learning and growing and do many things unexpectedly, such as throwing tantrums, which I feel could be very upsetting to an older person who may be used to a quieter environment.

Divergent interests of the two groups were another important generational issue. The respondents often mentioned generational, developmental, and personality factors that they believed contributed to the difficulty in planning and implementing intergenerational activities. "The generation gap may cause problems because today's children are used to getting what they want, not having much supervision, and playing Nintendo," wrote a child care administrator. These comments included the notion that children and older adults do not necessarily like being around each other for prolonged periods of time.

The notion of fear as a generational issue emerged from a handful of responses. Reports of fear on the part of the children dealt mostly with fears of elders in general, because of children's lack of opportunity to be around older adults, and of their physical impairments in particular (e.g., canes, walkers, wheelchairs). One respondent was afraid that elders might molest the children.

Closely related to the issues of fear was a more subtle theme about illness and death. Five child care administrators wrote about the problems that would occur if a child had to deal with the death or illness of a favorite elder. One administrator concluded, "The loss of an older adult is somewhat heartbreaking."

**Organizational and Service Delivery Themes.** — A minority of child care administrators identified benefits to their organizations as a result of providing intergenerational programs. Their comments included mention of cost savings and reduced duplication of services/resources, program enrichment, and access to additional helpers (e.g., an extra "set of eyes or hands" or a "spare lap to comfort a child"). For the most part, elaboration was not provided for any of these benefits.

In sharp contrast to the above perceived benefits, the child care administrators had a great deal to say about the organizational and service delivery problems associated with regular intergenerational programming. The number one issue was staffing and program planning. To their credit, the administrators understood the need to have specially trained staff in order to provide an effective intergenerational program. Time and again the respondents cited the divergent needs of elders and young children as the driving force behind requirements for additional staff training and staff supervision. As one child care administrator put it, "Taking [the attitude] of 'we'll just stick them together and go have coffee' would be disastrous." Another wrote, "qualified teachers would be a must!"

Adequate facilities and space to run an intergenerational program were also identified as organizational problems by the responding child care administrators. Most administrators felt that the two groups should "have their own space to be able to get away from each other." In many cases, the administrators commented that this would not be possible in their current locations.

Finally, the very practical organizational issues of infection control and transportation needs were included in comments by the child care group. The administrators seemed to feel that older adults would be at a disadvantage because of the frequent illnesses experienced by young children. Less common, administrators saw infection control as a two-way street, with children being as vulnerable as older adults to communicable diseases. Regarding transportation, administrators recognized that getting elders to and from an intergenerational center would require special transportation arrangements that may not apply to a segregated child care center. A slight variation on this theme dealt with the transportation (movement) of elders to and from the children's activity spaces. Issues such as mobility impairment and the need for assistive devices were mentioned here.
Adult Care Administrators’ Perceptions of Intergenerational Exchanges

Sociocultural Themes. — Adult care administrators included the same three sociocultural issues identified by child care administrators. However, a slight variation on the emphasis placed on each issue emerged from their responses. Opportunities for children and elders to respect and learn from each other during intergenerational exchanges seemed to be the most important sociocultural benefit for these administrators. This benefit was stressed by a majority of the adult care administrators. One adult day care administrator wrote, “Both groups get to ‘show off’ and exchange wisdom and skills with an appreciative audience.”

Time and again the adult care administrators highlighted the notion of “elders’ lifetimes of experiences” that could be used for exchanges with young children. Conversely, these administrators seemed to be cognizant of the many opportunities their elders would find to learn respect for the complex growth and developmental process of early childhood. There was a strong sense that elders and children benefited emotionally from shared experiences. As one adult care administrator wrote in summary:

An intergenerational program would provide both populations with positive experiences of just being together. Older adults seem to enjoy sharing life experiences with children while children seem to absorb their tales and want to learn.

As with child care administrators, the adult care respondents identified access to unconditional love, attention, and companionship as a major sociocultural issue. Typical comments included: “Children really bring smiles and warmth to our participants,” and “Children and older adults get that affection and attention that they both like.”

Finally, adult care administrators also mentioned grandparenting and extended family issues, although the language had neither the depth nor the force as that of their child care counterparts. Brief statements such as the following were the norm: “Older adults can act as surrogate ‘grandparents’ for children without ones close by.”

Generational Differences. — As with the child care group, adult care administrators also noted problems with intergenerational programs. One notable difference between the administrators’ responses was that comments by adult care respondents on the energy/activity levels issue tended to stress the health problems of the older adults in day care settings and the resulting diminished energy and activity levels. The tone of many of these responses was clearly toward the need to “protect” the elder from busy, active children. This perspective included comments such as, “Adult day care participants are not aging normally and may not deal well with too much activity.”

Divergent interests as a generational issue for the adult care administrators most often appeared in comments about needing to treat and respect the older participants as adults. “Some older adults see activities with children as ‘childish,’” responded one adult care administrator. Another adult care respondent noted, “Because participants in adult day care are generally (physically) frail and/or (cognitively) impaired, they have vastly divergent needs and interests from those of young children.”

Finally, fear was also an issue for the adult care administrators. These respondents felt that older adults were often afraid for their personal safety around young children. One adult day care administrator noted, “Some older adults . . . worry that quick moving children may knock into them.” At least one adult care administrator noted that elders’ desires to make personal contact with children could be a source of fear and discomfort for children during intergenerational activities. She wrote:

I have seen senior adults get too ‘pushy’ wanting to put children on their laps and hold them or just hug them. To the children, these people were still strangers and they didn’t care for this behavior.

On a final note, unlike the child care group, the concern regarding illness and death was briefly mentioned by only one adult care administrator. It is likely that professionals who work with the very old are much more familiar with and accepting of illness and death than those who work with young children at the beginning of the life course.

Organizational and Service Delivery Themes. — In general, adult care administrators, more so than child care administrators, felt that intergenerational programs would benefit their organization by enriching the program and reducing the duplication of services. The vast majority of the responses, however, mentioned problems associated with such a program model.

Whereas the child care respondents emphasized staffing and program planning problems about equally, adult care administrators who addressed these concerns tended to emphasize program planning issues over staffing. As echoed by several adult care administrators, “Care needs to be taken in selecting [participants] to make the [intergenerational] experience positive for both groups.”

Finally, adequate facilities and space to run an intergenerational program were identified by the responding adult care administrators as major organizational problems. This was comparable to the emphasis placed on the same problems by the child care respondents. That is, most of this group of administrators felt that separate time and space for each group was very important.

Infection control was mentioned by only one adult care administrator. Transportation needs, which were a significant issue for child care administrators, were not mentioned at all by the adult care group. This may be because children are typically the ones transported to older adults rather than vice versa.

Approximately 9% of the administrators seemed baffled that they were asked about problems with...
intergenerational programs. Their responses implied that they were convinced these program models would succeed. A child care administrator wrote: “To my knowledge, there are no disadvantages” (intergenerational programming). An adult care administrator concluded: “I would really like to see more of this” (intergenerational programming).

Discussion

Child and adult day care administrators in Virginia were surveyed to gather information about professionals’ perceived benefits and problems associated with providing regular intergenerational exchanges in day care settings. The results showed that socio-cultural and organizational benefits associated with these activities are counterbalanced by a set of generational differences and organizational/service delivery issues that could be interpreted as potential barriers to intergenerational day care programs. In other words, bringing these two dependent groups together may not be a panacea for the current dependent care crisis.

Important issues face child and adult care administrators who are interested in intergenerational day care programs. High on this list of issues are the training and supervision of staff members who will plan and direct intergenerational activities and develop curriculum guides for age and developmentally appropriate intergenerational programming. Not only have educators who are in the business of training future administrators identified these needs (e.g., Travis, Stremmel, & Duprey, 1993), but current professionals in the field have spoken, through this project, about the key role that specialized training will play in making these programs work.

It is not clear whether we will need to cross-train child development and gerontology professionals for these new program types or whether a new specialty devoted to intergenerational training will emerge. In either case, training must deal with how individuals develop and decline across the lifespan and, as a result, why individuals hold differing perspectives on the world at any point in time. Planning programs for the benefit as well as the enjoyment of both groups will take considerable knowledge and skill.

There should be a clearly articulated intergenerational practice paradigm. With this model, it is likely that many of the problems or barriers identified in this study, such as the divergent needs and different energy and activity levels of young children and older adults, will become normative programming constructs.

In general, we found nothing in these data to suggest that intergenerational day care programs would not work or would not be well received by current professional administrators of child and adult day care. The potential “barriers,” as we have called them, to intergenerational programs are not insurmountable. In fact, as we continue to explore curriculum development issues with others around the country, we will at the same time consider many of these logistical problems. This research agenda includes numerous applied research questions. For example, what types of facilities and spaces are most appropriate for intergenerational day care groups? Are there true cost savings involved in intergenerational models of care and, if so, where do the savings occur? What is the most appropriate and most cost-effective mix of segregated versus integrated activities for young children and older adults in day care settings? Finally, how do families (the consumers of these services) feel about intergenerational day care models?

The reconfiguration of community-based services to help families meet their dependent care needs in the 1990s demands innovation and creativity. We are cautiously optimistic from this sample in one southern state that intergenerational day care may be one viable model of care. Additional research in other states and regions of the country will be necessary to accurately track professional receptivity to this model of care.

Finally, even though this study used widely accepted sample size guidelines and followed sound survey procedures, new approaches are needed to achieve higher response rates among child care respondents in future surveys. For quantitative studies, these approaches may include sampling techniques that incorporate alpha (Type I error) as well as beta (Type II error) considerations in determining sample size, and creative follow-up procedures to nonrespondents. The challenge for qualitative studies is to find methods that invite and encourage respondents to think about and discuss, in their own words, the phenomenon of interest. It may be the case that busy professionals would be more receptive to recorded face-to-face or telephone interviews than they are to mail surveys requiring written responses.

References


Medical Director
Extended Care Program

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- Supervising and establishing educational opportunities for housestaff in geriatrics and nursing home care
- Establishing a Senior Care Clinic using the Extended Care Program nurses, nurse practitioners, and Community Medicine physicians

Candidates must be eligible or certified for Added Competence in Geriatric Medicine, have experience and expertise as a clinician/educator in nursing home care, have productive clinical research experience and possess management and administrative skills. Depending upon experience and qualifications, the successful candidate may be eligible for a full-time, renewable term University academic appointment at the level of either Assistant Professor or Associate Professor of Medicine.

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