The quality of a nation is reflected in the way it recognizes that its strength lies in its ability to integrate the wisdom of its elders with the spirit and vitality of its children and youth.

—Margaret Mead

Intergenerational Programming for Foster-Adoptive Families: Creating Community at Hope Meadows

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ABSTRACT. Generations of Hope serves foster and adoptive children, their adoptive families and older adults through an innovative program
that is breaking new ground in the development of caring intergenerational communities. It was created in 1993 as a non-profit social service agency designed to improve the service delivery and policies of the child welfare system; it ended up helping not only foster and adopted children but senior citizens as well. This paper examines critical social issues facing both foster children and senior citizens in the United States and how this program created a neighborhood that combines several generations of kin-like support to meet the needs of these vulnerable groups. We describe how the Generations of Hope model brings together in tangible ways critical shifts in perspective regarding foster care and gerontology. The lessons we have learned speak to research, policy making and practice.

KEYWORDS. Foster care, adoption, gerontology, successful aging, Hope Meadows

The story of Hope Meadows . . . offers not only a vision for how we can help take care of some of the most vulnerable young people in the society—foster children who essentially have no where else to turn—but how we can create neighborhoods that enrich the lives of all ages.

–Marc Freedman (2001)

INTRODUCTION

Generations of Hope serves foster and adoptive children, their adoptive families and older adults through an innovative program that is breaking new ground in the development of caring intergenerational communities (Krause Eheart & Hopping 2001a). It was created in 1993 as a non-profit social service agency designed to improve the service delivery and policies of the child welfare system; it ended up helping not only foster and adopted children but senior citizens as well.

In the geographic center of the United States, just two hours south of Chicago, Illinois, stands a unique neighborhood known as Hope Meadows. This is Generations of Hope’s first planned community. Hope Meadows spans the
generations to affect the quality of life of children, families and older adults. Here neglected and abused children, who have been removed from their biological parents by the legal system, find a safe and secure, permanent and caring home. They also find not just adoptive parents and a home, but also grandparents, playmates, and an entire neighborhood designed to help them grow up in a nurturing environment. Within this five block, small-town neighborhood, foster and adoptive children, their parents and surrogate grandparents develop supportive relationships capable of healing the hurts of child abuse and chronic neglect and of ameliorating the isolation and loneliness of old age.

**HOPE MEADOWS**

Generations of Hope is a not-for-profit corporation and child welfare agency. Its primary mission is to facilitate the adoptions of children seemingly trapped in the foster care system. Hope Meadows, its first program site, is a geographically contained, intergenerational, planned community where foster and adoptive families, children, and senior citizens live together and care for one another.

In 1993 Hope secured a million-dollar start-up grant from the State of Illinois, and purchased and rehabilitated a twenty-two acre housing subdivision on the former Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul, Illinois. Twelve duplexes were converted into spacious single-family homes, and three were renovated for administrative and community use. Ten four-plexes were renovated and made into forty apartments for seniors. With its tree-lined streets that meander in typical suburban fashion, the neighborhood is virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding housing. Overall the effect is that of an idyllic semi-rural, working-class environment where kids walk to public schools, ride bicycles safely and run freely between and around the houses from one large open green space to the next.

Hope parents (foster and adoptive) receive monetary support in exchange for a life-long commitment to the children who share their lives. They receive a comfortable home rent-free and an annual salary. In two-parent families, one parent stays at home to be a full-time mom or dad, adopting up to four children from the foster care system. Single parents adopt three children and may work part time outside the home. Weekly training is held for parents, and on-site therapy and counseling is available for all children and families.

Perhaps the most striking component of the model is its cadre of older volunteers. These older adults (age 55+) live in the neighborhood and receive below-market-rate rent in return for six hours a week of volunteer work which
may include tutoring, playing games, child care, guarding school crossings, playground supervision, or numerous other jobs. A principle contribution, however, lies in simply becoming a part of the lives of the children—just being there, lending an ear, and sharing their wisdom and insight as neighbors and honorary grandparents.

Currently 32 children, referred by the State of Illinois child welfare system, live at Hope Meadows. They joined 21 birth and adopted children who were already a part of Hope families. On average these foster children had spent 62% of their lives in care before coming to Hope Meadows (not counting the five who came as infants) and averaged four previous placements. They ranged in age from new-born to 13 years; two-thirds were older than age five. One-third of the children had been sexually abused, came with serious medical problems and/or were drug exposed at birth. More than one-half came to Hope with severe behavior and emotional problems. Twenty-nine of these children have been adopted and 20 have siblings also living at Hope. As is typical of foster care in general, the majority of the children at Hope Meadows are male and African American.

In January 2002 the mean age of Hope seniors was 67. Currently the 62 seniors living at Hope Meadows are renting 36 apartments, with 22 of these occupied by single seniors, 17 of whom are women. The average annual income per household is $12,389, with a slight majority of the households having at least one senior employed (mostly part-time). Twenty-five percent of the seniors have at least some college education. Seventy-five percent are Caucasian, twenty percent are African American and 5% represent other groups. Together they average a total of 1,000 volunteer hours per month, about twenty percent more hours than are required by Generations of Hope.

Hope’s strategy of combining three or more generations of kin-like support in a secure and welcoming neighborhood has paid off in several ways. Seniors have a safe and affordable place to live and renewed purpose in their lives. Adoptive families have adequate support for the often overwhelming task of parenting “special needs” children, and foster children find an end to a long series of temporary placements and, more importantly, an end to foster care.

**SOCIAL ISSUES: FOSTER CARE**

It is not news that changes need to be made to keep children safe in a nurturing family and a caring community. Particularly vulnerable are those children caught in the quagmire of child welfare. The total foster care population in the United States is rapidly approaching 600,000 children. At least 134,000 of these children are waiting to be adopted, and as of March 31, 2000, the mean
length of stay in continuous foster care for these children was 45 months (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, April 2001). Most of these waiting children are older, have minority status, are part of a sibling group, and often have severe behavior and emotional problems.

A convergence of social problems including poverty, maternal mental illness, domestic violence, drug abuse, and declining family support networks has resulted in increasingly large numbers of foster children (Barbell & Freundlich 2001, Children’s Defense Fund 2001). There are “higher rates of entry into foster care than of exit from care; high rates of re-entry into care; and placement of children in foster care through other systems [e.g., mental health and juvenile justice]” (Barbell & Freundlich 2001, p. 2). The Children’s Defense Fund sums up the problem: “Child Welfare systems are overloaded, and children linger in foster care without the assurance of permanent families. . . . Troubled families continue to depend on troubled systems—agencies, courts, and service providers that face a lack of resources, staff, and links to communities” (2001, p. 79).

The National Commission on Family Foster Care explained that the current child welfare system was not designed to serve the very troubled population of children that now enters the system. It was built on premises that are no longer valid: that children needing care are primarily neglected and can be helped through love alone, that caseworkers have the time and skills to supervise these difficult placements, and that there are sufficient numbers of families with working fathers and stay-at-home mothers willing and able to care for these children (Child Welfare League of America 1991).

Since the 1997 enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, recruitment of adoptive parents for the growing number of children for whom adoption has become the permanency goal has become an even more critical issue. The result, in part, is that a growing number of children are being served through group and residential care. The growing use of group and residential care for foster children should be of serious concern: almost 106,000 children lived in group homes and institutional settings in March 2000, a 58% increase since 1990 (Barbell & Freundlich 2001, p. 24). Agencies alone cannot keep children safe and happy; they must reach out to families and communities to solve the child welfare crisis (Children’s Defense Fund 2000).

**SOCIAL ISSUES: SENIORS**

Changes must also be made to meet the needs of rapidly increasing numbers of senior citizens. Since 1900 the proportion of individuals in later life has tripled, producing an end result that, as Marc Freedman (1999) notes, is truly
staggering: “half of all the people who have ever lived to age 65 are currently alive” (p. 12, emphasis in original). The 2000 census counted 45.8 million persons over the age of sixty in the United States.

Dramatic age trends are creating both challenges and opportunities that cannot be ignored. All older people experience major life transitions that create concern. Bronfenbrenner, McClelland, Wethington, Moen, and Ceci (1996) write that these include: “the onset of disability for self or spouse, leaving one’s job, widowhood, care-giving for older (and younger) kin.” They continue, “these transitions represent key emotional turning points and often pose major economic and social dislocations as well” (p. 209). The result can be depression and social isolation. However, in a study of meaning in later life, Thompson (1993) found it was not fear of poverty and poor health that was a threat to well-being, but rather a loss of purpose in life and boredom. Purpose was found through work, leisure, grandparenting and intimate adult relationships.

Similarly, a major study by the MacArthur Foundation defined three interrelated key components of successful aging: avoiding disease and disability, maintaining cognitive and physical functioning, and engagement with life, especially maintaining close relationships with other people and staying involved in meaningful and productive activities (Rowe & Kahn 1998, pp. 37-40). Elaborating on this last point, the authors wrote, “The task of successful aging is to discover and rediscover relationships and activities that provide closeness and meaningfulness” (p. 46).

Kofi A. Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, at a United Nations conference, “Towards a Society for all Ages,” held to launch the International Year of Older Persons 1999, suggested that successful aging is fostered in multi-generational societies:

[We] are in the midst of a silent revolution. It is a revolution that extends well beyond demographics, with major economic, social, cultural, psychological and spiritual implications... What do we mean by [a society for all ages]? A society for all ages is one that does not caricature older persons as patients and pensioners. Instead it sees them as both agents and beneficiaries of development. It honours traditional elders in their leadership and consultative roles in communities... A society of all ages is multi-generational. It is not fragmented, with youth, adults and older persons going their separate ways. Rather, it is age-inclusive, with different generations recognizing—and acting upon—their commonality of interest. (1999)

As Hagestad (1998) points out, the issues and challenges involved in caring for the young and for the old are intimately connected: communities that are
safe, supportive, and manageable for the old are also good for children. At Hope Meadows there is a close connection between the quality of life for the very young and for the very old. At Hope Meadows youth, adults, and older persons strive to create a society for all ages.

Lessons Learned

The Generations of Hope model was designed to secure successful adoptions from the foster-care system by applying what we already know intuitively: that a caring community is essential for healing and restoring processes of normal human development. The Generations of Hope model brings together in a tangible way five critical shifts in perspective. These have emerged through eight years of ongoing program evaluation and basic research conducted largely in partnership with the University of Illinois (e.g., Hopping 2001, 2002a,b; Hopping & Krause Eheart 2000; Krause Eheart & Hopping 2001a; Krause Eheart & Zimmerman 1998; Pintar & Hopping 1997).

• The program recognizes the importance of resilience in the lives of the residents of Hope Meadows. Research on resilience has proliferated over the last thirty years (c.f. Werner, Bierman & French 1971; Rutter 1979; Masten & Garnezy 1985; Masten 2001), focusing almost exclusively on children. (See Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker 2000 for a comprehensive review.) Many definitions of resilience have been developed (c.f. Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker 2000; Walsh 2002; Masten, Best & Garmezy 1990; Masten 2001; Egeland, Carlson & Sroufe 1993). All include the notion of positive adaptation despite adversity. It has become clear that resilience is not a function of extraordinary capacities, as suggested by early (and even some recent) studies celebrating the “invincible” child (e.g., Pines 1975; Buggie 1995). As Masten (2001) emphasizes, “the most surprising conclusion emerging from studies of these children is the ordinariness of resilience,” arising in most cases out of basic human adaptive systems (p. 227). Writing from the perspective of inter-generational programming, VanderVen (1999) speculates that some of the same factors that have been found to promote resilience in youth (strong interpersonal relationships, being held responsible for someone or something, involvement in challenging activities) may be likely to contribute to resilience in older adults as well (pp. 43-44; see also Milstein & Henry 2000; Milstein 2002; Staudinger, Freund, Linden & Maas 1999; Staudinger & Fleeson 1996; Staudinger, Marsiske & Baltes 1995).

• The program encourages a future-oriented as opposed to a narrow and limiting retrospective focus, creating a context in which shared memo-
ries of common events provide seniors, children and their families with a basis for anticipating the future. Good memories of picnics and parades, of talks, of hugs, of sharing, of caring provide children and seniors alike with a sense of being useful, with a sense of self-worth, and perhaps most importantly, with hope for the future (see Krause Eheart & Power 2001).

- The staff at Hope Meadows attempts to assume the role of facilitator, collaborator, and informational gatherer rather than the mantle of authoritarian power. Hope Meadows strives to be a place where everyone is valued for what they can contribute; where everyone’s talents are utilized and their ideas and opinions heard. Because of the small size of the community this is primarily accomplished through chance encounters and informal meetings, as well as in regularly scheduled events (e.g., Independence Day Picnic, the monthly neighborhood birthday party, daily afterschool activities); however, it also occurs through formal advisory meetings and educational programs for seniors and parents. At Hope it is not the job of the staff alone to ensure the welfare of children, it’s the job of every neighbor.

- Many children with troubled pasts who would ordinarily be raised in group homes and orphanages can be sustained in adoptive families, if these families are enveloped within an appropriately designed intergenerational community with the capacity to buffer the inherent difficulties. This entails more than simply putting generations together in one neighborhood. Important to the success of such a neighborhood are a small cadre of trained and committed staff, and an open-ended commitment on the part of the program itself to the families and seniors, who in turn commit themselves to working through the unpredictable challenges of raising these children. (See Krause Eheart & Hopping 2001a.)

CULTURAL VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

The Hope model is based on the belief expressed by John Dewey (1902), “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children.” As such, adoption becomes just one moment of a much longer process of supported family development that weaves the adoptive family into a larger intergenerational community. With its critical mass of generational and racial diversity this community is able to subvert many sorts of status-based prejudices and stigmas, including those of legal status (wardship), race, single-parenthood, class, and age. It does so apparently by presenting what amounts to a coherent alternative reality, lived out in relationships and routines of “normal” neighborhood life.
One might even say that Generations of Hope has managed to construct its own persuasive version of normality—one which runs counter to dominant cultural constructions. The program rejects, for example, the philosophy of “residualism” that currently prevails in both child welfare and gerontology. Residualism refers to the perception of foster children and seniors as liabilities to be managed, rather than resources to be developed or tapped (Lindsey 1994; Freedman 1999)—thus foster children are seen as victims and as vectors of needs to be accurately diagnosed and targeted for appropriate services. Similarly, seniors are too often viewed as demented, diseased, and dependent rather than as competent, caring and contributing (Hagestad 1998), while memories, for both foster children and seniors, are assumed to be mostly painful and lodged in the past rather than, as at Hope Meadows, a source of joy, hope and meaning for the future.

A residualist worldview permits institutions to enter into and manipulate the lives of children and families. The dispatching of professionals to the rescue is usually effected at arms-length and dispassionately. Foster children are rarely seen, as they are at Hope, as ordinary kids requiring the embeddedness in family and community that enables them to develop into caring and productive adults. Seniors at Hope are the community’s anchors, offering two special gifts—a surplus of unstructured time and vast life experiences.

**CONCLUSION:**

**POLICY FRAMEWORK AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

Hope Meadows is an intentional community that enriches the lives of all ages, as suggested at the beginning of this paper by Mark Freedman. It binds an improbable collection of strangers (foster children, families, staff and older adults) into a new and pragmatic organizational form, one that buffers the risks and enhances the rewards of collectively caring for adoptive families and special needs children.

Over the past eight years these children, parents and older adults have taught us a great deal of relevance for research, policy-making and practice. (See Krause Eheart and Hopping 2001b for our original formulation of these recommendations.) Perhaps first and foremost, it has become clear that as a nation we must revise our view of children who enter state care—rather than regarding them primarily as a management responsibility, where the focus is on finding and repairing deficits, these children should be seen as ordinary kids needing the same degree of embeddedness in family and community that we provide for our own children. When a decision is made about a foster child, the
standard should be, “Is this what I would want for my own child?” With such a
benchmark, the evaluation of programs and policies takes on new dimensions,
and new directions for design are more readily envisioned.

Second, neighborhood-based child-welfare initiatives need to be encour-
egaged. Agency-based services alone cannot protect children, nor help them
form meaningful relationships. New partnerships need to be formed with fami-
lies and neighborhoods where much of the work of caring and decision-mak-
ing is left to the residents, not the “professionals.” It may even be necessary, as
with Hope Meadows, to develop new neighborhoods where the common pur-
pose from the outset is caring for the children.

Third, it is imperative that we recognize that adoption, by itself, is not a
magic bullet for foster children. Usually, the older the children are the greater
their problems. To best promote positive outcomes, ongoing post-adoption
programs are needed that focus on support for the entire family.

Fourth, we must recognize the close connection between the quality of life
for the young and the old, and begin to weave an intergenerational vision into
public policy. We need to look at funding holistically, rejecting the simplistic
notion that children and the elderly are fundamentally in competition for
scarce public resources (Generations United 2002; Gersh 2000). At Hope,
children previously caught in the foster-care system, and seniors previously
sidelined from mainstream America, live side by side as friends and neighbors.
This model suggests that in developing policy we need to ask how we can fund
programs that help children help seniors, help seniors meet the needs of fami-
lies, and help families meet the needs of children and seniors. The result will be
that all benefit, and communities will become stronger.

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