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COMMUNICATION ACROSS FOUR GENERATIONS

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Cross-generational programs are enabling the elderly in America to become more involved in the education of our children. Special federal programs such as RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteers Program) and the Foster Grandparents Program have brought many older persons into schools to serve as aides, tutors, and volunteers. Local school districts and individual schools have developed programs involving the elderly with children. The elderly have shown they can use their love and concern for children, their knowledge of content, and their patience and skill in working with children to develop a warm, helping relationship as they help children grow and learn.

A wealth of assistance to children and schools is available in a facility seldom tapped, the nursing home or home for the elderly. Since many of the nursing home residents cannot leave easily, it is necessary to take the children to them. By so doing the children can find that education can take place outside school walls. They discover that they have something to offer the elderly and can begin early to assume responsibility for their welfare.

One program, currently in progress in Manhattan, Kansas, is providing benefits to nursing home residents and to primary children. There are several purposes for the program:

1. to maintain the child's high interest in reading as he reads his favorite passages of books, pictures, or magazines;
2. to facilitate contact between the young children and the elderly so that the elderly can share their lives with the young children in personally rewarding situations;
3. to involve the children with the elderly in ways in which the children can begin to assume some responsibilities for the elderly.

How the Program Works

Once a week nursing home residents are visited by children from a nearby elementary school. During an afternoon recess period eight-ten students are driven a few blocks to the nursing home by the teacher or a volunteer mother. The Occupational Therapist and the teacher pair children with residents so that when they arrive, the children can go directly to the residents' rooms.

Two children read and visit with one resident. One of the children is

“experienced;” he has been there before. The other child is “new;” this is his first visit. Each child reads aloud for a few minutes. They all talk and listen to one another as they share experiences, jokes, and questions with each other.

The first grade teacher initiated the program and serves as its coordinator. Her responsibilities include:

1. initial and continued contact with the nursing home relating to permission to visit and arrangement of schedules;
2. discussion with the Occupational Therapist at the nursing home;
3. obtaining parents' permission for their children to participate;
4. preparing the children for the visit;
5. accompanying the children to the visit;
6. recruiting and training adult volunteers (generally mothers) to assume responsibility for accompanying the children.

The staff of the nursing home carefully selects the persons who will be visited. Children do not visit persons who have difficulty relating to young children.

The residents eagerly look forward to the children's visits. They visit and joke with the children. One blind woman asked to feel the face of each child who read to her. The children allowed her to do this without hesitation.

The program was started with first graders. However, after the first year many of the “graduated” first graders wanted to continue in the program and now serve as the “experienced” readers. Currently first through fourth graders are involved in the program. Only children who volunteer may visit. The program has been such a success that there are many more volunteers than regular places available. Therefore the teacher has developed a rotation system so many children during the year will have the opportunity to visit.

Each child selects anything he can read. At the beginning of the year the first grader might take a picture book, poster, self-made book, or pre-primer. Older children who take larger books must select a small selection to read since there is only a short time available.

Benefits

The elderly who are involved with the program look forward to seeing the children. They provide positive reinforcement to all the children's reading endeavors. They share stories and jokes and initiate conversation with the children.

Even residents whom the children do not visit are affected by the children. As the children walk down the hall they will be stopped by persons just to say “Hello. How are you?” One gentleman who did little talking in the home stopped his wheelchair, reached out to a small child and initiated a conversation with the child. A staff member of the nursing home was amazed at the gentleman's actions, since he made no similar overtures to adults.

The elderly want the children to stay as long as possible and to come back again soon – “tomorrow.” Rounding up the children to leave may take

several minutes because it is often difficult to conclude some of the conversations.

The interest level of the children is very high. They enjoy the whole-hearted attention they are given by the residents. They very carefully plan and practice their reading selections. They listen and tell their friends and family about the good conversations, stories, and jokes with their elderly friends.

The entire first grade classroom makes birthday cards, valentines, and May baskets for the nursing home residents, many of whom they have visited and know by name. The children look upon these gestures as a regular part of sharing those special occasions.

Many of the "graduated" first graders have continued the visits on their own time. They go after school, on week-ends, and during the summer.

A few children have involved their families. The experienced child may take a younger brother or sister who may read or visit with their elderly friend. Some have convinced their mothers that the program is important enough for their mothers to provide special trips on week-ends and summers.

The purposes of the program are being achieved. The children are reinforcing their reading skills and are assuming responsibilities in caring for their elderly friends. The nursing home residents are reaching out to the children and sharing themselves with the children. Each is giving; each is receiving. All are enjoying the process.