

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERGENERATIONAL INTERACTION BETWEEN CHILDREN AND THE ELDERLY

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Abstract

Globally, the elderly population is growing rapidly. According to the United Nations, by 2050, 16% of the global population will be over 65. Conversely, the global youth population makes up around 26% of the total population. The gap between young and old demographics creates an opportunity for intergenerational programs to bridge divides and foster mutual respect and support. Intergenerational interaction contributes to societal harmony by bridging generational gaps, reducing stereotypes, and fostering mutual respect.

In an increasingly fast-paced world, interactions between younger and older generations are becoming less common. Children, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, often miss out on the wisdom and comfort that intergenerational connections can bring. At the same time, abandoned or destitute elderly in charity homes face isolation, affecting their emotional well-being. This paper on the project WE CARE proposes regular visits for slum children to spend time with elderly residents in old age homes. This interaction is designed as part of life skills training, promoting empathy, resilience, and care for others, while fostering a meaningful connection for both children and the elderly.

Traditional Indian families have historically been joint or extended, where multiple generations live together, providing natural support systems for the elderly. While joint families still exist, they are diminishing, especially in urban areas. Nuclear families have been on the rise, especially in urban areas due to increased mobility, work demands, and lifestyle changes. This societal dynamic often leaves elderly parents without consistent family support, especially in metropolitan areas.

Parikrma Humanity Foundation is an NGO that has been running schools for street, slum and orphaned children for 21 years and has shown amazing success. They have 4 schools one Junior College and we have started adopting government schools as well. The reason they have shown 96% attendance and less than 1% drop out is because our approach towards learning has been very different. This learning has emerged from varied exposure they give their children to diverse situations. Parikrma has been taking their students once a week to a shelter for aged and disadvantaged women called Sandhya Suraksha where they spend time with the residents and come back more caring and sometimes quite reflective. Parikrma believes this awareness is very important in life. The residents of the shelter is also happier, more youthful and full of joy. They look forward to the children's visit and called our children their beacon of hope. Parikrma data has shown that children who participate in intergenerational programs tend to be more accepting and empathetic. Elderly participants report feeling less isolated and more purposeful, noting improved mental well-being and even physical health.

Internal study has found that seniors who spent regular time with children experienced cognitive improvements, often due to the mental engagement and emotional warmth the interactions provided. For children, increased understanding of aging helped them become more compassionate and inclusive.

This paper is recommending that intergenerational interaction should become a part of the regular academic curriculum. It should get incorporated in the regular academic calendar so that all children get the benefit of the intergenerational interaction.

Keywords: Education, intergenerational, influences.

1 INTRODUCTION

Interactions between younger and older generations are becoming less common in an increasingly fast-paced world. Children, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, often miss out on the wisdom and comfort that intergenerational connections can bring. At the same time, abandoned or destitute elderly in charity homes face isolation, affecting their emotional wellbeing. This paper has focused on the situation in India and has highlighted a small experiment that an NGO has done to understand the condition of the elderly especially those that are abandoned and living in low-end free old age shelters

and the impact there has been of regular visits by underprivileged children on the sense of wellbeing of both the residents and the visitors.

This paper on the project WE CARE proposes regular visits for slum children to spend time with elderly residents in old age homes. This interaction is designed as part of life skills training, promoting empathy, resilience, and care for others while fostering a meaningful connection for both children and the elderly. This study is relatively young and has been going on for only eight months, but it has given enough data to warrant an in-depth analysis of such programs. The objective is to explore the possibility for the education authorities to incorporate such practices in all schools and, particularly, the state-run schools, as a part of life skills to bring in a certain sense of grounding and understanding of life with a sense of empathy. This could lead to collaboration with the Health and Family Welfare, Women and Child Welfare departments as well to understand the wellbeing of the elderly.

The NGO in this study is Parikrma Humanity Foundation, which has been running schools for street, slum and orphaned children for 21 years and has shown fantastic success. They have four schools and one Junior College and have also started adopting state-run government schools. They have 2000 children in their schools and have been impacting about 65000 poor children by training the teachers of government schools and adopting some government schools themselves. They have shown 96% attendance and less than 1% dropout because their approach towards learning has been very different. They have designed a learning model called the Parikrma Way™. Their motto is Love, Explore and Excel, and their education philosophy concentrates on developing empathy in the teachers, staff and, of course, all the children from age groups 5 to 18. This learning has emerged from varied exposure they give their children to diverse situations. Parikrma has been taking their students of age groups 8 to 18 years once a month to a shelter for aged and disadvantaged women called Sandhya Suraksha.

This shelter, Sandhya Suraksha, is being run by a well-known NGO that works towards the welfare of senior citizens through various innovative projects focusing on dementia care, active and healthy ageing, elder abuse, social integration, empowerment and capacity building. They aim to build a society where elders are healthy, happy, empowered and socially integrated. They estimate that there are thousands of homeless people in Bangalore out of which around 7500 are elderly women. Most of them are abandoned due to old age or physical or mental ailments, and they are forced to beg on the streets and live a life of humiliation and indignity. Sandhya Suraksha has about 100 residents who are all above 60 years of age. Some of the residents are immobile and suffering from the early onset of dementia. Some are physically mobile and reasonably healthy but have no one to care for them.

Parikrma has collaborated with this reputable NGO with the encouragement of a philanthropist named Chander Baljee who knows both these NGOs well. He resonated with the Parikrma philosophy that kindness, compassion and love can make a huge difference to people of all age groups and bring more harmony and joy in the world. He encouraged Parikrma, with his sponsorship, to visit Sandhya Suraksha and suggest what could be done to improve it. On the first visit with the leadership team of Parikrma, it was observed that the centre was run very well, had adequate staff members who were well trained and was kept clean and well maintained. It was also observed that although all the facilities were in the centre, the residents were morose and seemed depressed. There was an overall climate of doom and lack of hope. The first feedback given by Parikrma was to liven up the place with more cheerful colours around and introduce the chatter and laughter of children.

Parikrma also looked at this as a great opportunity to provide valuable lessons to the children. The children coming to Parikrma come from very dysfunctional, deprived homes, and many of them have experienced abuse of some sort and carry a great deal of trauma with them. This manifests in their behaviour through mild aggression and lack of grit. Children from stable but low-income families must follow the Parikrma values of gratitude and humility. It was therefore, I decided that taking the children to spend time with the elderly women of Sandhya Suraksha would also benefit the character-building of the children and, at the same time, eradicate the loneliness of the elderly women.

2 METHODOLOGY

The academic leaders of Parikrma, under the stewardship of the Head of Academic Administration, took this new initiative as a welcome challenge and worked out a timetable by which each class of Grades 5 to 12 from the four schools got the opportunity to spend an hour and a half with the women of Sandhya Suraksha once a month. A program head was selected to coordinate with the heads of the schools to ensure that the logistics of transport, adjustment of learning periods, and provision of snacks were taken care of. The children carefully prepare for this visit and make small hand-made gifts for the women by name. They bring musical instruments to perform for the residents. They compose and recite poems for

everyone. They share current affairs with the residents and the older kids even have debates and discussions with the elderly. But most touchingly, they share their snacks and whatever food they take with them. Many times, they save money to buy snacks for women. During the visit, every effort is made to ignite sustained participation from all present, and the supervisors and a psychologist are attempting to make both quantitative and qualitative observations of both parties.

It has been observed that in the first few visits, the residents were quite reticent to participate, and the children had to make extra effort to get them to join in the games or the sing-song. After eight months of consistent interventions, the resident is observed to finish their regular tasks quickly and wait for the children's visit very eagerly. Initially, the elderly who were unwell and immobile would not join the activities, but now they insist on being brought down to where the gathering takes place. The children have themselves decided to keep changing the space venue of the activities to bring in the surprise element and do away with the monotony.

A rudimentary pilot survey was conducted as an exploration by the organisers and the academic team leaders to assess the impact of this intergenerational interaction. The elderly were asked some qualitative questions like:

What do I do during the day?

What do I do with the children when they visit me?

And some quantitative questions like:

Do I like the visits from the Parikrma children?

- Yes
- No

What makes me happy?

- Good food
- Warm clothes
- Visit by the children of Parikrma
- Less body pain
- Peace and quiet
- When the warden is nice to me

Why do I like the children of Parikrma?

- They make me laugh
- They hug me with love
- They share their food with me
- They come regularly
- They remember my name
- They call me Aiji (grandmother)

Hundred per cent of the elderly said they liked the Parikrma children's visits. In their list of priorities for what makes them happy, 70% gave the number one rating to good food, followed by the visit of the Parikrma children, less body pain, peace and quiet, warm clothes, and when the warden is nice.

When asked why they like the visits of the Parikrma children, 90 % rated number one as the children's hugs, then that the children make them laugh, then that they are regular, they remember their name, they call them Aiji, and that they share their food with them.

As mentioned earlier, this was just a rudimentary pilot survey, and nothing was absolutes, but it has become quite clear to the organisers that even in the last eight months of the children's visit to the centre was having some positive impact on the elderly. The shelter's residents seem happier, more youthful and fuller of joy. They look forward to the children's visit and call these children their "beacon of hope". Elderly participants report feeling less isolated and more purposeful, noting improved mental well-being and even physical health. The officials of Sandhya Suraksha have said, "We see the inmates have

become more active and communicative with each other. They bicker less about aches and pains and get prepared for the visits with eagerness."

Parikrma did similar surveys with the children who visited the centre. They, too were asked the same question:

What do I do during the day?

What do I do with the Ajjis at Sandhya Suraksha?

And some quantitative questions, like

Do I like to visit the elderly at Sandhya Suraksha?

- Yes
- No

What makes me happy?

- My favourite food
- Playing with my friends
- Going to school
- Visiting the Ajjis at Sandhya Suraksha
- A sticker from my teacher
- When my parents don't fight

Why would I like to visit the Ajjis at Sandhya Suraksha?

- The Ajjis make me feel good
- I feel like taking care of them
- I remember my own grandmother
- They love being with me
- I prefer being with them in the classroom
- I learn a lot from them

Parikrma went a little further and asked the older teenage children some more pointed questions like

- What do old people do?
- How are old people different?
- Can old people understand children?
- Are old people fun to be with?
- Will I go again to meet the elderly?
- What do I like most about the visits?
- What can I do for the elderly?

3 RESULTS

Hundred per cent of the children of all age groups said they loved visiting the elderly. In the list of preferences, 85% of the children rated good food as the number one denominator that makes them happy, followed by when their parents do not fight each other and then play with friends. Number four on the list was visiting the Ajjis, which was ahead of going to school and getting a congratulatory sticker from the teacher. The teachers of the students feel that there has been some behavioural change in the children that have visited the centres. To quote their own words, "The children seem gentler and less aggressive. They come back more caring and sometimes quite reflective" They, however, regretted that the impact did not last long, and after a week, they reverted to their old behaviour. The teachers have requested more visits per class, and the children have even opted to go on the weekends. Parikrma is now considering adopting more shelters to increase the frequency of the visits.

The children were clear as to why they liked visiting the elderly women. Number one on their list of priorities of about 80% of children was that they felt good being with the elderly. Ninety per cent of the children were reminded of their grandmothers, and many loved that they knew that the elderly women liked being with them. This awareness gave them confidence and high self-esteem; therefore, they even said they preferred going to the centre even more than their school. 80% of the children confirmed that there was much to learn from the elderly and wanted to do more for them.

The responses to the qualitative questions that were asked of the older students have made Parikrma believe that this kind of exposure is making the children more sensitive and aware of the environment. The students actually thought the elderly were fun to be with because they were less demanding and more accepting. The teenagers felt good taking on more responsibility and were open to making more independent decisions. 95% of the students thought that the older people have a lot to teach the young since their experience is invaluable.

Of all the questions asked, "What do old people do?" was the most significant. In the beginning, there were vague responses because of a lack of awareness, but repeated visits and repeated asking of the questions have opened many doors in the student's mind. The students now understand that they, too, will become old someday and will not want to be lonely. This is a significant shift in understanding the elderly, which needs to be encouraged and fostered. Children's responses prove that intergenerational programs can promote positive attitudes toward elders. The elderly are at a particular risk of social isolation. This condition significantly affects health; however, social involvement can be highly advantageous. In this context, intergenerational programs improve interactions between different ages.

While this kind of hands-on study is not so common in India because of several cultural implications, there have been many such studies done globally, and the Indian education system may find paying attention to these explorations quite beneficial to enrich the learning process of children in Indian schools. Children from diverse backgrounds are likely taught various expectations for engaging with older adults (Gilbert & Rickets, 2008). With increasing attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion training for educators (Fuentes et al., 2021), further understanding of how children engage in diverse, intergenerational settings is an area for future intergenerational research.

The author reviewed more than twenty studies. Regarding quantitative evidence, 4 out of 8 studies found significant intergenerational engagement effects on cognitive outcomes, 15 of 20 on social outcomes, and 15 of 20 on health-related outcomes. Qualitative evidence was also important for understanding intergenerational programs' perceived impacts and experiences. Only 11 studies fully met the criteria for high-quality research, of which the majority focused on social outcomes. This indicates that there is room for more detailed research in this domain globally and hands-on experimentation in India.

Schools can provide a robust environment for shared learning among similar age groups and different generations. This study aims to explore the literature on the effectiveness and economic aspects of intergenerational interventions among children and young people in terms of academic performance and psychosocial outcomes. A literature review was conducted to assess current research regarding intergenerational activities and outcomes among young people. The search included English-language publications that reported original data from January 1986 to mid-2014. There were positive trends in mental health and social aspects of the outcomes, such as positive changes in attitudes towards older people, which showed better mutual understanding, decreased stereotyping of older people, and more respect for them. Better psychological outcomes were found, including reduced anxiety and an improved sense of self-worth. The intergenerational programs in non-kin relationships also promoted better family relationships. In addition, classroom behaviours were improved among children in need of fostering pro-social behaviours, and there was a non-significant improvement in early literacy development.

4 CONCLUSIONS

More studies with larger sample sizes and longer-term follow-ups are needed to explore the possible transferability of the results to different country contexts. Economic modelling techniques can be more utilised to explore the generalisability of the findings from one setting to another under various scenarios. This would facilitate a more optimal allocation of scarce resources by justifying whether investments in intergenerational activities at a strategic level would be worth pursuing as a public health intervention for a whole society.

While more research needs to be done, schools must take intergenerational interactions more seriously for the wholesome development of children. Most studies done in developed countries consider intergenerational interactions a voluntary activity and not part of the academic curriculum. The author

feels there is an opportunity to develop a unique model in India where schools can be offered as experiential labs to explore the impact of intergenerational interaction in a structured manner.

The initial findings of this young study suggest that interaction with children promotes well-being among the elderly. Interaction of children with the elderly residing in elderly homes can be included as a part of the school curriculum, and it may contribute to the holistic development of children's attitudes. Children who come from poor, deprived and dysfunctional homes that go to charity and state-run schools can benefit from finding mentors in the elderly who live in shelters. This could be a win-win situation where both parties benefit through a deeper understanding of each other that is guided by empathy. Qualities of patience, deep listening, compassion, and acceptance can be developed by both children and the elderly, which can lead to a more harmonious coexistence in an increasingly divided world.

This paper recommends that intergenerational interaction become a part of the regular academic curriculum and be incorporated into the regular academic calendar so that all children benefit from it.

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