

Ageless education: Researchers create guide for intergenerational classrooms at nursing homes

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A Kansas State University researcher and writing team are developing ways for nursing home residents and elementary school students to learn in a shared setting: an intergenerational classroom.

Stephanie Gfeller, research assistant and instructor with the College of Human Ecology's Center on Aging, has recently published a guidebook -- "Uniting Wonder With Wisdom, An Intergenerational [Classroom Replication Guide](#)" -- outlining ways to create a successful intergenerational program involving nursing [home residents](#) and kindergarten and preschool students. Others at Kansas State University involved include: Gayle Doll, director of the Center on Aging; Jane Marshall, communications coordinator of the College of [Human Ecology](#) ; and Mary Hammel, associate director for creative service in the College of Education.

The guidebook emphasizes a program with a profound purpose: To integrate the school setting and nursing home setting into an environment where both children and nursing home residents can benefit from each other.

"By bringing elders and children together, it gives elders a renewed sense of purpose, a sense of value and a role again in our society," Gfeller said. "It gives these children the opportunity to develop academically, but it's amazing to see the social development that occurs when the children are

interacting with the elders."

The project began when Gfeller was evaluating an existing intergenerational classroom for [kindergarteners](#) and residents at Windsor Place nursing home in Coffeyville, Kan. The project became a way for Gfeller to create a replication guide for the intergenerational classroom so that other interested parties had the key pieces to create an intergenerational program. Gfeller met with two other nursing homes -- Grace Living Center in Jenks, Okla., and Windsor Place in Iola, Kan. -- that had existing intergenerational classrooms for kindergarteners and preschool students.

"We really see this as a great opportunity for helping people see that elders are still valuable individuals in our society," said Gfeller, who is also the mother of a 4-year-old. "As a gerontologist, I was very excited about this program and its potential for elders. As a parent, I was very intrigued by the program and the opportunities that it brings for children."

In Coffeyville, the program involves a classroom placed in the heart of the nursing home. Students are greeted by residents from the start of the day as they walk through the nursing home into their classroom. During the school day, residents come into the classroom for reading time, crafts, holiday celebrations and other activities. The children also have activities in the nursing home and their playground is on nursing home grounds.

"Residents become volunteer teachers in the classroom," Gfeller said. "Every day, these children are getting one-on-one time with an elder who is helping them work on writing and reading."

Through a three-year qualitative and quantitative study, Gfeller found numerous benefits and outcomes of an intergenerational classroom.

Quantitative results showed that nursing home residents were able to uphold basic skills while maintaining and sometimes improving their health status. Qualitative data showed that nursing home residents experienced mood enhancements and felt that had a sense of value and purpose. They spoke of feeling needed, which pushed them to work to recover more quickly from illness.

Gfeller plans follow-up studies that examine the benefits that children receive from such an intergenerational programs.

"With our society the way it is today, many children don't have access to a grandparent," Gfeller said. "This is an opportunity to provide both of these generations the opportunity to come together and share their knowledge and their time in a way that these kids and elders may not get otherwise."

The guidebook offers suggestions on intergenerational classroom layout, goals, vision and community involvement. It uses tables to demonstrate responsibilities of people involved in the program, while worksheets help to form measurable goals and develop ways to evaluate the program. An accompanying DVD with interviews and testimonials explains program benefits and shows the interaction between elders and students.

"For each section -- getting started, getting approval, setting up the classroom and evaluation -- we have included a tool within the document to help with these steps," Gfeller said. "The guidebook really walks through the process of clarifying your vision. We wanted the guidebook to contain enough information to help a person work through the process but not so much to be overwhelming."

Provided by Kansas State University

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