

Older people offer resources that children need

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Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

When older adults contribute to the well-being of youth, it cultivates a sense of purpose and extends benefits both ways, according to a new Stanford report.

Such relationships are important for society. They can help ensure that

children and teens receive the kind of attention and mentoring they often lack, especially among the most vulnerable populations, the Stanford scholars said. These relationships also offer older adults opportunities to learn about new technology and trends, and experience the excitement of seeing the world through a younger perspective.

Laura Carstensen, a Stanford psychology professor who led the report and is the director of the Stanford Center for Longevity, said, "Contrary to widespread beliefs that older populations consume resources that would otherwise go to youth, there is growing reason to think that [older people](#) may be just the resource children need."

Carstensen's prior research has found that as people age, their brains actually improve in many ways, including in complex problem-solving and [emotional skills](#). "It is a huge loss for society not to offer such counsel and experience to others, especially young people," she said.

The aging population has "distinctive qualities to meet the needs of youth," she and her co-authors wrote. "Older adults are exceptionally suited to meet these needs in part because they welcome meaningful, productive activity and engagement. They seek – and need – purpose in their lives."

As for older adults, the report pointed out, they benefit as well, experiencing emotional satisfaction in relationships with young people. One way to achieve such contact is through volunteer service, which is associated with better physical health and cognitive performance for aging people. From a societal view, these interactions are positive, too.

"Focusing volunteer efforts on young people improve their (young people's) chances of success in life," Carstensen said. "These mutual benefits are perhaps the most compelling reason for programs that connect young and old."

Benefits for underprivileged children

The Stanford Center on Longevity, Encore.org and the Packard Foundation sponsored the report, "Hidden in Plain Sight: How Intergenerational Relationships Can Transform Our Future."

The document describes widening socioeconomic and educational gaps among [young people](#) in the U.S., bringing to light a critical need for society to focus on ways to help vulnerable young men and women.

"A large proportion of youth lack the resources needed for success, their educational pathways and well-being impeded by poverty, perpetuating an ever deeper gulf between those who succeed in life and those who struggle," the report stated.

The opportunity exists for older adults to fill these mentoring roles, Carstensen said. Children now in grade school will grow up in societies filled with old people. "Most children – not just a lucky few – will grow up in families in which four or five generations are alive at the same time," she said.

Young adults require emotional skills to succeed in life, Carstensen said. These are the attitudes, behaviors and strategies required to operate as a productive adult in an increasingly complex and technical world. And they are the types of skills and experiences that older adults have in abundance due to their [life experiences](#).

"These skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving and social interaction, influence social connections and sense of purpose. They are key to success in school and work, and they enable people to contribute meaningfully to society," the report noted.

Parents matter, of course, but the research shows that significant benefits

exist for children who have an older adult mentor in addition to their parents, Carstensen said.

"Age-related increases in wisdom, life experiences and emotional stability are well-documented, as is a drive to give to others in a meaningful way," she said.

Carstensen and her colleagues call for a national movement that encourages "intergenerational engagement" between the young and old alike. She acknowledged the challenge of such an undertaking, as it requires a change in the way people and society view young-old interactions and relationships.

"To date, older people do not volunteer at higher rates than younger adults. Creating a social norm that encourages generativity (the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation) will require institutional and cultural change," she said.

The study originated in the 2014 "[Pass It On](#)" conference at Stanford, which explored the need to mobilize [older adults](#) across the country to help guide at-risk children into adulthood.

More information: Hidden in Plain Sight: How Intergenerational Relationships Can Transform Our Future.

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Provided by Stanford University

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