

# Interaction with children could help improve the mental well-being of retirement home residents, study suggests

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A study conducted at a retirement home in South Africa suggests that programs promoting interaction between residents and children may

provide mental health benefits and could help manage common mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression. Elizabeth Jane Earl and Debbie Marais of Stellenbosch University, South Africa, presented these findings in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE*.

Prior research suggests that common [mental health](#) conditions are often undiagnosed and untreated in [retirement homes](#). Standard treatment for such conditions typically involves a combination of medication and non-pharmacological interventions. Some evidence suggests that programs enabling [older adults](#) to interact regularly with kids may boost mental health. However, most of that research has been conducted outside of retirement homes, and few studies have addressed such programs within South African facilities.

To deepen understanding of potential benefits of intergenerational interactions, Earl and Marais conducted a study at a retirement home in South Africa where residents can interact regularly with [children](#) who attend an onsite preschool. Activities include playing games, doing puzzles, reading, or singing with the children. The program is in line with a philosophy of elder care called the Eden Alternative, which aims to minimize factors that contribute to anxiety and depression.

The researchers invited residents to complete a questionnaire evaluating their anxiety and depression levels and asking them to describe their experiences with the children. Ten women participated, with four screening as possibly having anxiety, depression, or both. All women had some interactions with the preschool children, though some had more than others.

Overall, the participants reported positive experiences with the children. Analysis of their responses suggested that the interactions promoted a sense of belonging and purpose, fond recollection of their own childhood, and positive effects on mood and emotions. Participants had

varying preconceptions of children, which could have influenced their individual experiences with the program.

On the basis of these findings, the researchers conclude that intergenerational interaction programs have the potential to help manage common mental health conditions for retirement home residents. They outline recommendations for implementing such programs and call for larger studies to further explore the [potential benefits](#).

The authors add, "Interactions with children promote a sense of belonging and purpose, evoke reminiscence, and positively influence the mental well-being of older persons."

**More information:** The experience of intergenerational interactions and their influence on the mental health of older people living in residential care, *PLoS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0287369](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0287369)

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