



Bridging the Years...Teens and Seniors Mix It Up!

A half hour special from IN THE MIX, the award winning weekly PBS series, and MetLife Foundation

Intergenerational programs are on the rise across the country, providing a place for teenagers and senior citizens to come together to share talents, resources, and support. First, we see how much fun high school art students and older adults at the senior center have working together to create murals and mosaic tables to beautify a local community park in their small town. Then we visit an intergenerational center which has a unique initiative that pairs autistic teens with surrogate “grandmas and grandpas” who work patiently to improve the teens’ communication and social skills. High school volunteers also enjoy helping at the center. We close with a theatrical flourish as older Hispanic women and at-risk students in NYC inspire each other as they create and perform a play to a full house. Throughout this program we hear how stereotypes are dispelled as the groups realize how much they have much in common. In addition to having fun, the teens find emotional support and welcome advice, and the seniors feel useful. It’s a “win-win” for everyone and encourages teens to volunteer with seniors. This program was made possible by MetLife Foundation.

HOW TO USE THIS PROGRAM

Independent research on previous In the Mix specials has shown that these programs engage the interest of teenagers, deliver information, catalyze discussion on critical issues, and promote analytical thinking and a greater sense of self-efficacy among teens. The aim is to encourage thought and allow teens to generate their own creative solutions.

In this guide, we have outlined specific questions based on the program’s content, along with answers. These questions can be used to open up more analytical discussion about related concepts. Also included are in-class activities and longer-term projects. We suggest showing the entire program to the group and then running individual segments followed by discussion.

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This guide to “Bridging the Years...Teens and Seniors Mix It Up” contains three major sections which include questions, discussion topics and activities. A list of intergenerational resources is also included.

SECTION I

Clinton Street Senior Center/Pleasantville High School segment

High school art students and older adults at the local senior center have fun working together for months to create a historical mural and intricate mosaic tables for a new public garden. Throughout the project, they realize how much they have common, understand their roots and form ongoing supportive friendships. The segment ends with a large turnout for the garden’s dedication, at which the Mayor praises the value of the project.

Rebecca mentions that seniors and teens each told stories of how they grew up. What did the teens discover?

They discovered they had a lot more in common than they thought. They discovered that as teenagers, both generations were interested in fashion and music. Both liked some of the same TV shows, were interested in learning about each other’s lives, were caring and helpful people, were creative and liked to participate in projects that benefit the community.

2. Tierney mentions that she learned a lot about herself and what she wants out of life and because she never knew her grandfathers, she discovered a connection with the older men that she never had before. What kind of connections/learning opportunities might the teens seek from seniors?

Teens discover an appreciation of the abilities of older people. Teens realize that seniors are not boring but good listeners who are interested in their lives. Seniors may provide a mentoring and supportive relationship. Teens learn something about themselves, their interests, even their future options. They also feel they can give back and be supportive to the seniors.

3. What was the value of using creative expression to depict what they discovered?

Creative expression allows people freedom to imagine, to find common connections between ideas and emotions. Art helps people of all ages establish communication and understanding. It is a “lasting” communication.

4. Virginia, the program director, said that working with the seniors gives the teens “roots” and the teens “give our older people comfort.” What did she mean by that statement?

She meant that teens could see the history of their town, for example, the train station, the clock. The opportunities we have today were created through the efforts of older generations who were just like them. Teens could see the common roots of both generations, and how music, the school band and fashion were valued by both generations. Giving the old people comfort was accomplished by engaging their continued usefulness. The seniors feel their memories and values are being passed along. Sometimes older people are neglected or under-valued for their contributions, but when equality was established, seniors felt validated.

5. Rebecca, a student, says, “They never gave us advice on a problem, but they told us about a story about themselves in a similar situation...” In the next segment, one senior will tell you he does give advice. How do you feel when an older person (not a parent) gives you advice? What makes it helpful?

Enlist from students instances in which advice was helpful. See if they can find a common thread regarding when advice is accepted or rejected. Try to get students to think of a time when they received advice or gave advice to a friend. Was that different? Was it always helpful?

6. What kind of stereotypes might teens have about seniors that were dispelled in this program?

If seniors have physical difficulties, they aren't smart and creative. Seniors cannot relate to teens. Seniors might try to give advice without understanding a teen's situation or they may not have anything to talk about that would interest teens. Seniors are boring.

7. What kind of stereotypes do seniors have about teens that were dispelled?

Teens don't listen. Teens are not patient and move too fast. Teens cannot relate to older adults. Teens may not be polite. Teens want instant gratification and would not be interested in a project that takes a long time to complete.

8. Rosemary, the senior, says, “.there was enough input into what the final product would be from both seniors and the girls, themselves, so everybody felt that they had the right to a voice.” Why is this so important?

Equality was established. Each felt they had a right to an opinion and that these opinions were useful. Mutual respect engendered better understanding, cooperation and results.

9. How did this project reach a larger audience? What is the importance of that?

There was a ceremony where everyone was thanked and the projects showcased. It allowed the community to participate and encourage such projects. The seniors and teens were honored for their efforts. Teens would be able to use this community service project to help them get ahead. Rosemary says they had a feeling of belonging together.

Further Discussion:

Rosemary says the experience of this project changed the teens' opinions of seniors and proved to the teens that “the mind can still be very active” in old age. What are your perceptions of seniors? Discuss times when you found that the reality of a situation was different than what you thought it would be like.

Related Activities:

Create a photo collage to depict your family life. Include family members such as grandparents and other relatives.

Develop a printed “Guide to the Internet” for seniors. Work in teams to research the kinds of sites and services that would interest seniors, such as Social Security benefits, free or low cost trips, etc.

Develop a workshop for seniors. Teach them how to search for information on the Internet, how to use email. Visit a senior center and deliver this training.

Research and contact local senior centers, assisted living homes and other programs for seniors to find out how you can volunteer.

SECTION 2

My 2nd Home, Mt. Kisco, NY segment

An assisted senior day center has a variety of intergenerational programs in place to help its older adults maintain a fulfilling lifestyle. High school volunteers realize that seniors aren't boring, and can offer useful advice on life and career choices. Another unique project pairs autistic teens with surrogate “grandmas and grandpas” who work patiently to improve the teens' communication and social skills. The seniors are so effective that one teen was recently mainstreamed into high school, and we see him return to the center for a touching reunion.

1. The teen volunteers in the first part of the segment looked forward to bringing some joy to the seniors. What did they expect? What did they find out?

The teens discovered they had fun too. “The guys had real personalities...you can really talk to them and kinda connect with them.”

2. What kind of reactions do you see from the seniors in the segment?

They enjoyed reminiscing with the teens, they laughed and played games. They were happy to share their experiences and were genuinely interested in listening to the teens.

3. The next part deals with the interactions of autistic teens and the seniors. How was this kind of interaction different from when the seniors worked with the first set of teens? How was it the same?

Different: The seniors were very sensitive to the increased needs of these children. They showed more affection, were very gentle, made more eye contact. The seniors had more patience and gave lots of praise.

Same: The seniors used their experience to connect to these children, were supportive, excellent listeners. The seniors were genuine and loved to participate in whatever way was needed. One of the senior men said he treated them like normal teenagers and that gave them more self-confidence.

4. Normally, autistic children are stereotyped as being unintelligent and unsociable. What did you witness in this segment?

We witnessed that the children were able to sit down quietly for quite some time, engage with the seniors, had better eye contact. They were more social and more patient. One of the boys was able to go back to his school. He remembered and visited "Grandma Dora" and had real affection for her.

5. What are some of the reasons Rina, the director, cites as to why teenagers may want to come to My 2nd Home. What can they gain from volunteering?

Some teens come because of loss. Some like the connection if they do not have a grandparent close by. Some just enjoy the affection, praise and fun that the seniors provide. Some see it as a way of exploring career options.

6. What were some of the qualities that Grandma Dora exhibited that made her relationship with the autistic boys genuine?

Dora was loving, nurturing, gentle and affectionate. She gave Danny lots of praise. She was a good and patient teacher and made him feel smart. She missed Danny but said, "whatever is best for the child."

7. How does the interaction with teens benefit the seniors?

Seniors feel young again, have a chance to be reminded of their youth, find connections with young people. They have the opportunity to interact and laugh with the teens. They feel helpful when they can use their experiences and talents.

Further Discussion:

Describe some career opportunities that involve working with older people.

What skills and interests do you have that might be useful in volunteering with seniors.

What do you know about autism? What does it mean to be "on the spectrum"? How can you be more sensitive to those with the condition?

Describe some career opportunities that involve working with autistic children.

Related Activities:

Rent the film <http://www.horseboymovie.com/film-about.php>, the story of a father who goes to the ends of the earth to heal his son who is autistic. Information about the story, the therapeutic foundation and the family can be found at <http://www.horseboyfoundation.org/horseboystory.html>. How did one person's experience have a lasting effect on others?

SECTION 3

EVOLVE, New York City segment

Teaching artists work for 20 weeks with Hispanic women from University Settlement House and a group of at-risk youth from The Door. We see how, through theatre games, improvisations, and their own stories, they develop and perform an original theatre piece off-Broadway on what it means to grow, to become your authentic self -- to "Evolve." The initiative gives the feisty seniors and teens a way to express their unique and dynamic voices, opening communication among themselves as well as between the groups.

1. The moderator compares creating a play to working in a kitchen. How are these two activities similar?

It is like putting all the ingredients together in a recipe and using the right tools to bring out the flavor. Some flavors get blended, just like some groups work together to sing or dance, while other flavors stand out, just like when some actors perform alone. In this play, participants were asked to bring their ideas, thoughts, stereotypes, fears, joys from real life. In a recipe, there are foods, spices, and liquids. In both cases, the ingredients are important to the whole recipe. The tools of the kitchen might be pots, pans, bowls, stoves, etc. while the tools of acting might be direction, music, lights, cameras, etc.

2. What other analogies might describe the interactions between seniors and teens, where old and new live harmoniously?

A garden with older plantings and newer ones, some full of color, some not.

A neighborhood where people live together but in different kinds of houses, some old, some new but each contributes to the vibrancy of the community.

A college, where young people and adult students interact and share experiences.

Further Discussion

Create a living history project in which you record or videotape interviews with grandparents or older relatives about their lives when they were teens. What would you like to know? What are some good questions?

It is generally understood that actors do a better job of acting if they can understand the character they are portraying. How did improvisation help the women remember their teen years and the teens understand how it feels to be older?

Related Activities

Research volunteer opportunities in your community. Make a poster to show the skills that are needed, places to volunteer and phone numbers. Post in your school hallways.

Create a dramatic monologue “retrospective”. Pretend you are 70 or over and reflect on your life. (You can interview a senior for inspiration). Speak of your triumphs, your losses, what you miss the most and what memories you treasure.

RESOURCES

Partners for Livable Communities (www.livable.com)

Generations United (www.gu.org) See the Connecting Generations toolkit at www.unitedgenerations.ca/pdf/connectingGenerationsToolkit.pdf

My 2nd Home, Mt. Kisco, NY Ph 914 241-0770

Clinton Senior Center, Pleasantville, NY Ph 914 769-2021

Pleasantville High School Ph 914 741-1423

The Devereux School, Millwood, NY Ph 914 941-1991

For additional intergenerational activities, visit <http://www.activitytherapy.com/intergen.htm>

HOW TO REACH *In the Mix*:

For information about *In the Mix*, including program descriptions and schedules, visit us at www.inthemix.org, or e-mail us at mail@inthemix.org. You will also find discussion guides, transcripts, video clips, resources and more.

Other *In the Mix* programs of interest to grades 6-12 and college are available on topics including: Divorce and Stepfamilies; Living with Serious Illness; Ecstasy Abuse; Steroid Abuse; Dealing with Death; Sex and Abstinence; School Violence; Financial Literacy; Cliques; Drug Abuse; Teen Immigrants; Depression and Suicide; Gun Violence; Incarcerated Teens; Self-Esteem; Sports Participation; Media Literacy; Activism; Alcohol and DWI; Dating Violence; Getting into College; School to Work Transition; Careers; Relationships; AIDS; Fitness/Nutrition; Bullying; and others.

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